

**Note in advance of the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural
Development and the Islands, 22nd September 2023
Re: Housing and Sustaining Communities on Offshore Islands.**

This document provides a brief overview of recent research - and subsequent report - carried out by Dr Conor Cashman and Dr Siobhan O'Sullivan of the School of Applied Social Studies, University College Cork, regarding housing needs on Ireland's Offshore Islands. It should be noted that this information is presented in advance of the opening statement and before the official launch / publication of the forthcoming report.¹

Overview of the Report

The forthcoming report is the result of a survey conducted between September and December 2022 regarding the housing needs of Ireland's offshore island communities. The research was funded by Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann. It aimed to do the following:

- understand the current housing situation and circumstances prevalent on Ireland's offshore islands;
- document quantitative and qualitative data as to the nature of housing needs for island communities;
- explore perspectives on the barriers to housing and housing issues on the islands; and
- consider how housing needs and sustainability can be best met in the coming years.

The survey was widely distributed by Comhar na nOileán through their networks. It was open to Ireland's offshore islands residents (over the age of 18) as well as to previous residents on the islands and those who wish to move to the islands. Participation was on an anonymous basis. Respondents selected their 'best description' category from a list categories:

1. Full-time Resident (Homeowners) where their main place of residence is owned by them or their family. This category also includes adult children living in the family home;
2. Full-time Resident (Renters) where their place of residence is rented by them or their family. This category also includes adult children living in the family home;
3. Second Homeowners who do not live full-time on the islands;
4. People who previously lived on the islands;
5. People who have not previously lived on the island but would like to, or need to, move to the islands.

Detailed findings will be discussed at the Joint Committee and set out in the formally published report in due course. However, some key issues and recommendations are noted below.

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.

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

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

The sustainability of island communities is also impacted by the particular type of housing precarity that renters on Ireland's offshore islands are experiencing. Renters express concern about security of tenure, having to vacate their home due to sale/landlord request to leave, and having to move out of their home during the holiday season.

- **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 wishing to move to the islands.

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 reservation of housing for sale. 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, grant aid for new houses, and gateway housing.

Recommendations

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)² 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 (recommendation 5). As part of this action plan, it is recommended that Comhar na nOileán / Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann establish a set of targets related to housing that are specific to individual islands and island regions.

2. Community-led Housing Association/Approved Housing Body

The data from the 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,

² Government of Ireland, 2023a. *Our Living Islands National Islands Policy 2023-2033*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/a7188-our-living-islands/>

Government of Ireland, 2023b. *Our Living Islands Action Plan 2023-2026*. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/a7188-our-living-islands/>

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.