

**JOC Public Petitions Opening Statement for Minister of State with responsibility for  
Nature, Heritage and Electoral Reform, Malcolm Noonan TD 30.11.23:**

**BACKGROUND**

Thank you for the invitation to attend today. Since I was before this committee a year ago, my Department has undertaken a range of initiatives designed to assist the owners and occupiers of thatched buildings. It will take time for these initiatives to take full effect, but I am confident that the steps we have taken will reduce the incidence of fire in thatched buildings, and thereby improve safety, reduce losses, and make thatched buildings easier to insure. I am very much encouraged to see there has already been a significant reduction in the number of thatch fires in the 12 months since we spoke. I will discuss this in greater detail later, but first I would like to summarise the relevant work carried out by my Department.

**Research Conducted**

Last year we contracted an historic buildings expert to produce a report on the topic of thatch insurance and fire safety. This study considered information received from the insurance industry, owners, fire officers and local authority heritage personnel on the incidence and causes of fire in thatched buildings. It also reviewed research undertaken in other jurisdictions on the causes of thatch fires and on fire-prevention measures. In parallel, my Department liaised with officials in other jurisdictions to understand the prevalence of thatch fires there.

The first key finding of this work was that the incidence of fire in thatched buildings in Ireland is much higher than the incidence in England, the only other jurisdiction for which figures are available.

Survey responses from local authority fire officers indicated that Ireland had 72 thatch fires in the five-year period to November 2022. Figures provided to my Department by Historic England indicated that the equivalent figure for England, which has more than twenty times as many thatched buildings as Ireland, was only 189. This means that in the period 2018 to 2022 there were fires in 3.1% of thatched buildings in Ireland, compared to only 0.4% of

thatched buildings in England. The incidence of fire in Ireland was approximately 8 times greater than in England.

The second key finding was that thatch fires tend to originate from a small number of causes, relating mainly to chimney use and maintenance, and particularly the ejection of hot embers out of the chimney and onto the thatch. A review by Burgoyne's, an engineering firm which specialises in forensic investigation of building fires, found that 64 of 103 thatch fires investigated were caused by the ejection of hot embers, with a further 13 also originating in the chimney. This risk can be addressed through simple measures such as not using solid-fuel stoves and improving chimney design and maintenance.

Taken together, these findings hold out the possibility that through a sustained effort we can very substantially reduce fire risk and reap the obvious benefits that would stem from that, including improved insurability.

### **Actions taken**

#### *Dissemination of research*

Following on from this research, my officials have used our regular contacts with owners and local authority staff to raise awareness of the measures needed to improve fire safety in thatched buildings.

We have also developed and published a document entitled *Fire Safety in Thatched Properties*, in conjunction with the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management. This booklet is aimed at thatch owners and occupiers, and offers clear advice on the simple measures required to reduce risk. It has been sent directly to the owners of thatched properties, who, following on from the thatch insurance survey that my officials circulated last year, indicated that they would like to stay in touch with the Department. Together with Architectural Conservation Officers, Heritage Officers, Housing Inspectors, and thatchers, my officials are working to ensure that the booklet is circulated as widely as possible.

As part of the implementation of this fire safety guidance, I am pleased to announce that in 2024 we will run a pilot scheme where thatch owners can request a visit to their property by an engineer from my Department. The engineer will provide advice on how to apply the

published guidance in the particular property in question. This service will be available to thatch owners free of charge. It will be available for an initial 6 month pilot period – if it proves successful the Department will look to make it available on an ongoing basis.

#### *Engagement with insurers*

In addition to engaging with local authority staff and the public, officials from my Department and the Department of Finance have met with Insurance Ireland and Brokers Ireland as well as a range of individual underwriters and brokers to raise awareness of the research findings.

To establish a baseline and to assist the insurance sector in understanding the scale of the market, my officials completed a national survey to ascertain the number of thatched buildings, both historic and modern, across all counties. This survey identified 2,278 thatched buildings, including homes, commercial premises, etc. When fully compiled, we will circulate the survey results to Insurance Ireland and Brokers Ireland, so that they may clarify the scale of the market for their members.

In addition to helping insurers, this data will also assist local authorities by giving them a comprehensive picture of the location and general condition of the thatched buildings in their area. This will enable them to take the necessary steps to protect these buildings, and in identifying owners and occupiers who may wish to access advice and grant funding for repairs and maintenance.

#### *Guidance for fire services*

As well as guidance on fire prevention, my Department is working with the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management to develop Standard Operating Guidance for fire in thatched buildings. This type of guidance is intended for the fire services in local authorities. Recent research into firefighting in thatch indicates that improvements can be made that reduce both roof and building loss, while of course ensuring that human safety is paramount. This guidance is expected to reduce damage in cases where fire does break out, which should reduce insurers' losses and ultimately premiums.

#### **Initial results**

My officials have followed up the survey of fire officers previously mentioned with a repeat survey covering the 12 months to November 2023. I am pleased to say that the results of this survey are positive. In the five years to November 2022, we had an average of just over 14 thatch fires per year. With two local authorities left to report, the figure for the 12 months to November 2023 is 6, of which only 1 resulted in full loss of the building. While it is only one year of data, and we may experience reverses in future years, this is still a very positive indication that the incidence of fire in thatched buildings can be significantly reduced. I hope that insurers will take note of this improvement and begin to see the commercial opportunity which exists in this sector.

### **Grant support**

Finally, I would like to remind the committee of the grant support which exists for thatched buildings. Last year I introduced a new ringfenced fund of €500,000 under the Built Heritage Investment Scheme. This can be used for thatching or for other repairs to the historic fabric of thatched buildings. It is in addition to the €500,000 made available each year under the Thatch Repair Grant, and any funds which thatch owners may compete for under the Historic Structures Fund or the wider Built Heritage Investment Scheme. While this funding does not directly address the issue of insurance in thatched buildings, it is a sincere effort by the State to take on some of the wider financial burden of maintaining our historic thatched buildings.

### **Going forward**

Going forward, my Department will continue to support local authorities and building owners to reduce fire damage to thatched buildings. Our *Fire Safety in Thatched Properties* booklet provides essential and evidence-based guidance upon which owners, occupiers and insurers can rely, and the offer of home visits will ensure that thatch owners and occupiers are supported to apply and adapt the guidance to their particular property. We will also continue to monitor the incidence of fire in thatched buildings so that improvements can be brought to the attention of insurers in a timely manner. In short, we will do our utmost to reduce fire risk in order to protect historic fabric and ensure the safety of owners and users of thatched buildings. I hope that insurers will follow suit by offering insurance at a premium that reflects this reduction in risk.