

LOCAL AUTHORITY ACTION PLANS ARE KEY TO HOUSING DELIVERY

Under the Government's 'Housing for All' plan to tackle Ireland's housing crisis, all 31 local authorities have been directed to develop their own action plans in detailing social and affordable housing delivery over the next five years. So, just how well are councils across the country currently progressing with these plans? Report by Derek Nagle.

The 'Housing for All' plan launched by Minister for Housing Darragh O'Brien TD in September 2021 has been described as the most ambitious plan in the history of the State.

Having replaced the Rebuilding Ireland Strategy, which was launched in 2016, the Government's latest plan to address Ireland's housing crisis has been dubbed the "single largest investment in housing since the 1960s". The scheme contains 213 actions which aims to deliver a range of housing options for families, couples and individuals.

The plan proposes to increase the supply of housing to an average of 33,000 per year over the next ten years, including the delivery of 90,000 social homes, 36,000 affordable purchase homes and 18,000 cost rental homes.

It is supported by an investment package of over €4 billion per year. This is through an overall combination of €12 billion in direct Exchequer funding, €5 billion in funding through the Housing Finance Agency with €3.5 billion in funding through the Land Development Agency.

A major component of 'Housing for All' is that the housing delivery action plans will be consistent with the relevant adopted Development Plan for each local authority area and any associated environmental assessments.

These new housing plans are to be aligned with the National Planning Framework, in particular compact growth

objectives. The location of where housing developments will be delivered must be outlined (such as towns, villages, urban and rural areas) and the planned numbers of homes to be delivered in each local authority area and by year.

The plans should also outline the planned delivery streams used to meet the targets, including the role of the Approved Housing Bodies, Land Development Agency (LDA) or other partners with a focus on delivery through new build.

An assessment of housing types and sizes must also include the adequate proportion of 1-, 2-, 3- and 4-bedroom homes aligned

with those needs, and the provision of housing for people with a disability, in addition to the provision of age friendly housing.

'Council Review' checked out how some local authorities around the country are progressing with their housing delivery action plans over this five-year period.

MAYO COUNTY COUNCIL

As part of the Housing for All delivery action plan, Mayo County Council received its delivery target for social housing of 730 units up to the year 2026. Mayo felt the



Mayo County Council's 50-unit social housing project in Ballina is one of two significant housing delivery schemes in the county; the other 50-unit housing scheme in Westport has gone to tender.

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need to be more ambitious and subsequently provided a greater target of 1,004 units for the provision of social housing.

Although it did not receive an allocation for affordable housing, it is currently examining its eligibility for affordable housing funding, with an application due to be submitted to the Department of Housing by the end of September 2022.

Tom Gilligan, Director of Services for Mayo County Council, was also instrumental in setting up the vacanthomes.ie initiative. "Two of the more significant housing delivery schemes include a 50-unit social housing project in Ballina which is well advanced and another 50-unit housing scheme in Westport which has gone to tender," he said.

"We're seeing significant interest in the recently announced Croí Cónaithe (Towns) Fund. This aims to tackle vacancy and dereliction by giving homeowners or prospective homeowners a grant of up to €30,000 (€50,000 if you can prove dereliction) for the refurbishment of a vacant property for occupation as a principal private residence. Although still very much in its infancy, I anticipate the Croí Cónaithe Fund will prove very popular," he added.

Mayo County Council is currently working on more than 34 projects which are at different stages. Before the 'Housing for All' Plan, it exceeded its overall housing targets under Rebuilding Ireland, despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

Gilligan sees the lack of suitable land as well as a shortage of skilled tradespeople within the construction sector as particular challenges. He even recalls one visit to a building project where a foreman asked if he brought any block layers with him, such was the shortage.

"In some cases, we are seeing builders not being able to access additional finance to deliver housing schemes. This is one of the significant challenges to Mayo County Council being successful in delivering its 'Housing for All' Plan," he said.

WATERFORD CITY AND COUNTY COUNCIL

As the war in Ukraine continues to make headlines worldwide, Waterford City and County Council has deliberately tried to utilise vacant properties to provide accommodation for displaced Ukrainian persons.

This is to minimise the impact on a housing supply market that is already pressured. Resources from other areas,



Fingal's new affordable housing scheme at Dun Emer, Lusk, Co. Dublin, where 51 homes are being built (39 affordable, 12 social) with owners due to move in before the end of the year.

including Housing for All has had to be diverted to deliver accommodation solutions for those fleeing war.

"While it is certainly having an impact on delivery, the Ukrainian issue is not the predominant influence on delivery as much as construction inflation and capacity," noted Paul Johnston, Senior Resident Engineer at Waterford City and County Council.

Johnston feels that planning and procurement are the biggest issues in relation to Waterford's housing delivery action plans: planning due to the length of time required and similarly with procurement. In his opinion procurement has become unnecessarily complicated, and he also feels it adds "considerable time and complication more than its input value".

Waterford City and County Council has targeted the return to use of vacant properties through the Repair and Lease & Buy and Renew Schemes. These have proven to be successful because they effectively remove the planning and procurement constraints and timelines and identify regeneration benefits.

"An important point to note in relation to vacant properties in the county is that while the reasons for vacancy may be consistent, when it is considered in the context of the number of owners, it requires an individual solution in each case. In Waterford we actively identify and engage with owners, offer the incentives we can, and if there is no uptake, we proceed to compulsory purchase," Johnston said.

FINGAL COUNTY COUNCIL

The impact of construction inflation and lack of skilled labour on housing delivery action plans has been echoed by Robert Burns, Director of Housing and Community Development at Fingal County Council. He noted that in July this year the Society of Chartered Surveyors in Ireland reported the annualised rate of inflation is now running at 14 per cent.

He feels that while it is a challenge for local authorities to support central government in providing temporary housing solutions, the Ukrainian crisis has not impacted Fingal County Council's progress in delivering social and affordable housing in the county.

Fingal was one of the first local authorities in Ireland to bring affordable housing development forward under the Government's current 'Housing for All' policy. It has 39 affordable homes under construction in Dun Emer in Lusk, North County Dublin, where new owners are due to move in before the end of the year.

"The council has further affordable housing and mixed tenure projects in the pipeline. Fingal is committed to constructing almost 1,000 new affordable homes over the next five years, including one of the largest mixed tenure developments in Church Fields, Mulhuddart.

"This will, on its own, result in the delivery of over 1,000 social and affordable homes. We have also met our housing delivery targets since 2016 when the Rebuilding

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Ireland policy was introduced right through to recent years under the Housing for All policy,” according to Burns.

The impact of COVID-19 on Fingal’s housing delivery action plans is waning, but was a factor when restrictions were in place and construction was not able to proceed. Supply in terms of contractor capacity is now under pressure to meet demand.

Vacant homes in the Fingal region do not appear to be a particular issue. “The level of vacancy in Fingal is quite low, being the second lowest in the country at 17 empty dwellings per 1,000 inhabitants according to the 2016 census. I don’t believe that it is contributing to the housing crisis in any meaningful way,” he noted.

KERRY COUNTY COUNCIL

The social housing targets for Kerry County Council are 1,454 up to the year 2026. While specific targets have been set out for each year, the council is confident it can meet this overall target even if individual yearly targets are not successful.

In its Strategic Plan for Housing People with a Disability (2021-2016) Kerry County Council proposed to allocate, subject to funding, an average of no less than 15 per cent of the total number of available properties to households with a disability. It met this target for 2021.

In recent years, the council has overseen the successful delivery of larger family units to meet a particular demand for that type of dwelling. Housing need in the county has thus quite noticeably moved towards smaller units. However, larger units will continue to be provided and developed.

There is currently an estimated 1,000 Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) units in Kerry. Formed to alleviate housing need, they are non-profit and private, and include co-operatives and housing associations which provide and manage social rented housing.

The two schemes in which an AHB can acquire funding towards the delivery of housing units are the Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS) and Payment & Availability Agreements. The council works in tandem with AHBs to deliver homes for those on its housing waiting list. Housing remains a critical priority for the council with progress being regularly monitored and reviewed.

CORK CITY COUNCIL

In accordance with the targets as set by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Cork City Council’s Housing Delivery Action Plan will provide for the delivery of 3,934 social homes and 1,737 affordable homes across the city within the 2022-2026 timeframe.

Cork City Council will provide 378 homes with the balance to be delivered by AHBs and the Land Development Agency (LDA) through affordable purchase and cost rental schemes. It is noted that these targets are deemed minimum affordable delivery targets.

The city council is confident, in partnership with both AHBs and the LDA, that the proposed housing delivery detailed within this Housing Delivery Action Plan can be delivered during this timeframe.

The Lord Mayor of Cork, Cllr Deirdre Forde, stated that this is the first plan in recent times to deliver both social and affordable homes in Cork City. “I am delighted to see such an amazing



Four new social housing developments, comprising 106 new homes for Cork City across Blackpool, Mahon, Pouladuff Road and Togher, were officially opened in June 2022.

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Kildare County Council's housing delivery action plan has been described as "ambitious" with a series of key objectives to be delivered by 2026.

number of homes being committed to in the plan and supported by Government."

Describing the action plan as the "most ambitious", Ann Doherty, Chief Executive Cork City Council, said the undertaking will involve considerable commitment and focus from all stakeholders, both internal and external. "Plans like this do not appear without considerable work behind the scenes," she noted.

LOUTH COUNTY COUNCIL

Louth County Council has delivered 98 housing units under the CPO (Compulsory Purchase Order) procedure since 2018. It continues to manage the allocation as well as the retrofit of this supply and "will take further part in the CPO process as soon as is practical", according to Paddy Donnelly, Director of Housing and Community Services at Louth County Council.

Donnelly feels the increase in landlords leaving the rental market has become apparent due to the numbers of families presenting as homeless. The knock-on effect of a lack of properties in the private rented sector is the burden placed on Louth County Council's homeless unit.

In some cases, vacant properties in Louth are due to mortgage defaults. These distressed properties remain in the books of financial institutions where in some cases there is no urgency in concluding the matter to allow the property to be brought back to a serviceable standard. In other cases, private vacant properties have declined to a such an extent that it is a challenge to find a justifiable financial case to repair the property by the owner.

"Vacant homes in the council's own housing stock will always remain a challenge and are a result of the death of tenants, tenants leaving the jurisdiction or acquiring their own properties. We

continue to manage the same in an effective manner and return the same to active stock as quickly as possible," said Donnelly.

Louth County Council remains confident of meeting the targets set out in Minister O'Brien's Housing for All Plan. Donnelly admits there will be a challenge in meeting the specific 2022 target, but this will be made up over the course of the plan. Delivery has been held up this year as some sites did not reopen due to delays or a shortage in materials and personnel.

KILDARE COUNTY COUNCIL

With a target to deliver 2,416 social housing homes and 226 affordable homes over the next five years, Kildare's Housing Delivery Action Plan sets out how Kildare County Council and the AHBs will provide these new homes through direct build as well as through turnkey and Part V arrangements.

Over the period 2022-2026, Kildare County Council will deliver a range of housing including mixed-tenure schemes, increase social housing stock and address issues such as affordability and vacancy.

Annette Aspell, Director of Services at Kildare County Council, said that the targets set out in the plan shows the council's commitment to delivering social and affordable housing for the county and "to playing our part in addressing this national challenge".

She described it as an ambitious plan with a series of key objectives to be delivered by 2026. "It is our ambition to continue working closely with our Approved Housing Body partners and with the Department of Housing to achieve these targets which will make a significant and positive impact on the supply of social and affordable housing in Kildare."