

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government & Heritage

Ivan Grimes, Director of Services, Waterford City & County Council, 14 December 2021

Good afternoon Chair and Committee Members. First of all I would like to thank you for the invitation to attend the meeting this afternoon. I am accompanied by my colleague, Paul Johnston who is the Senior Resident Engineer in Waterford City and County Council's Housing Department. In my opening statement I will give a brief overview of the work we have undertaken in relation to tackling vacancy in Waterford in recent years and after that Paul and I will be available to take any questions the Committee members may have.

Since 2016, Waterford Council has been actively seeking to reduce the level of vacant homes across Waterford City and County. This focus was initially in the context of Census 2016 data which indicated that the number of vacant residential units in Waterford was 5,194 or 13.6 % of the total residential units in the city and county (this level was above the national average). This level of vacancy could not be sustained in the context of increasing demand for both social and private housing.

Working with our Councillors we put in place an Action Plan to tackle vacancy, the key objectives of which are to;

- maximise the potential for the reuse of empty homes for social and private housing;
- provide sources of good quality affordable housing;
- ensure that awareness of the issue of empty homes is raised amongst the public and to give the public opportunities to bring vacancy issues to the Council's attention
- help improve the existing streetscape of our city, towns and villages,
- promote the availability of funding, schemes and other services through targeted information sharing and publicity, and
- help to reduce the level of localised anti-social behaviour that can often occur in long-term vacant housing.

A dedicated Vacant Homes Team was established to identify and record vacant residential units and to assess the options available to bring those units back into occupancy.

The Vacant Homes Team works to encourage vacant property owners to allow their properties to be used for social housing through the Repair and Leasing Scheme and the Buy and Renew Scheme. Working with colleagues in our Property Management and Planning Departments we have also taken enforcement action through Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO). While the Repair and Lease and the Buy and Renew schemes have proved particularly effective in Waterford, the use of CPO's has had more mixed results to date with legal delays and challenges in some instances. However, it is our intention to continue to use the CPO process to target more complex vacant properties.

There are approximately 320 units currently in the Repair and Lease Scheme pipeline, including 140 dwelling units that have been returned to productive use since the scheme commenced, and there are approximately 50 units currently in the Buy and Renew Scheme pipeline. Both schemes, and in particular the Repair and Lease Scheme, have proven particularly suitable at delivering 1-bed and 2-bed units, particularly in urban areas where there is a proportionately larger demand for this type of accommodation. Both schemes have also been very successful in re-purposing protected structures and the use of both schemes have also been combined with other methods that target vacant properties including the Living City Initiative and current planning exemptions to return vacant commercial and retail buildings into use for residential accommodation. Interest levels in the Repair and Lease Scheme remains strong as demonstrated by the recent funding approval for the proposed Repair and Lease Scheme at St. Joseph's House, Waterford City, to deliver 71 self-contained dwellings within a former convent building that will be aimed at providing quality accommodation for elderly residents.

Waterford Council have currently undertaken compulsory purchase orders on approximately 49 vacant dwellings to return them back to use for housing purposes.

Finally I want to acknowledge to ongoing support the Council has received from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in our ongoing work to tackle vacancy, both in terms of the financial resources and the ongoing engagement and advice they have provided.