



Comhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe
Galway County Council

PLEAN GNÍOMHAÍOCHTA UM FOLAMH VACANT HOMES ACTION PLAN



2024 - 2029



Photos on Front Cover

Photo 1.

Before; St. Joseph's School Clifden

After; Gort na gCloch Development

Photo 2.

Before; Dunlo Hill Ballinasloe

After; Artist's Impression Dunlo Hill Ballinasloe

Contents

1	Foreword	3
2	Introduction	5
3	Objectives	6
4	Objective 1; Establish robust, accurate, consistent, and up-to-date data sets on vacancy.	8
5	Objective 2; Bring forward measures to ensure, to the greatest degree possible, that vacant and underused privately owned properties are brought back in to use.	9
6	Objective 3; Bring forward measures to minimise vacancy arising in Social Housing Stock.	12
7	Objective 4; Continued engagement with and provision of support to key stakeholders to ensure suitable vacant properties held by banks, financial institutions and investors are acquired for social housing use.	13
8	Objective 5; Foster and develop cross-sector relationships, collaborating in partnership to tackle vacant housing matters.	15
9	Objective 6; Facilitate the activation of vacant properties utilising the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) and in conjunction with the Town First Strategy.	16
10	Objective 7; Acquire derelict and vacant brown field sites to convert into Social Housing Units at strategic locations to meet social housing demand in key County Towns, thereby addressing dereliction in town centres and social housing need as one project.	17
11	Implementation of the Vacant Homes Action Plan	19
12	References	20
13	Appendix A; Leaflets distributed during the Vacant Homes Survey	Ai

Foreword



As Cathaoirleach of the County of Galway, I am delighted to welcome the publication of the Vacant Homes Action Plan 2024 – 2029, which sets out the strategic direction for Galway County Council in relation to addressing vacancy across all sectors, and all parts of the County. Galway County Council's Vacant Homes Action Plan 2024 – 2029 recognises our very real and pressing need to tackle and address vacancy and dereliction in our County. In this time of housing demand, it is essential that the houses that are already in existence are fully utilised.

The reasons for vacancy are often complex but this plan provides a pathway to utilise properties which sit vacant at the heart of our communities and allows us the opportunity to bring these properties back into use. The Vacant Homes Action Plan 2024 – 2029 sets out detailed objectives and approaches to deliver more housing by fully utilising schemes, initiatives and supports available to return a vacant property into a home.

The next five years will present challenges and opportunities for the Council in regard to bringing back vacant homes. However, the overall framework provided by this Vacant Homes Action Plan 2024 – 2029 will allow us to plan effectively, monitor delivery and overcome the challenges presented in order to bring back as many vacant homes as possible.

Cllr Liam Carroll

Cathaoirleach of the County of Galway

April 2024

Foreword



As Chief Executive of Galway County Council, I am pleased to introduce our Vacant Homes Action Plan 2024 – 2029.

This Vacant Homes Action Plan, adopted by the Elected Members of Galway County Council, provides the framework to enable Galway County Council to guide the restoration of vacant homes across all parts of the County of Galway over the next five years.

The strategic Objectives identified in the Plan reflect the challenges and opportunities facing Galway County Council in addressing vacancy and dereliction in both privately and publicly owned vacant properties.

In order to address these challenges, Galway County Council has identified the key focus areas to bring vacant homes back into use namely;

- Privately owned vacant homes.
- Vacant Social housing stock.
- Commercial buildings that could be converted into affordable / social housing.
- Brown field sites that could be acquired and brought into use as affordable / social housing.

The challenging housing environment in which we operate will continue to influence the implementation of the Plan, however, I am confident that with the ongoing co-operation and commitment of the Elected Members and staff, we can collectively meet the challenges ahead. Our action plan will be a strategic and a dynamic document which will inform an annual implementation Plan aimed towards bringing as many vacant properties as possible throughout County Galway back into use as permanent homes for both private and social housing clients during the life of the Plan.

It is imperative that we continue to support, improve, and monitor our progress in bringing vacant homes back into our community and I look forward to reducing vacancy and dereliction and improving the character of our towns, villages and rural areas over the coming years.

Liam Conneally

Chief Executive- Galway County Council

April 2024

Galway County Council Vacant Homes Action Plan 2024 – 2029

1. Introduction

The Programme for Government – Our Shared Future – sets out the Government’s mission to tackle the Housing crisis. The objective is that everybody should have access to sustainable, good quality housing to purchase or rent at an affordable price, built to a high standard, and located close to essential services, offering a high quality of life. In this time of crisis, it is essential that the houses we already have are fully utilised. That is why *Housing for All* introduces incentives and measures to bring vacant and derelict properties back into residential use. This policy has the potential to rejuvenate our towns and cities and breathe new life into once loved buildings. These and other measures support the ambition of the Climate Action Plan.

‘Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland’ is the government’s housing plan to 2030. It takes the Government’s commitment to fixing our housing system a step further on the pathway to a sustainable housing system, by clearly setting out how to address the serious short, medium and long-term challenges with housing in Ireland. The overall aim of “Housing for All” is closely aligned to the objective in the Programme for Government and is that ***“Everyone in the State should have access to a home to purchase or rent at an affordable price, built to a high standard and in the right place, offering a high quality of life.”*** It is a multi-annual, multi-billion euro plan which will improve Ireland’s housing system and deliver more homes of all types for people with different housing needs.

“Housing for All” has four pathways to achieving the plan:

- Supporting home ownership and increasing affordability.
- Eradicating homelessness, increasing social housing delivery and supporting social inclusion.
- Increasing new housing supply.
- Addressing vacancy and efficient use of existing stock.

Pathway 4 emphasises the fact that at a time of such high housing need, it is essential to ensure that the houses already in existence are being fully used. While the reasons for vacancy are often complex, it is disappointing to see habitable properties lying idle while people are homeless or living in unsuitable accommodation. There are also other types of vacant properties that could be converted to residential use, while there is potential to use existing stock more efficiently.

Bringing vacant properties back into use is a cost effective and sustainable way to increase the supply of housing and makes the best use of existing buildings to meet local needs. It can improve neighbourhoods, increase access to housing and help to improve quality of life for those living within the towns, villages and larger urban areas within the county.

The reasons properties become or remain vacant are varied and the tools, resources and skills required in resolving the issues are significant and diverse. The re-use and regeneration of these buildings is essential for towns in Ireland, supporting revitalisation, regeneration, and investment.

The aims and objectives of the action plan can only be achieved by working closely with internal and external partners and other key stakeholders such as property owners and local communities.

As a response to Pathway 4 “*Addressing Vacancy and Efficient Use of Existing Stock*” Galway County Council has prepared this Vacant Homes Action Plan 2024 - 2029 (‘the action plan’).

This action plan seeks to provide a targeted approach to identifying vacant housing units with the intention of bringing these properties back into use for both private and social housing. The action plan will also take cognisance of promoting town and village centre development as a positive town and village centre environment which can help reduce dereliction and vacancy. This action plan is developed in conjunction with the Town Centres First policy which was launched by Government in February 2022. It builds on

- the first Galway County Council Vacant Homes Action Plan 2018 to 2021 which was prepared with reference to Pillar 5 of the Government’s previous Housing Strategy “***Rebuilding Ireland: An Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness.***”
- Circular PL7/2017, which issued in August 2017, as updated by Circular VHU 01/2018, which directed local authorities to prepare and adopt a “Vacant Homes Action Plan”, and
- The Vacant Homes Action Plan 2023 to 2026 prepared by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH).

This action plan looks at why private properties become vacant, what advice and assistance are available to the owners of vacant properties and how Galway County Council uses the range of schemes, supports and incentives available to support owners and prospective owners of vacant properties to return these properties to use. The council aims to address vacancy and underutilisation of residential properties in the county to help contribute to the supply of housing in the county.

It also examines vacancy in Social Housing and introduces several measures to establish the reasons for this and to minimise the time between lettings to keep vacancy to a minimum. While the Plan is prepared by the Housing Department, it includes input from the Planning and Economic Development Unit and the Rural and Community Development Department of Galway County Council in relation to the activation of vacant properties in the Town & Village Renewal Scheme as well as key criteria in the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) and the Town Centre First Policy.

The Vacant Homes Action Plan 2024 to 2029 is a high-level Strategy document setting out the key objectives over the life of the plan. An annual implementation plan will be prepared each year identifying the key actions for that year and will be presented to the Housing Strategic Policy Committee (SPC). This will facilitate any future schemes that may be introduced over the life of the plan to address vacancy, or any developments of current schemes introduced by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to be included.

2. Objectives

Galway is the second largest county in Ireland and has the third highest vacancy rate in the country. The residential vacancy rate in Galway was 6.0% in June 2023, which was higher than the national average of 3.9%. Galway has a population of 193,323 as per Census 2022, an increase of 13,933 since Census 2016. Galway County has a high demand for housing across all tenures, with a growing

population, and this is in the context of wider issues around the affordability for rental and purchase properties and continuing challenges with homelessness.

The impact of the shortage of housing within the county is affected in various ways:

- The number of applicants on Galway County Council's social housing list is currently 3500 approximately;
- An increasing number of applications for housing support are being received by the Local Authority;
- People and families are remaining in either rental accommodation or private accommodation that is unsuitable for their needs;
- A rental market where demand exceeds supply.

It is believed that the demand for housing is having an upward effect on the cost of both renting and purchasing property within Galway County.

Provision of social housing for those who are unable to provide housing for themselves is a high priority and a major challenge for Galway County Council. The aim is for every household that has a need, to be able to access an affordable home of good quality, at an affordable cost, which is suited to their needs and in a secure environment. Bringing vacant homes back into use will assist with meeting this issue.

The seven Key Objectives detailed below, and the main actions that will be taken to achieve these objectives will form the basis of this Vacant Homes Action Plan 2024 – 2029.

Objective 1	Establish robust, accurate, consistent, and up-to-date data sets on vacancy.
Objective 2	Bring forward measures to ensure, to the greatest degree possible, that vacant and underused privately owned properties are brought back in to use.
Objective 3	Bring forward measures to minimise vacancy arising in Social Housing Stock.
Objective 4	Continued engagement with and provision of support to key stakeholders to ensure suitable vacant properties held by banks, financial institutions and investors are acquired for social housing use.
Objective 5	Foster and develop cross-sector relationships, collaborating in partnership to tackle vacant housing matters.
Objective 6	Facilitate the activation of vacant properties utilising the Town & Village Renewal Scheme, the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) and in conjunction with the Town First Strategy.
Objective 7	Acquire derelict and vacant brown field sites to convert into Social Housing Units at strategic locations to meet social housing demand in key County Towns, thereby addressing dereliction in town centres and social housing need as one project.

3. Objective 1: Establish robust, accurate, consistent and up-to-date data sets on vacancy.

3.1 Vacant Homes Survey 2023-2024

The challenge in addressing vacancy is varied and complex and having an accurate picture in terms of data is vital. Under the *Housing for All* Strategy Pathway 4 for “*Addressing Vacancy and Efficient Use of Existing Stock*” Galway County Council completed a GeoDirectory Vacancy Data Survey in 2023/2024. The primary purpose of the survey was to establish if the properties identified under the GeoDirectory data set were indeed vacant so that this data could then be utilised to bring them back into use.

An App was developed by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) which was pre-populated with the properties to be surveyed to assist local authorities in identifying properties which may be recoverable into use. The initial part of the survey, whereby the properties identified on the APP were visited, to determine whether the property was vacant, began in September 2023 and was completed in early February 2024. 43 settlements were identified by the Department (DHLGH) to be surveyed within the urban settings of Galway County and a perimeter of 1km from a central hub point. 7 large towns, 11 major settlements and 25 minor settlements were selected.

In total 1708 properties were surveyed, 817 properties were deemed vacant/derelict. Of these 817, 773 were deemed to be vacant and 44 properties were deemed to be vacant and derelict. The condition of the properties which were deemed vacant/derelict were categorised as follows:

- Good (habitable, requires only minor work or no work at all)
- Fair (habitable, requires moderate work)
- Poor (habitable, requires substantial work)
- Uninhabitable.

As the purpose of the survey is to bring vacant properties back into use, a leaflet was compiled to give the owner information on the vacant homes schemes available, including the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grants (Croí Cónaithe scheme), Repair and Leasing and Buy and Renew Scheme and this was distributed to the vacant property owners through the letterboxes or under the doors of the properties where possible. Please see leaflet attached in **Appendix A**.

The information gathered during this survey will be used as a database to inform the next steps to be taken to address vacancy. It is noted that there were limitations to the survey as the only properties visited were those already uploaded onto the app and identified as vacant. It was noted throughout the survey that additional properties exist particularly in the main urban centres that are also vacant. It is intended to build on this existing database as more vacant properties are identified to ensure that a robust and up to data set is being utilised throughout the life of the plan.

3.2 Actions under Objective 1

1. Establish a database of information and up to date position of vacant properties in County Galway. This may be established at a National Level in due course.
2. Identify a number of key towns in conjunction with the Planning and Economic Development Unit and the Rural and Community Development Department and prioritise these towns to add in additional vacant properties into the database.
3. Follow this up with additional surveys of the remaining urban centres throughout the life of the Plan.
4. Keep the database up to date as properties are activated and leave the scheme.

4. Objective 2: Bring forward measures to ensure, to the greatest degree possible, that vacant and underused privately owned properties are brought back to use.

4.1 Follow up from the survey and the distribution of leaflets during the survey

Following the distribution of the leaflets, property owners (81) and neighbours (8) contacted the Vacant Homes Office directly to provide information in relation to the vacant properties. Please see breakdown below of the information collected:

- Legal/family issues, for example probate: 11
- Financial Issues: 1
- Interest in VPRG/B&R/RLS: 30
- Occupied Part-time / Holiday Home: 6
- For sale: 14
- Construction/renovations will commence: 7
- Storage/Commercial Use: 6
- Not vacant/permanent home: 6
- Further information provided by neighbours : 8

The next step will be to follow up with all of the property owners identified during the survey and to identify further property owners following the leaflets distributed at the vacant properties.

4.2 Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant (Croí Cónaithe Scheme)

The vacant property refurbishment grant is applicable for property owners who wish to refurbish an existing dwelling that they own. The property must be vacant for a minimum of 2 years and the property owner must intend to live in it or rent it for 10 years.

The applicant can also rent the property as opposed to using it as their principle private residence. In this case, they must rent the property privately and must register the tenancy annually with the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB).

There has been, and continues to be, a high level of interest in the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grants (Croí Cónaithe Scheme). The number of applications received at the end of Q1 2024 is 364.

The Croí Cónaithe Scheme facilitates the transformation of unsightly and vacant properties into dwelling houses over a reasonably short period of time. See before and after photos below of a property in County Galway which has been brought back in to use through the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant (Croí Cónaithe Scheme):



Photo 1; Before refurbishment



Photo 2; After refurbishment

4.3 Serviced Sites Fund/Ready to Build Scheme (Croí Cónaithe Scheme)

This fund allows local authorities to make serviced sites in towns and villages available to potential individual purchasers. These sites are available at a discount on the market value of the site for the building of a property for occupation as the principal private residence of the purchaser. The level of discount to the individual would depend on the level of service and cost incurred by the local authority before the sale of the site, which discounts up to a maximum of €30,000. The amount of such discounts will be reflected in the sale price of the site to the purchaser. Any sites that may become available will be advertised on Galway County Council's website and/or in relevant local publications along with the closing date for receipt of applications. Galway County Council does not currently have any serviced sites available; this will be kept under review.

4.4 The Activation Programme

Under this Programme, Galway County Council is now required to adopt a proactive, planned and systematic approach to the identification and activation of vacant and derelict properties. The main steps of the Programme include:

- Identification of vacant and derelict properties
- Identification of and engagement with owner
- Communication regarding the various schemes and measures in place to support bringing the property back into use, and
- Where owners of vacant and derelict properties cannot be identified or where they are unwilling to engage, use of available legislative powers to compulsory purchase or acquire such properties using either the Housing Act, 1966 or the Derelict Sites Act, 1990.

The acquired properties may subsequently be used for social housing, made available for sale on the open market or used for other purposes, for example, community use.

Targets to activate vacant properties will be set for Galway County Council annually by The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

4.5 Derelict Sites Register

The Environment section currently manage the Derelicts Sites Register for Galway County Council. At present the focus in relation to Derelict Sites under the Derelict Sites Act 1990 as amended, is dealing with matters that detract from amenity, character, or appearance of land or buildings in the neighbourhood in question because of neglected or unsightly condition.

This does not really address the issue of vacancy or serve towards bringing the buildings back into use. It is intended to work closely with the Environment Department in relation to considering the Compulsory purchase of such buildings under the Derelict Sites Act so that they can be brought back into use as private or social housing.

4.6 Actions Under Objective 2

1. Engagement with property owners identified from the survey to bring the properties back in to use.
2. Identify a number of vacant and derelict properties in accordance with the annual targets to bring through the activation programme.
3. Continue to promote and administer the Croí Cónaithe and other vacant homes schemes to bring back privately owned vacant homes into use and incorporate any amendments into the scheme.
4. Utilise Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) under the Housing Act, 1966 and the Compulsory Acquisition (CA) under the Derelict Sites Act, 1990 to ensure that properties can be brought back from vacancy and dereliction.
5. Provide details to update the Derelict Sites Register following completion of the Geo-Directory Vacancy Data Survey.

5. Objective 3: Bring forward measures to minimise vacancy arising in Social Housing Stock.

5.1. Addressing Vacant Social Housing (Voids)

It is Galway County Council's policy to address its Vacant Social Housing Stock and bring social houses back into use as soon as practicable. A void can arise through surrender of the dwelling, death of the occupant, transfer of the tenant, or other unplanned events. The condition of the house at the time the house is surrendered normally determines the length the house is vacant to carry out the necessary refurbishment works.

In order to manage the current stock of 2,916 Social Houses proactively, a Social Housing Stock Condition Survey and Planned Maintenance Programme is also ongoing. This project ensures that the Council takes a proactive approach to housing maintenance, incorporating an investment programme to upgrade existing stock. This will have a positive impact by reducing vacancy periods.

A framework for Works Contractors is in place since May 2017, which reduces turnaround times when coupled with the funding available through the Planned Maintenance/Voids Funding Programme 2024 facilitates a streamlined approach geared towards minimal turnaround and re-let times of vacant properties. This programme will also aid the continued transition to a strategic and informed Planned Maintenance approach to stock management and maintenance with the recoupment of fees for Stock Condition Surveys (subject to limits) and subsequent Planned Maintenance works. The annual Programme will provide funding to Local Authorities to support the refurbishment and re-letting of a specified minimum number of homes and continue the transition from a reactive voids approach to stock management, to a Planned Maintenance approach.

5.2 Addressing vacancy in houses that are difficult to let

Vacancy periods can increase because of allocation refusals or the time taken to get a tenant to accept a tenancy. Galway County Council is committed to a speedier identification and housing of new tenants by re-introducing the Choice Based Letting initiative (CBL). Social Houses, which are ready for letting, will be advertised on Galway County Council's website. Through the CBL process applicants are invited

to submit expressions of interest in the properties that suit their needs and in which they are willing to live.

5.3. Disposing of derelict vacant social houses that are no longer viable so that they can be brought into use as private housing

In 2023 Galway County Council conducted a review of derelict social houses and identified eight properties that were no longer viable as social housing either due to their condition and the costs to refurbish, their remote location, boundary issues or insufficient services. An estate agent was engaged to sell these properties to the general Public, and they were approved under the Section 183 process at the Plenary Council in December 2023.

It is intended to roll out an annual programme to dispose of similar properties so that they can be brought into use as private housing.

5.4 Actions Under Objective 3

1. Continue the roll out of the Social Housing Stock Condition Survey and Planned Maintenance Programme.
2. Identify suitable properties annually under the Periodic Inspection Reports (PIR) for the upgrading of electrical works, updating fire alarms to reduce the length of time that properties are vacant during void periods.
3. Assess properties where tenants apply for the Disabled persons grant and carry out works to renovate properties where the tenant resides as opposed to creating a vacancy when the tenant is required to move to another suitable social housing property.
4. Identify suitable properties annually under the Energy retrofit programme for the upgrading of social houses to B1 standard.
5. Continue to roll out frameworks for contractors as required to reduce the time required to turnaround a property.
6. Re-introduce the Choice based letting scheme initially for houses that are in hard to let locations.
7. Identify derelict Social Housing units that are no longer viable as social houses and bring forward via the Section 183 process for sale to support private home ownership.

6. Objective 4: Continued engagement with and provision of support to key stakeholders to ensure suitable vacant properties held by banks, financial institutions and other investors are acquired for social housing use.

6.1 The State, its Departments and Agencies are the owners of large amounts of property. It has been agreed that State entities that own vacant or underutilised land, which may be suitable for housing, will offer that land to the Land Development Agency. It has also been agreed that all Government departments will examine their existing portfolio of properties and, subject to any obligations under the Public Spending Code, the Land Development Act 2021 or the State Property Act 1954, will place them on the market if they are not required and may be suitable for residential housing. This will allow for more efficient use of those buildings and provide opportunities for individuals and families to convert suitable buildings into homes.

6.2 Repair and Lease Scheme

The purpose of the Repair and Leasing Scheme is to bring vacant properties in need of repair back into use for social housing. The scheme is aimed at owners of vacant properties who cannot afford the repairs needed to bring their property up to the standard required to rent it out. In addition, under a pilot expansion of the scheme, property owners of certain categories of buildings do not have to meet the requirement of being unable to afford or unable to fund the repairs. This applies to the following categories of properties:

- Vacant commercial units;
- Vacant units associated with a commercial unit, for example, a flat over a shop;
- Vacant institutional buildings;
- Unfinished developments, which have been vacant for a significant amount of time.

If the vacant property is suitable for social housing, the cost of necessary repairs is paid by means of an interest free loan by the local authority or Approved Housing Body (AHB). The property is then leased to the local authority or AHB, who will use it for social housing for an agreed rental payment and the value of the loan will be gradually offset against this rental payment over a specified period.

- The property must have been vacant for at least 12 months and proof will be required that it has been vacant for this time.
- There must be a demand for social housing in the area.
- The property must be assessed as being suitable to provide social housing.
- The property must be in good structural condition and subject to inspection by the local authority or AHB.
- It must comply with the minimum standards for rented houses.
- It must have a Building Energy Rating (BER) certificate.
- All properties must be furnished and include certain appliances.

Galway County Council will aim to meet the annual targets to be achieved under the Repair and Lease Scheme.

6.3 Buy and Renew Scheme

This initiative supports local authorities in purchasing and renewing housing units in need of repair and making them available for social housing use. It is a matter for Galway County Council to determine a property's suitability for social housing. This scheme aims to tackle the problem of dereliction and to improve an area's appearance. The Buy and Renew Scheme provides the option for suitable properties to be purchased by Galway County Council rather than leased.

6.4 Long-term Leasing Scheme

The government has allocated funding to Local Authorities and approved housing bodies to lease residential properties from private owners. The properties are then used to provide accommodation to people who are currently on the social housing waiting list. Galway County Council will aim to meet the annual targets to be achieved under the long-term leasing scheme.

6.5 Unfinished Housing Estates

Galway County Council is responsible for the management and administration of unfinished housing developments and will work towards minimising the vacancy level of these estates.

6.6 Actions under Objective 4

1. Continued engagement with key stakeholders to acquire suitable vacant properties held by banks, financial institutions and other investors for social housing use.
2. Galway County Council will aim to meet the annual targets under the Repair and Lease scheme and under the Long-Term Leasing scheme.
3. Galway County Council will continue to seek and purchase suitable properties for refurbishment as social housing.
4. Galway County Council will continue to work towards minimising the vacancy level of unfinished housing estates.

7. Objective 5: Foster and develop cross-sector relationships, collaborating in partnership to tackle vacant housing matters.

7.1. Vacant Homes Officer

Galway County Council has appointed a full-time Vacant Homes Officer to co-ordinate the roll-out of this Action Plan.

The role of the Vacant Homes Officer in Galway County Council

- Actively promotes and leads in the uptake within the local community of various initiatives, schemes, and funding programmes to address vacancy and bring vacant properties back in to residential use.
- Actively engage with owners of vacant properties and other relevant stakeholders and promote use of relevant schemes and supports to bring properties back in to use.
- To collect, monitor and assess vacancy data locally and use that data to actively engage with property owners and promote schemes to encourage activation of properties.
- To communicate, promote, advise both internally within the local authority and externally as contact point for members of the public and key interested parties on vacant homes/properties.

7.2 Communication with the Public

A dedicated e-mail for members of the public to report vacant homes, vacanthomes@galwaycoco.ie along with the national website www.vacanthomes.ie, which provides information and a mechanism for reporting potentially vacant properties has been established and will be maintained. The national web portal is aimed at encouraging members of the public to report vacant properties in their area and the data is then provided to each local authority to investigate further. Galway County Council will further promote the website and encourage citizens of County Galway to report vacancy.

Galway County Council will continue to use the local newspapers, its website and social media to promote information about all schemes to reduce vacancy and bring homes back into use.

The Vacant Homes Officer will hold additional Information events throughout County Galway to inform the public of the schemes, incentives and grants available to them to bring vacant properties back in to use. Continued engagement with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) will bring awareness to the General Public of complimentary grant schemes that are available from both organisations to upgrade and bring homes back into use.

7.3 Actions Under Objective 5

1. The Vacant Homes Officer will roll out an annual plan to deliver on all initiatives in accordance with this plan.
2. Share information on schemes and support with the Public using traditional media, Social Media and Public Awareness evenings and keeping the Galway County Council website updated with information on all Schemes.
3. Continued engagement with stakeholders to promote other grants such as Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) grants which can be used in conjunction with the Vacant Homes Schemes.
4. Continued collaboration with other Departments within Galway County Council to promote addressing the issues of vacancy and dereliction.

8. Objective 6: To facilitate the activation of vacant properties utilising the Town & Village Renewal Scheme, the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) and in conjunction with the Town First Strategy.

8.1 The Town Centre First (TCF) Policy

Town Centre First (TCF) Policy was launched by Government in February 2022, as a result of the policy, a dedicated Town Regeneration Officer position was funded for 3 years and appointed in June 2023. It is the role of the Town Regeneration Officer to work with local communities, including Town Teams to deliver tailored Town Centre First Plans for identified settlements. A TCF Town Team is a group of local residents, businesspeople, community representatives and other stakeholders who come together to make their area a better place to live, work, study and visit. TCF Town Team members come from diverse sectors and backgrounds. They have a unique position in the community to become 'local experts' on their area and to take a lead on the development of projects that can make positive long-term changes for the town.

Several towns in Galway will produce a town centre first plan with Gort being the first pilot town to roll it out. Athenry is the second town to benefit from funding to deliver a dedicated TCF plan, and the process to deliver the TCF Plan will commence in 2024. The TCF plan, while a non-statutory plan, must demonstrate compliance with adopted Local, Regional and National Planning Policy and sets out a clear strategy for the future development and revitalisation of the Town Centre. It is used to prepare a pipeline of regeneration projects for the town with identified funding possibilities and with a focus on deliverability. The TCF Plan addresses, with equal importance, the Social, Economic, Commercial, Cultural, Historic and Environmental opportunities and challenges within town centres

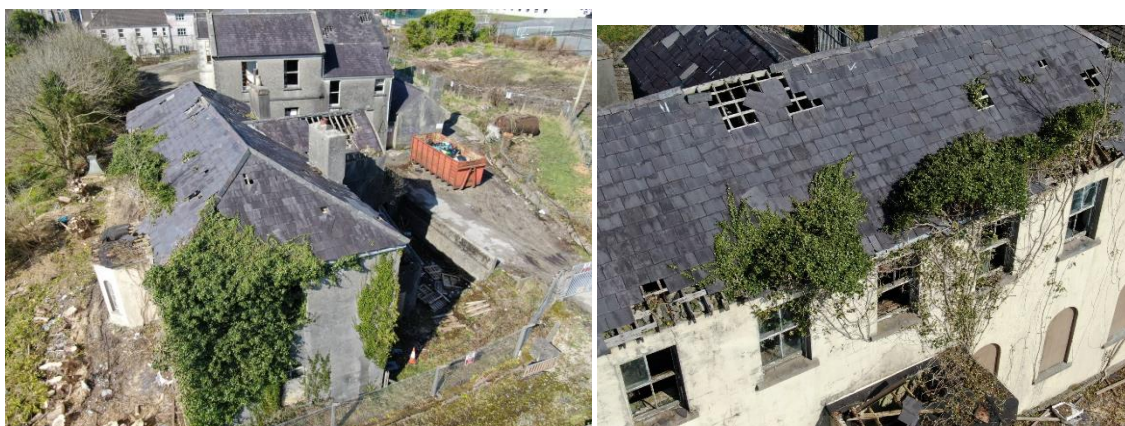
and incorporates them into a comprehensive strategy of interventions, proposals, and projects which will assist in the regeneration of the town centre making it an attractive place to live, study, work and visit.

8.2 Actions Under Objective 6

1. The Town Regeneration Officer will continue to apply for funding as and when it becomes available.
2. Collaboration between the Town Regeneration Officer (TRO), Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) team, Derelict Sites, Housing and Environment sections to address vacancy and dereliction will continue.

9. Objective 7: Acquire derelict and vacant brown field sites to convert into Social Housing Units at strategic locations to meet social housing demand in key County Towns, thereby addressing dereliction in town centres and social housing need as one project.

Galway County Council has acquired a number of brown field sites to address vacancy and to deliver social housing at the same time. In addition, it is our intention to continue to refurbish and bring back into use existing social housing sites that have fallen into disrepair. Some of the works that have been carried out to date on this are as follows.



Photos 3 and 4; Before: St Joseph's Clifden – Addressing vacancy and Increasing Social Housing Delivery.



Photos 5 and 6; After: Gort na gCloch Clifden – Addressing vacancy and Increasing Social Housing Delivery.



Photos 7 and 8; Before: Dunlo Hill Ballinasloe – currently under development for social housing.



Photos 9 and 10; After: Artist's Impression Dunlo Hill Ballinasloe – currently under development for social housing.

9.1 Actions under Objective 7

1. Galway County Council will continue to source suitable brown field and vacant sites for regeneration as social housing.

10. Implementation of the Vacant Homes Action Plan

10.1. Identification of the reasons behind Vacancy

It is recognised as part of the implementation of this plan that the underlying reasons for vacancy must be kept under review. Not all vacant properties are located in what might be perceived to be deprived areas, nor are they necessarily derelict, boarded-up or causing a problem. There are a significant number of properties which naturally become vacant for periods of time, perhaps due to the buying and selling process, are in between tenancies, an owner may have moved to residential care, owner passes away, and the probate process delays moving the property on. When a property remains empty for a significant period of time, or is attracting unwanted attention, then it is considered vacant. It is important to monitor and establish the reasons underlying vacancy so that these can be addressed through the annual plan.

10.2 Annual Plan under this Action Plan

An annual plan will be prepared and presented to the Housing SPC annually during the life of this action plan. This will allow the introduction of new schemes, amendments to existing schemes and the application of annual targets under the various schemes as they are advised by the Department.

10.3 Staffing and Resources

It is recognised that staffing in the vacant homes unit in Galway County Council is under resourced at present and a case has been made for additional staff in this area to be able to deliver under all of the initiatives listed above.

10.4. Collaboration with various Departments within Galway County Council

Collaboration within GCC will be an essential element of rolling out this Plan because it addresses vacancy under a number of distinct Departments within the Council. By working together it is envisaged that this plan will facilitate significant improvements in reducing vacancy and dereliction throughout County Galway.

11. References

Policies:

- 1 **Housing For All – a New Housing Plan for Ireland**
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ef5ec-housing-for-all-a-new-housing-plan-for-ireland/>
- 2 **Housing for All – Pathway 4 Addressing Vacancy and Efficient Use of Existing Stock**
<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ef5ec-housing-for-all-a-new-housing-plan-for-ireland/>
- 3 **Town Centre First Policy 2022** <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/473d3-town-centre-first-policy/>
- 4 **Rebuilding Ireland: An Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness**
- 5 **Vacant Homes Action Plan 2023 – 2026** <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/df86c-vacant-homes-action-plan-2023-2026/>

Circulars:

- 6 **Circular PL7/ 2017**
- 7 **Circular VHU 01/2018**

Legislation:

- 8 **Derelict Sites Act 1990**
- 9 **Housing Act 1996**
- 10 **Land and Development Act 2021**
- 11 **State Property Act 1954**

Appendix A; Leaflets distributed during the vacant Homes Survey



Comhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe
Galway County Council



Galway County Council has identified this property as a Vacant/Derelict Property and is committed to maximizing the use of existing housing stock.

As the owner of this property, did you know of the three options available to you?

- 1. Bring the property back into use as a home for you to live in or rent.***
- 2. Sell the property to the Council to bring back into use as social housing.***
- 3. Use a loan to refurbish the property and then lease it back to the Council.***

Option 1: Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant - Croí Cónaithe

You can get a grant of up to €50,000 and up to €70,000, if the property is derelict. The property must be vacant for 2 years and you must intend to live in it or rent it. Properties on qualifying islands may be entitled to (up to) an additional 20% grant funding.

Option 2: Buy and Renew Scheme

If there is demand in this area, suitable properties can be purchased by the Local Authority for Social Housing.

Option 3: Repair & Leasing Scheme

If a property requires repairs and has been vacant for at least a year, you can get a loan for repairs to a maximum of €80,000 (vat inclusive) and lease it back to the Council for social housing for 5 to 25 years.

Application forms, expression of interest forms, further information and scheme outlines can be found on our website:
www.galway.ie/en/services/housing

The Vacant Homes Officer
Galway County Council
+353 91 509 300 and by email at
vacanthomes@galwaycoco.ie

An information evening will be held in your area in the coming weeks – dates will be announced on social media & radio.



Comhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe
Galway County Council



D'aithin Comhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe an réadmhaoin seo mar Réadmhaoin Fholamh/
Thréigthe agus tá an Chomhairle tiomanta an stoc tithíochta atá ann cheana a uasmhéadú.

Mar úinéir na réadmhaoin seo, an raibh tú ar an eolas faoi na trí rogha atá ar fáil duit?

1. An réadmhaoin a thabhairt ar ais le haghaidh úsáide mar ait cónaithe nó chun a ligean ar cíós.
2. An réadmhaoin a dhíol leis an gComhairle chun a thabhairt ar ais in úsáid mar thithíocht shóisialta.
3. Úsáid a bhaint as iasacht chun an réadmhaoin a athchóiriú agus ansin a ligean ar léas ar ais leis an gComhairle.

Rogha 1: Deontas Athchóirithe do Réadmhaoin Fholamh - Croí Cónaithe

Is féidir leat deontas suas le €50,000 agus suas le €70,000 a fháil, más réadmhaoin thréigthe atá i gceist. Caithfidh an réadmhaoin a bheith folamh ar feadh 2 bhliain agus beartaithe agat cónaí ann nó a ligean ar cíós. D'fhéadfadh go mbeidh réadmhaoin ar oileáin cháilithe i dteideal le (suas le) 20% maoiniú deontais breise.

Rogha 2: Scéim Cheannaigh agus Athnuála

Má tá éileamh ann sa cheantar seo, is féidir leis an Údarás Áitiúil réadmhaoin oiriúnach do Tithíochta Sóisialta a cheannach.

Rogha 3: Scéim Deisiúcháin agus Léasaithe

Má theastaíonn deisiúcháin ón réadmhaoin agus más rud é go raibh sí folamh ar feadh bliana ar a laghad, is féidir leat iasacht a fháil le haghaidh deisiúcháin suas le huasmhéid €80,000 (CBL san áireamh) agus a ligean ar léas ar ais leis an gComhairle mar thithíocht shóisialta ar feadh tréimhse idir 5 go 25 bliana.

Is féidir foirmeacha iarratais, foirmeacha léirithe spéise, tuilleadh eolais agus achoimrí scéime a fháil ar ár suíomh gréasáin:
www.galway.ie/cn/services/housing

Oifigeach Tithe Cónaithe Fólma do Chomhairle Chontae na Gaillimhe
+353 91 509 300 agus trí ríomhphost ag vacanthomes@galwaycoco.ie

Beidh seisiún eolais ar siúl i do cheantar sna seachtainí amach romhainn – fógrófar dátaí ar na meáin shóisialta & ar raidió.