

**Joint Committee on Housing, Planning,
Community & Local Government**

**Opening Statement by John O'Connor,
Chief Executive of Housing Agency**

Chair, Members, I am pleased to be here this morning to discuss with you the issues of vacant housing; derelict and vacant sites throughout the country to assist the Committee in its examination of these issues. I am accompanied by my colleagues David Silke and Isoilde Dillon.

Housing Agency

Founded in 2010, the Housing Agency's vision is to enable everyone to live in good quality, affordable homes in sustainable communities. We provide a very wide level of expert advice, support, research and training activities for local authorities, the Department of Housing, Planning, Community & Local Government, Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs), NAMA and many other public and private sector organisations in this pursuit.

The many activities we are involved in, together with our research, provides the Agency with a unique vantage point from which to be able to offer this Committee information, advice and observations on addressing vacant housing and sites.

1. Overview

We were asked to address the issue of vacant housing, derelict sites and underused spaces. In addressing these issues I would like to cover the following areas:

- Vacant Housing
- Housing Agency Acquisitions - Vacant House Purchase Initiative
- NAMA – Acquisitions and leasing for social housing
- Unfinished Residential Developments
- Derelict and Vacant sites

2. Vacant Housing

In May 2016 the Housing Agency's discussion paper, **Overview of Vacant Housing in Ireland**, highlighting the level of vacant housing and possible actions to address this, was submitted to the Oireachtas Committee on Housing and Homelessness.

Following that, Pillar 5 of the Government's Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness – Rebuilding Ireland, focussed on utilising existing housing stock. The key objective identified is to ensure that existing vacant housing stock throughout the country and across all forms of tenure, in both the private and public sectors, is used to the optimum degree possible. The key action from this is to develop a National Vacant Housing Re-Use Strategy.

In order to prepare a draft strategy for consideration by the Minister, a working group, was established, which I chair. This working group is examining ways of addressing vacant housing and is consulting with organisations and individuals in this country and abroad, including organisations such as the Empty Homes Network in England and the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership.

Some of the key areas being examined by the working group are:

- **Priority** - How to ensure that bringing vacant homes back into use is taken as a priority at national and local level
- **Information** - How best to identify and compile registers of vacant properties and their owners. The group is examining various sources of information required to build an understanding of the scale of the problem/potential which will indicate if actions and policies can be tailored to ensure effective use is made of existing resources and assets.
- **Response Structure** - A critical factor informing the success of bringing vacant homes back into use will be the role played by local authorities. The immediate focus needs to be on ensuring that local authorities are in a position to identify and actively engage with owners and that they have the necessary support to do this. Support at national level is critical to success.

We are currently consulting others, researching and analysing various approaches and actions. If Committee Members would like, we can discuss this in more detail during the open session.

Two initiatives are currently being implemented: namely the Repair and Lease scheme and the Buy-and-Renew scheme. These are important measures in addressing vacant housing.

3. Acquisitions - Vacant House Purchase Initiative

The Agency has been engaging with the banks on their portfolios of properties throughout the country in the context of the Vacant House Purchase Initiative. The objective is for the Agency to utilise a €70m rolling fund to acquire 1,600 properties by 2020. The majority of these properties would be formerly buy-to-let properties.

To date, the Agency has had bids accepted on 305 dwellings with a total value of €46.75m. Of these the Agency has signed contracts for 217 dwellings and 29 of these purchases have closed. The dwellings acquired will be sold to AHBs to provide homes for those in need of social housing support.

In addition, under an earlier initiative in 2015 and early 2016, the Agency acquired 171 properties from banks which were transferred directly to local authorities.

4. NAMA – Acquisitions and leasing for social housing

The Agency has been working with NAMA, the Department, local authorities and AHBs since 2011 to utilise properties that were part of the security to loans taken over by NAMA. To date, 2,378 properties have either been delivered or contracted for delivery to the social housing sector. It is important to note that many of these properties were vacant properties and, in most cases, required significant investment by NAMA through the property owners and receivers to make them suitable for provision as homes.

5. Unfinished Residential Developments

It is important to note that significant work has been on-going to resolve the main proportion of unfinished housing developments since 2010. The number of these developments has reduced from 2,846 to less than 500 in that period. A key aspect of this process was to identify and collect detailed data and undertake surveys on an annual basis on each development. In addition, significant time was required to engage with developers, receivers and banks in relation to resolving the specific issues for each development. The lessons learned from this process – the need for good data, ongoing monitoring, stakeholder engagement and co-operation, results orientation - are important in informing the approach to dealing with vacant housing and sites.

6. Derelict sites and underused spaces

The effective implementation of the vacant sites levy is critical. This was introduced under the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015 and imposes a levy of 3% of the market value of sites that are identified in a register residential development sites and regeneration sites. Each local authority is preparing a register of relevant sites that meets certain criteria, including the sites are serviced, viable and that there is a demand for housing in the area. The findings from other countries is that a site tax is an effective way of promoting housing supply and utilising vacant sites.

Conclusion

We are pleased to elaborate upon or discuss the points raised and to provide more information to the Committee as it sees fit.

Thank you, again, for this opportunity to make a contribution about these important issues.

What the Housing Agency Does	
Works with others to improve housing and communities	
Department of Housing, Planning, Community & Local Government	Support on policy development and implementation. Financial analysis and reporting on AHB applications for funding.
Local Authorities	Support and advice on housing supply (capital, current expenditure etc.), Part V, housing management issues, land mapping. Shared service for loan underwriting.
Approved Housing Bodies	Support and advice on housing supply issues. The Regulation Office in the Agency is the interim regulator for this sector.
Other stakeholders	Undertake specific projects such as, unfinished estates, the Pyrite Remediation Scheme, the Mortgage to Rent Scheme etc. Research on the housing market and related issues such as housing standards.