

**The Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development
and the Islands, 22nd September 2023**

Re: Housing and Sustaining Communities on Offshore Islands.

Attendees:

- Dr Conor Cashman, School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork
- Máire Uí Mhaoláin, CEO of Comhar na nOileán CTR
- Nóirín Uí Mhaoldomhnaigh, Bainisteoir, Comharchumann Oileán Árinn Mhór and member of Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann

Dear Chairperson, Deputies and Senators,

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak with you today about housing and sustaining communities on Ireland's Offshore Islands. I am joined by Máire Uí Mhaoláin, CEO of Comhar na nOileán and Nóirín Uí Mhaoldomhnaigh, Bainisteoir, Comharchumann Oileán Árinn Mhór and member of Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann.

In this opening statement, I propose to provide a brief overview of recent research - and subsequent report - carried out by myself and Dr Siobhan O'Sullivan of the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork. The research focused on housing needs on Ireland's Offshore Islands.

It is important to acknowledge the timeliness of the research and its recommendations. This is particularly the case in light of the urgent need to address identified housing needs on the islands, and the opportunity presented by the recent publication of the Government's 'Our Living Islands National Islands Policy 2023-2033' and 'Our Living Islands – Action Plan 2023-2026'.

I believe it is also important to stress from the outset that the research clearly indicates a wish by full-time residents and communities to remain living and thriving on the islands, and a clear cohort of people wishing to return to, or move to the islands. The research underscores how housing is crucial in this respect - for maintaining and expanding

communities on Ireland's offshore islands. While the housing situation on the Irish islands is situated within the context of a wider housing crisis in Ireland, the needs, preferences, and experiences set out within the report indicate that a failure to address housing needs on the offshore islands represents an existential threat to the continuity of sustainable communities on the islands.

Overview of the Report

The research - and subsequent report¹ - is the result of a survey conducted between September and December 2022. The research was funded by Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann

The survey was formulated and designed following forums and consultations with island residents and representative groups. It was distributed through community groups' networks, in particular by Comhar na nOileán through their networks.

In total, 611 people participated in the survey. 60% of all survey respondents were full-time residents on the islands. Second homeowners accounted for 21% of total responses received. 13% of respondents had previously lived on the islands. 6% of responses were from people who wish to/need to move to the islands. The Galway islands region accounted for 44% of responses, followed by Cork (31%), Donegal (14%) and Mayo (11%).

I welcome the opportunity to provide more specific details this morning. However, the following key issues emerge from the survey.

Key Issues

- Lack of Housing Availability and Affordability

The availability and affordability of housing are the most significant issues identified for respondents wishing to remain on, or move to, the islands. Full-time residents who wish to remain on the islands highlighted lack of available, affordable housing, and lack of available long-term rental accommodation as the main barriers to remaining. For those

¹ Cashman, C. and O'Sullivan, S. (Forthcoming, 2023) 'Ireland's Offshore Islands: Housing Needs Survey', Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann, University College Cork.

respondents indicating they are likely to move away from the islands, the majority stated that their decision is influenced by the housing situation on the islands.

A house that is owned outright/owned with a mortgage was the most preferred property and tenure type for full time residents and those wishing to return to the islands and those needing to move to the islands.

- Precarity of Renters and Lack of Long-Term Sustainable Renting Options

Secondly, the sustainability of island communities is also impacted by the particular type of housing precarity that renters on Ireland's offshore islands are experiencing. 79% of renters in the survey stated that they are very likely/likely to move in the next 5 years. While the majority want to remain on the offshore islands, renters express concern about security of tenure, having to vacate their home due to sale/landlord request to leave, having to move out of their home during the holiday season, and the state of repair of the property.

- Latent Housing Demand and the Impact of Housing on Potential Residents

In addition to the housing needs of those full-time residents wishing to remain on the islands but impacted by housing barriers identified above, there was strong interest expressed by respondents in moving to the islands full-time, including returning islanders, those wishing to move to the islands for the first time, and second homeowners. It is of note that the language and culture of islands are key factors identified by respondents as reasons for their wish to move. The lack of property for sale and inability to obtain planning permission are identified by former island residents as issues potentially impacting their ability to return to the islands to live.

- Schemes / Initiatives that Enable Sustainable Communities

There is strong support for developing schemes and a range of housing options to enable younger generations and full-time residents to remain on the islands, including community-owned/island-run housing schemes, social housing, and conversion of derelict properties, seen as an untapped asset in addressing housing needs. Making planning permission more achievable and accessible is also highlighted by respondents. Support was also notable for initiatives to attract people to live long-term on the islands, including through a rural resettlement fund, and gateway housing.

Recommendations

The data and issues identified in the research clearly indicate that island communities need to be involved in informing and advising on housing-related action plans and, where applicable, delivering housing in conjunction with other stakeholders. The report therefore seeks to acknowledge the voices of survey respondents, engage with the 2023-2033 National Islands Policy (GoI, 2023a, 2023b), and drive community-led solutions to meeting housing needs on the islands.

In this regard, the report sets out 5 recommendations;

1. Island Specific Action Plan with Key Targets/Metrics

It is recommended that Comhar na nOileán/Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann develop a housing action plan for Ireland's offshore islands. This would be aligned with relevant housing initiatives in 'Our Living Islands' (GoI, 2023a, GoI, 2023b) where appropriate, but would add to these by identifying island-specific housing needs informed by issues identified in this survey and ongoing engagement with island communities.

2. Community-led Housing Association/Approved Housing Body

The data from this survey underlines the urgent need and support for community-led and community-managed housing developments on the islands, that would address affordable, gateway, and sheltered housing options, including for full-time residents, new residents, and essential workers (with eligibility and affordability requirements calculated accordingly). It is therefore recommended that Comhar na nOileán/Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann consider establishing a community-led housing association/Approved Housing Body focused on the offshore islands. 'Our Living Islands' (GoI, 2023a) and related action plan (policy measure 1.11, GoI, 2023b: 5) include reference to the potential role of an islands focused AHB. Consultation, advice, and support from other AHBs, the Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Irish Council for Social Housing, the Housing Agency, and Local Authorities would be essential to establishing the viability, model, and structure

of such an association. This AHB could also provide a point of contact and register of the specific housing requirements of island residents and potential residents. This would assist with the measurement of ongoing housing needs of full-time residents, as well as latent demand, and the nature of housing required to meet demand, as the recent policy highlights the importance of understanding ‘the quantum and mix of housing needed to meet corresponding island population targets’ (GoI, 2023a: 27).

3. Advisory/Input Role to National Policy Formation on Planning Guidelines

This survey indicates a clear need for community experience and voices to be heard as to the planning permission process and outcomes. The ‘Our Living Islands’ action plan includes a commitment that forthcoming planning guidelines ‘acknowledge the unique challenges and characteristics of offshore islands’ (policy measure 1.7, GoI, 2023b: 4). It is recommended that Comhar na nOileán / Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann seek to provide input to the planning guideline updates to assist in developing an islands-specific approach that address concerns as to population and environment sustainability on the islands.

4. Advisory/Input Role to National Policy Implementation on Vacant Homes

It is also recommended that Comhar na nOileán/Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann work with Vacant Home Officers in Local Authorities to ensure the realisation of unused housing stock, including vacant and derelict properties (policy measure 1.8, GoI, 2023b: 4) by supporting the identification of such properties, highlighting the availability of schemes to residents and the provision of grant support, including increased support under Croí Cónaithe (policy measure 1.9, GoI, 2023b: 4). The islands focused AHB (Recommendation 2) could also take a key role in supporting communities and local authorities with such a reactivation programme.

5. Ongoing Research and Community Engagement.

The success of an action plan (both government-level and community-based) is dependent on responsive and ongoing engagement with island communities. It is recommended that ongoing monitoring, research, and consultation is conducted

to ensure action plans and targets are meeting island needs. This could include a detailed analysis of 2022 Census data, conducting a survey of island housing stock (including vacant and derelict housing), revisiting data in this survey on a periodic basis, and holding community forums and engagement at regular intervals.

Closing Points

The data presented in this survey and the 2023 'Our Living Islands' National Islands Policy and Action Plan (GoI, 2023a, 2023b) offer a compelling opportunity to address island communities' housing needs. The information provided by respondents to this survey also shows a clear wish by full-time residents to remain on the islands, a desire by those previously living on the islands to return, and a cohort of people wishing to move to the islands for the first time. In all these situations, access to affordable and suitable housing is crucial. Island communities cannot be sustained without a specific housing policy that recognises the particular challenges islands face. The creation of long-term secure, affordable, available housing (whether to buy or to rent), is essential to fulfilling people's needs as identified in the survey, and to maintaining and building resilient, vibrant, and sustainable communities on Ireland's offshore islands.

Thank you for your time.

Myself, Máire, and Nóirín will be happy to take any questions.