



**Opening Statement on 'Revitalising Derelict and Vacant  
Houses on Farmland' by Macra na Feirme President Elaine  
Houlihan to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture,  
Food and the Marine**

**Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2023**



Chairman and Committee Members,

My name is Elaine Houlihan, President of Macra na Feirme. I am joined today by Niamh Farrell Chairperson of our National Rural Youth Committee and Mick Curran CEO of Macra na Feirme. Thank you for the invitation to speak with you all today on the topic of *'Revitalising Derelict and Vacant Houses on Farmland'*.

Farm buildings and homesteads play a central role in the sustainability of the rural environment and Macra na Feirme, therefore, supports the motion to revitalise derelict and vacant houses on farmlands across Ireland. Moreover, we welcome the opportunity to put forward key points for consideration in relation to the above issue, which are important for rural regeneration and key for viable and prosperous rural communities.

Historically, the rural landscape of Ireland has been dominated by agriculture and the activities of rural inhabitants have strongly influenced the agricultural environment and the visual perception of the landscape. Farm buildings and houses are thus a characteristic part of the Irish landscape. Together with field patterns and boundaries, they provide an essential component of the built heritage and landscape. Farmhouses, designed over the decades to support farming families and their communities, provide a valuable link to our farming past, and impart an understanding of historic agricultural settlement patterns and ownership structures. However, changing farming practice, and society needs of farming families, have left many farmhouses and buildings unsuited to modern living and farming needs. Consequently, many farmhouses dotted throughout the countryside now lie derelict. Through the revitalisation of farm buildings, together with their continued appreciation and reuse, there is opportunity to preserve the cultural heritage of our rural landscape while also addressing the current housing crises. It also addresses the urgent need to make rural housing and living attractive to the younger rural generation. Consequently, Macra na Feirme would like to strongly emphasise that these dwellings continue to play a central role in the formation of the rural landscape. Representing the legacy of past generations, they provide us with the challenge of preserving this critical link to our heritage. Moreover, these derelict farmhouses also provide opportunity for rural regeneration through the development of these key assets that are commonly found in prime locations across our landscape. As a result, they have potential to add value to existing farm economies and broader rural socioeconomics.

Currently, there are 150,000 vacant homes in Ireland, and as these are not coming onto the market or being lived in, there is a requirement for additional housing. This additional housing need can be met



by either building more houses or renovating existing homes. Renovation of property has a key role to play in addressing the housing shortfall and there is currently significant opportunity for renovation of current derelict housing on farmland. Rural vacancy is commonly considered only in relation to towns and villages, but the derelict farm housing across the agricultural landscape provides significant opportunities for addressing the housing shortfall and rural development. It is also important to note, that by addressing rural vacancy across Irish farmland it can also support urban areas by alleviating pressure where housing densities are increasing. Thus, providing mutual benefits for the urban and rural areas.

By recognising the value of our built farmland heritage, it can provide an alternative perspective to these buildings that have provided a long-standing means by which humans have populated the countryside in harmony with nature and the surrounding landscape. Macra na Feirme would particularly like to draw attention to the interaction between farm buildings and the rural environment and the mutual benefits. The primary benefit is that it will allow people to live in rural Ireland and thus support rural regeneration. Secondary, but equally important benefits, are presented in reducing the pressure on existing overcrowded urban areas and in doing so reduces pressure on key services such as the provision of health and education. However, this is not to neglect the current requirement for investment in critical services for rural Ireland. Such investment in critical services, together with addressing rural vacancy from a rural agriculture farmland perspective, is critical so that people are presented with real and viable options to remain in, or return to, rural communities across Ireland.

There is currently a limited local demand for vacant homes in rural areas, which is confounded by the current situation whereby in a recent survey by the Society of Chartered Surveyors, it was found that only 25% of derelict properties profiled were deemed to be financially viable. Given that only 25% of vacant properties may be financially viable, then the current scheme available to commercial properties where grants of up to €70k are available to refurbish a commercial premises once the refurbished unit is passed to a local authority for social housing. This cannot be directly applied to derelict houses on farmlands, or in the wider rural setting.

Macra na Feirme therefore put forward the following proposal for consideration which would provide a real and viable means for people to have the opportunity to live and participate in their local communities:

- Ensure the vacant property refurbishment grant is available to all rural settings.
- If the vacant property achieves an A or B standard BER, the grant as received will be net of VAT.
- As houses need to be owned by the grant applicant at the time of application, the introduction of a state backed guarantee to assist people buying the vacant property is required. This assistance is in the form of a guarantee, very few people will have the means to purchase a property and/or have sufficient funds in place to renovate the property. If the state acts as a guarantor, then individuals may borrow against the future value of the property as opposed to the current derelict value.
- To be eligible for the grant, the property should either be a principal private residence that is lived in for at least 40 weeks of the year or rented out through a local authority.
- The grant is not intended to increase the stock of Airbnb, but rather to assist people to be able to renovate and own their own home.
- It is not recommended that renovated homes can be “second homes,” if through circumstance that this comes to pass, and the property becomes a rented property, then the landlord will have to be registered with the Rental Tenancies Board.

Bringing derelict farmhouses back into productive use presents a fast and cost-effective way to meet the current housing demands and the needs of rural communities. To support the above proposal, Macra na Feirme would also like to emphasise that it is critical to better understand the different categories of vacant properties across the rural farm landscape. This would allow for a clearer understanding of the characteristics of vacancy (e.g., reason, frequency, and type) so as to identify farm buildings and homesteads that have the greatest potential to be refurbished and made available for use. This would support the development of a guidance framework for their refurbishment in line with conservation of our heritage and assist in managing expectation in relation to target setting.

Any such review should also investigate other key benefits of addressing derelict farm buildings and homesteads such as providing opportunities for rural dwellers to obtain a second home for rental purposes, as is currently more readily available to urban purchasers. Moreover, it could provide a dedicated source of income to owners who opt to rent their property (subject to conditions for long term tenancy). This would help to revitalise rural communities as not all rural dwellers want the burden of owning a house but would welcome a sense of permanency. Many people at various stages in their lives may simply wish to experience rural living, in addition, purchasing and restoring rural



farm buildings provides a means for people to forge intimate connections with the natural environment, while also conserving our cultural heritage and leaving a distinctive legacy for future generations. This increases the housing stock, while providing no increase to the housing footprint. It also ensures energy efficiency by increasing energy rating of housing in rural areas.

Increasing the population through various strategies, would also simultaneously enhancing the streetscapes of towns and villages which are also suffering from mass emigration of people from rural areas resulting in many derelict shops and other amenity properties.

While conversion into residential use remains a key focus, other additional uses must not be overlooked. Many older farm buildings and homesteads have the advantage of a pivotal location due to their early establishment in terms, for example, position, orientation, and views. Addressing derelict buildings, therefore also has important potential for diversification of the rural economy. This will ensure its resilience in the face of future change forecast in relation to climate, food chain supply and energy usage. For example, such renovations of farm buildings could provide opportunity for new amenity and economic uses allowing for the creation of additional income for rural dwellers. Macra na Feirme strongly recommend that all options for new uses of farm buildings and homestead be explored to ensure the best use of available resources which should be focused on rural regeneration. Moreover, as these farm settlements are integral to the appearance of the cultural landscape it is important that old buildings and sites should be cared for through a measured process of conservation. This would serve as a crucial added benefit of promoting rural landscape management that allows for the unique character of Irish farmland to be maintained.

To conclude, I would like to emphasis once again that derelict farmhouses and building are an underused resource that have great potential to be transformed into a value asset providing sustainable rural development as well as addressing the current housing crises and wider regeneration needs. The role of rural buildings is indeed fundamental to creating better living environments where people feel connected to the natural environmental and have a sense of place through their cultural heritage. In addition, through addressing the housing need from an Irish agricultural landscape perspective it recognises the long-standing role of farmers, and the wider rural communities, in preserving our built heritage left by our previous farming generations. This legacy is the heart of Irish Family Farms and the communities it supports, must be conserved, and managed better so that its legacy is available for future generations to come.