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HOUSING INSIGHTS

Tackling Dereliction - Limerick City and County Council's approach

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The Housing Agency is a Government body working with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies in the delivery of housing and housing services. The Agency's vision is to achieve an integrated housing system, meeting the nation's housing needs and promoting sustainable communities. It does this by providing evidence-based housing insights and data that inform thinking and policy-making; by working with others to enable the delivery of housing solutions and to implement programmes and actions in Government housing policy; and by equipping itself and its stakeholders with the capacity required to respond quickly and effectively to challenges in the housing system.

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What is the Housing Insights series?

The Housing Agency Housing Insight series aims to disseminate good practice in housing and innovative solutions among housing practitioners in Ireland.

If you have ideas for a case study, contact roslyn.molloy@housingagency.ie or policy@housingagency.ie.

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Tackling dereliction – Limerick City and County Council’s approach

Introduction

In 2017, Limerick City and County Council restructured their directorates to create a new multidisciplinary team which was tasked with addressing dereliction using the Derelict Sites Act (1990).¹ Between 2019 and the end of 2024, the council has served 2,772 notices under the Derelict Sites Act, with 300 properties being proposed for compulsory acquisition and 206 being vested² into council ownership. Over the same period, 37 properties have been compulsorily purchased for social housing, 13 have been retained for community and tourism use and 24 have been sold on the open market and made non-derelict by new owners.

Through the approach developed, Limerick has emerged as a leader amongst local authorities in the use of compulsory acquisition under the Derelict Sites Act (1990). Between 2019 and 2023, Limerick has compulsorily acquired more properties than any other local authority in Ireland (see figure 4). Limerick’s success using the Derelict Sites Act has been recognised by elected members and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH).³ The council has worked with the DHLGH and The Housing Agency to develop guidance on conducting compulsory acquisitions and provided training for other local authorities on compulsory acquisition through the Vacant Homes Officer network.

This paper adds to the existing research and guidance on compulsory purchase by providing a summary of Limerick’s experience and highlighting learnings for housing practitioners.

Insights

Limerick City and County Council accounted for over 52 percent of all compulsory acquisitions in Ireland between 2019 - 2023

24 properties were sold and made non-derelict by new owners and a further 41 properties are for sale on the open market

Staff capacity and a revolving fund were key enablers of Limerick City and County Council’s success

¹ [The Derelict Sites Act \(1990\)](#)

² Vesting refers to the legal transfer of ownership from the current owner to in this case the local authority, once vested the local authority has full responsibility for the property.

³ Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 15 June 2023, Dereliction and Vacancy: Discussion. [Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage debate - Thursday, 15 Jun 2023](#)

What was the issue?

To meet the growing demand for housing in Ireland it is essential that in addition to building new homes, the existing stock is being used effectively. The commitment to this is clear under Pathway Four of Housing for All – ‘Addressing vacancy and efficient use of existing stock’.⁴ Key to this approach is tackling the continued presence of vacant and derelict property across Ireland.

The need to tackle vacant and derelict property is evident when compared with the latest social housing waiting list figures from 2022 and increasing homelessness statistics. Social Justice Ireland (2024) highlighted that while the 2022 census shows that there has been a decrease in the number of vacant properties across Ireland, in each county in Ireland the number of vacant properties is higher than the number of households in need of a home.⁵

Beyond representing an unused resource, vacant and derelict properties can also have a negative impact on their environs. Under the Derelict Sites Act (1990) a derelict site is defined as “any land which detracts, or is likely to detract, to a material degree from the amenity, character or appearance of land in the neighbourhood of the land in question”.⁶ As well as blighting the local area, derelict properties can also be health and safety hazards, attract anti-social behaviour and negatively impact neighbouring house prices.⁷

While bringing vacant and derelict properties back into use not only mitigates the negative impact of dereliction, it can also be more cost effective and less resource intensive than building new homes.⁸ Buildings are a major contributor to global carbon emissions with 39% of energy-emissions being attributed to building.⁹ The construction of new buildings is carbon intensive and adaptive re-use of existing buildings is one way to reduce the embodied carbon of building.

Vacancy and dereliction in Ireland

In Ireland, vacancy and dereliction data is collected through the Central Statistics Office’s (CSO) census as well as the GeoDirectory. The latest census from 2022 showed that on the night of the census, there were 163,433 vacant properties, of these, 48,000 were also vacant in 2016. The longer a property has been vacant, the more likely it is to fall into disrepair and become derelict.¹⁰ In June 2024, the GeoDirectory recorded 20,413 residential properties as derelict.¹¹

4 Housing for All (2021) [gov.ie - Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland](https://www.gov.ie/en/publications-and-resources/publication/housing-for-all-a-new-housing-plan-for-ireland/)

5 Social Justice Ireland (2024) [Vacancy and Dereliction in Ireland | Social Justice Ireland](https://www.socialjusticeireland.org/vacancy-and-dereliction-in-ireland/)

6 Derelict Sites Act (1990), Section 3 [Derelict Sites Act, 1990, Section 3](https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/1990/en/act/pub/0032/section-3.html)

7 The Scottish Land Commission (2019) Vacant and Derelict Land in Scotland: Assessing the impact of Vacant and Derelict Land on Communities [Other Reports Template](https://www.slc.gov.uk/reports/vacant-derelict-land)

8 Policy Insights Series Issue 4 – Office-to-Residential Conversions: Case studies from Tuath Housing

9 American Institute of Architects. (2021). Strategies for reducing embodied carbon

10 Social Justice Ireland (2024) [Vacancy and Dereliction in Ireland | Social Justice Ireland](https://www.socialjusticeireland.org/vacancy-and-dereliction-in-ireland/)

11 Geodirectory (2024) [GeoDirectory - Your address and location data specialists for Ireland](https://www.geodirectory.ie/)

Tackling vacant and derelict property has been a priority of housing policy in Ireland for a number of years with clear references made to it in the government housing plans, Rebuilding Ireland (2016)¹² and Housing for All (2021).¹³ With the launch of Housing for All in 2021, a number of actions and Initiatives were taken to address vacancy and dereliction. One of the vacancy activation measures which received renewed focus and attention was compulsory purchase.¹⁴

Compulsory purchase powers

There are two main pieces of legislation for public authorities to purchase vacant and derelict land in Ireland.¹⁵ The Housing Act (1966) provides for compulsory purchase orders and the Derelict Sites Act (1990) provides for compulsory acquisition. The two pieces of legislation have different purposes and associated processes. The Housing Act (1966) gives a local authority the right to acquire a property through compulsory purchase order for specific purposes such as for use as social housing. When using this power, the local authority is required to submit the application for review to An Bord Pleanála. The Derelict Sites Act is specifically designed to tackle derelict properties and is based on the duty of property owners “to take any reasonable steps to ensure that the land does not become or does not continue to be a derelict site”.¹⁶

Compulsory purchase for derelict properties has not always been a popular option for local authorities as it can require significant resources and can pose risks. However, along with a suite of other vacancy activation measures including the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant, compulsory purchase can be a compelling way to bring properties back into use.¹⁷

In April 2023, the DHLGH launched a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) Activation Programme.¹⁸ It sets specific targets for the number of vacant and derelict properties that each local authority should enter into the programme, and targets for the number of compulsory purchases to be completed.

Vacancy and dereliction in Limerick City and County Council

Between 2016 and 2022 Limerick’s rate of vacant property fell from 10% to 7.7% of total housing stock, just below the national average for 2022 at 7.8%. As well as a reducing the rate of vacancy one of the actions taken by Limerick to reduce the number of derelict properties was to use their powers of compulsory acquisition under the Derelict Sites Act.

12 Rebuilding Ireland (2016) [Rebuilding Ireland - Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness | IPAV](#)

13 Housing for All (2021) [gov.ie - Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland](#)

14 Housing for All (2021), page 104 [gov.ie - Housing for All - a New Housing Plan for Ireland](#)

15 Throughout this paper compulsory acquisition is the term used to describe any ‘compulsory acquisition’ under the Derelict Sites Act, where ‘compulsory purchase’ is written this refers to both compulsory acquisition under the Derelict Sites Act and compulsory purchase orders under the Housing Act.

16 DSA 1990 Section 9 [Derelict Sites Act, 1990](#)

17 See pg. 10 for learnings

18 Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPO) Activation programme (2023) [gov.ie - Compulsory Purchase Orders \(CPO\) Activation Programme](#)

What was the solution?

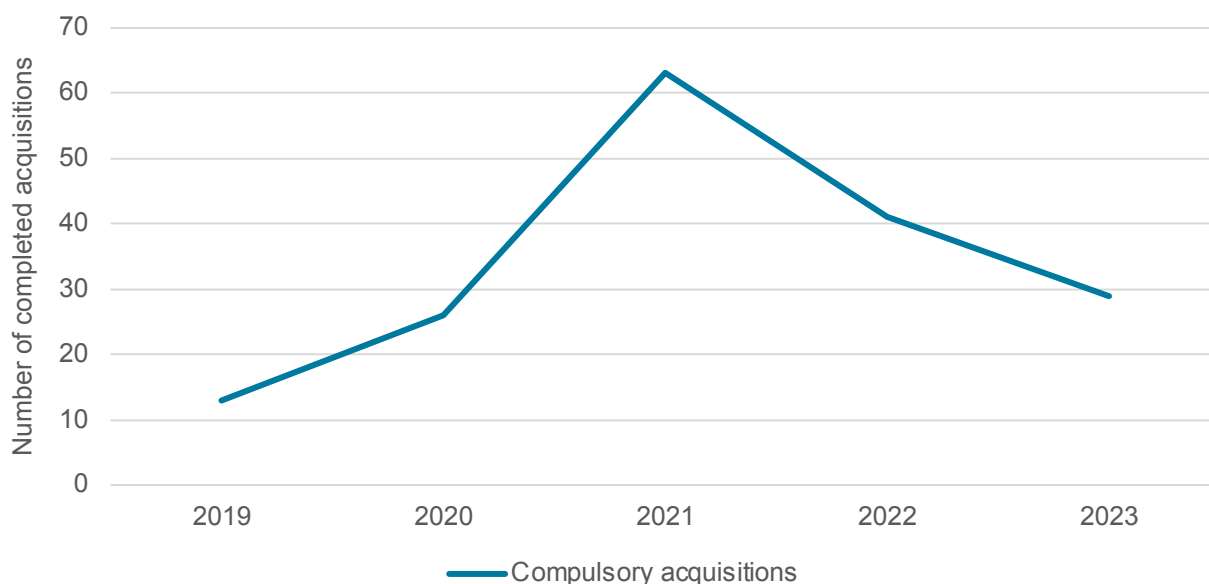
In 2017, Limerick City and County Council established a new programme for addressing dereliction which included using compulsory acquisitions. The programme was part of a wider strategy to make Limerick an attractive place to live, work and invest.

Limerick's use of compulsory purchase

In an appearance before the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage in 2022, the then Director of Service, Gordon Daly, explained how Limerick established its approach to compulsory acquisition.¹⁹ He explained that in 2017, Limerick City and County Council was a relatively new local authority, the city and county having merged in 2014. In 2017, the council had not conducted any compulsory acquisitions for a number of years. This, as well as an understanding of the benefits of tackling dereliction having wide reaching benefits, including for local communities, was the catalyst for establishing their compulsory acquisition programme in 2017.

With the launch of Housing for All in 2021, a key objective was for local authorities to acquire at least 2,500 vacant units by 2026 and present them to the market for sale. The commitment to using compulsory purpose powers to bring properties back into use was re-iterated in the 2025 Programme for Government which states that CPO powers will be streamlined.²⁰ Limerick has continued its programme, established in 2017, to use compulsory acquisition to bring properties back into use to meet this objective.

Figure 1: The number of compulsory acquisitions conducted in Limerick from 2019 – 2023.



Source: Created by The Housing Agency from data provided by Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

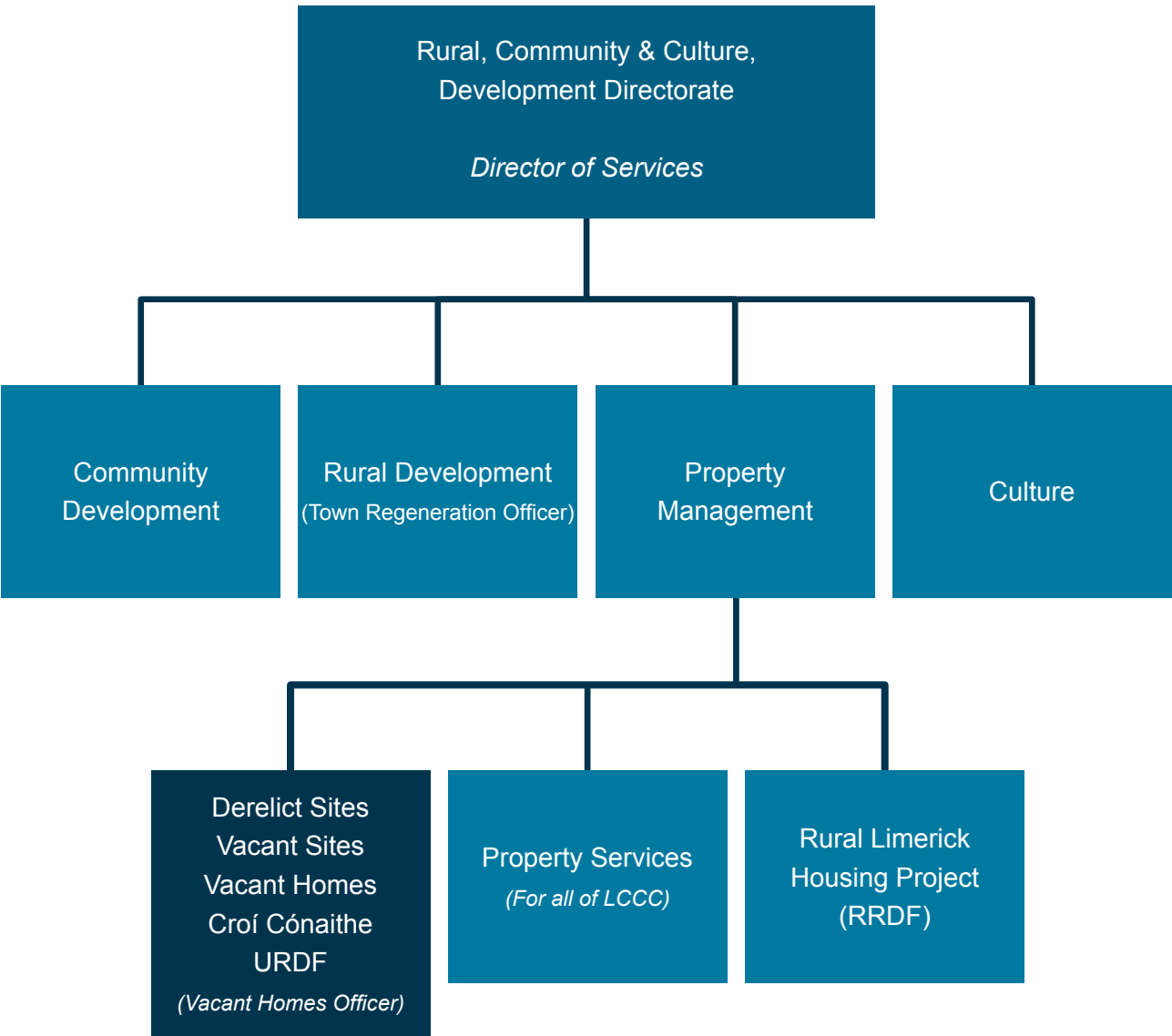
¹⁹ Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Housing, 8 November 2022, Implementing Housing for All: Discussion (resumed) [Joint Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage debate - Tuesday, 8 Nov 2022](#)

²⁰ Programme for Government 2025 - Securing Ireland's Future (2025) <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/078a1-programme-for-government-2025-securing-irelands-future/>

Restructured their teams to ensure that vacancy and dereliction was being managed by one multidisciplinary team

The first step in Limerick’s approach to tackling vacancy and dereliction was to restructure their teams so that the staff who were dealing with vacancy or dereliction were all brought into one team, under one directorate in 2017. This enabled streamlining of processes and ensured a smooth transition between stages of assessing vacancy and dereliction, such as identifying sites, serving notices and valuing properties. The housing directorate is separate to the team dealing with vacancy and dereliction. Between 2019 and the end of 2024, 206 properties have been vested in council ownership through the Derelict Sites Act and the Housing Act.

Figure 2: A new multidisciplinary team was set up to tackle vacancy and dereliction



Source: Created by the Housing Agency from information provided by Limerick City and County Council

County wide survey of vacancy and dereliction

In 2017 a survey of all vacant and derelict properties across the city and county was conducted. The survey is place based, meaning that technicians conduct the surveys one village and one town at a time. This also signals to local communities that the council is committed to addressing vacancy and dereliction. Limerick believe that having the capacity to do this survey for the whole county enables them to monitor vacancy and dereliction closely.

Provided financial and legal supports

Financial and legal supports were provided to facilitate the compulsory acquisition process in 2017, before any central funding was available.²¹ At the start of establishing the new approach a one-million-euro revolving fund was set up by the council. This funding was established to cover any upfront costs involved with compulsory acquisition, including advertising the site, legal fees and any immediate remedial work needed.

For support with legal aspects, Limerick City and County Council outsourced work to a solicitor practice. Since 2017, they have used the same solicitor at the practice, this has helped the council and the solicitor to build up legal experience over time in conducting compulsory acquisitions.

Established the process slowly through test cases

Limerick City and County Council has been developing its approach to compulsory acquisitions for seven years. This means that it has built up significant inhouse expertise and experience dealing with a wide range of properties, including where objections have been received. Key to building up inhouse expertise has been that the council started the process slowly with test cases, enabling them to learn and adapt their approach. Low turnover of staff within the team involved in compulsory acquisitions has meant that knowledge has been maintained.

Established strategies to maximise impact and credibility

To maximise the impact of its approach to compulsory acquisition, Limerick has been strategic in its communication with the public. They have done road shows and local radio interviews to highlight the actions they are taking. They also publish compulsory acquisition notices in quarterly batches in local newspapers, ensuring the notices cover multiple pages and have a greater impact on readers.

Another strategy that the council has developed over time is to minimise time delays between the different stages of the compulsory acquisition process. This means that in total from a compulsory acquisition notice being served, to the property coming into the ownership of the local authority, can take as little as four weeks. The short turnaround times ensure that momentum is maintained.

21 URDF Call 3 funding now replaces the need for local authorities to have a revolving fund to compulsorily acquire and resell properties.

What were the outcomes?

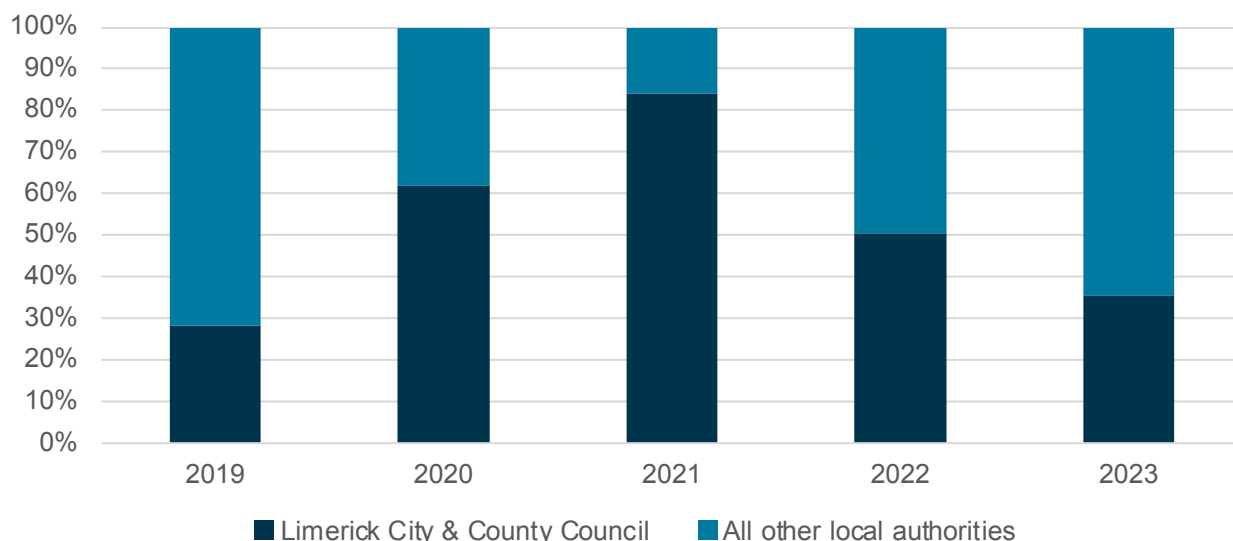
A reduction in the number of derelict properties

Between 2019 and the end of 2024, 206 derelict properties have been vested into Limerick City and County Council's ownership, reducing the number of derelict properties in the county. Compulsory acquisition paired with the other vacancy and dereliction activation measures such as the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant has made compulsorily purchased properties popular when put up for sale. In recent years the number of compulsory acquisitions conducted by Limerick has begun to slow due to the properties in their compulsory acquisition pipeline taking longer as they are more complex cases.

Between 2019 – 2023 Limerick has conducted more compulsory acquisitions than any other local authority

The success of Limerick's programme for compulsory acquisition is clear when comparing the number of compulsory acquisitions it has conducted with other local authorities. Of the 326 compulsory acquisitions conducted in Ireland between 2019 and 2023, Limerick accounts for over 52 percent of them. For each year in that period, Limerick has conducted the highest number of compulsory acquisitions (see figure 4).

Figure 4: Limerick City and County Council's compulsory acquisitions compared with the combined compulsory acquisition of all other councils



Source: Created by The Housing Agency from data provided by Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Sharing practice and learnings with other local authorities

An outcome of Limerick's approach to compulsory acquisition has been their involvement in providing advice and training for the benefit of other local authorities. Limerick has also been involved in developing guidance documents for other local authorities on the topic.

Winning The Local Authority Innovation Award

In November 2024, Limerick City and County Council won the Local Authority Innovation Award from the Chamber of Ireland Excellence in Local Government Awards for their Vacancy, Dereliction and Reuse Initiative. This award is specifically related to Limerick's approach to using the Derelict Sites Act to bring properties back into use through various different options including sale on the open market, social housing and retaining their use for community and tourism projects

Income earned from the sale of derelict properties

As of December 2024, and since 2019, Limerick City and County Council has compulsorily purchased 206 properties. While 37 of these properties have been transferred to the housing directorate of the council for social housing, a further 24 have been sold on the open market. The income from these sales covers the costs of acquisition including compensating previous owners based on the market value of the property at the date of vesting.

Challenges

Limerick City and County Council highlighted several challenges:

- Having adequate capacity is crucial to being able to implement compulsory acquisitions at scale. In particular, having technical staff who are able to conduct and produce site surveys and reports. It can be challenging to recruit and retain technical staff.
- Tracking data at each stage of a property's status under the Derelict Sites Act can be challenging. There is no purpose-built software or programme for this and instead information is stored in excel spreadsheets. Limerick City and County Council are currently working with a software company to develop a purpose-built software programme.
- Demonstrating the true impact of compulsory acquisitions can be challenging. Often the indication by the council that they are considering using compulsory acquisition is enough to encourage an owner to bring their property back into use themselves. However, this impact is not represented or measured nationally, therefore the true impact of Limerick's approach to compulsory acquisition may be undercounted.
- Not all properties that are purchased compulsorily are appropriate for social housing and are more suited to resell on the open market.
- Limerick is now in a position where it has compulsorily acquired the more clear-cut derelict sites. A challenge it now faces is that the sites which are left are more complex and may take longer to acquire.

Lessons learned

Key learnings from Limerick City and County Council's experience:

1. Building up inhouse expertise takes time

Limerick started compulsorily acquiring properties in small numbers in 2017 to act as test cases. Over time this has allowed them to adapt their approach and develop confidence in their methods.

2. Establishing credibility through time efficiency and communications

Minimising time delays between the stages of compulsory acquisition helps maintain momentum and urgency, signalling that the local authority is committed to addressing dereliction. Communicating this approach locally and publishing notices in batches further amplifies its impact.

3. Intending to use compulsory acquisition can encourage owners to bring a property back into use themselves

Limerick has found that a notice of the intention to compulsory acquire can often result in an owner bringing the property back into use themselves. Compulsory acquisition is a measure of last resort and there are staff on hand to discuss options with current owners regarding schemes to bring their property back into use such as the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant and the Repair and Leasing scheme.

4. Some remediation works can help the sale

Doing a small amount of remediation work to a property signals to the local community that the council is committed to tackling dereliction and can help with the sale of a property.

5. Engaging with stakeholders

It is important to engage with different stakeholders including the local community groups, Tidy Towns, and elected councillors.

6. Demand for properties

Limerick has found that demand for derelict sites that have been compulsory acquired is high. This demand has increased with the creation of the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant.

7. There are many ways to dispose of a property

There are several options that can be used to dispose of a property once it is in the ownership of the council. A case-by-case approach is needed to assess whether the property is kept by the council or sold on the open market.

8. Monitoring vacancy and dereliction

Limerick carries out vacant and derelict site surveys therefore they can monitor vacancy and dereliction accurately for the entire county, this helps inform their strategy on compulsory acquisition.

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