

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage
Opening Statement by Caroline Timmons, Acting Assistant Secretary, Housing
Affordability, Inclusion and Homelessness Division, Department of Housing,
Local Government and Heritage.

15 June 2023

Cathaoirleach, members of the joint committee, thank you for the opportunity today to discuss the issue of vacancy and dereliction. I am Acting Assistant Secretary in the Department with responsibility for Housing Affordability, Inclusion and Homelessness and the issue of residential vacancy forms part of my brief. I am joined by Ann Marie O'Connor, Principal Officer of the Vacant Homes Unit and I acknowledge my colleagues representing the City and County Managers Association here today also.

Addressing vacancy and bringing properties back into use in our cities, towns, villages and rural areas can provide much needed housing, while also being a catalyst for the regeneration of these areas and the communities living in them.

Tackling vacancy is a key part of the *Housing for All* plan. *Housing for All* recognises that at a time of such high housing need, we have to ensure that the houses we already have are being fully used and, while the reasons for vacancy are often complex, we do not want to see existing housing unoccupied, while others have no home.

Pathway 4 of *Housing for All* sets out a blueprint to combat vacancy and make efficient use of our existing housing stock. It contains a series of actions to ensure houses already built are being fully used and it is very much aligned with other government policies such as Our Rural Future and the Town Centre First Policy.

The Vacant Homes Action Plan, which was launched in January 2023, outlines the significant progress made in addressing vacancy since the launch of *Housing for All*, and expands on the actions that are being pursued to return vacant properties back to viable use.

A number of necessary structures have been established to support addressing vacancy. These include the establishment of a dedicated Vacant Homes Unit in the Department which has a central role in overseeing, driving and supporting a co-

ordinated approach to addressing vacancy. Support is being provided for a Vacant Homes Office in each local authority, with 31 full-time Vacant Homes Officers now in place. This role aligns closely with Town Regeneration Officers to drive the revitalisation of local communities.

A new National Town Centre First Office has been established in the Local Government Management Agency to drive Town Centre First actions, coordinate stakeholder engagement at a national level and across the local government sector and promote best practice. The Vacant Homes Unit in the Department is working closely with this office and other stakeholders to ensure a co-ordinated approach to bringing vacant and derelict properties back into use.

Real progress has been made, with the introduction of new schemes, supports and incentives for owners and prospective owners of vacant properties.

For example, in July 2022, the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant was launched to support bringing vacant and derelict properties back into use. A grant of up to a maximum of €50,000 is available for the refurbishment of vacant properties for occupation as a principal private residence and for properties which will be made available for rent. A top-up grant is available where the property is confirmed to be derelict, bringing the total grant available for a derelict property up to a maximum of €70,000. The Grant is available nationwide in respect of vacant and derelict properties built up to and including 2007. Feedback on the Grant has been overwhelmingly positive, with almost 1,600 applications submitted to the end of Quarter 1 of this year.

In addition, under call 3 of the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, €150m is being made available to local authorities to acquire long-term vacant or derelict properties for onward sale or re-use. The Fund will be replenished from the proceeds of the sale or reuse of a site, allowing the local authority to establish a rolling programme of acquisitions to tackle long-term vacancy and dereliction.

Furthermore, planning regulations, introduced in 2018, which exempted certain vacant commercial premises, including 'over the shop' type spaces, from requiring planning permission to change to residential purposes have been extended until 2025.

More recently, a new CPO Activation Programme was launched in April, with targets identified for each local authority. The Programme provides for a proactive, systematic and planned approach to the activation of vacant and derelict

properties, including identification of properties and engagement with owners of those properties to bring them back into use. It also includes guidance and supports for local authorities to actively use their legislative powers to acquire vacant and derelict properties, where engagement with owners has been unsuccessful. These powers are already being successfully used by some local authorities, for example in Limerick, where 43 properties were acquired and brought into use in 2022, and the CPO Activation Programme will help to standardise that good practice and bring a proactive approach to vacancy in each local authority.

The Department has also commenced a vacancy survey in order to capture data on the number of vacant dwellings nationally. This is being rolled out across all local authorities to identify properties to bring back into use.

The focus on vacancy and the work to address it needs to continue. Significant progress has been made and the Department intends to build on this momentum. The Vacant Homes Action Plan outlines planned actions to 2026 and support structures are now in place to promote and undertake the ongoing work needed. These actions will be overseen, and driven by the Department who will continue to engage with and provide supports to all stakeholders and ensure a coordinated and focused approach in bringing back into use as many vacant homes as possible.

We are happy to answer any questions that the Committee may have.

Thank You.