

# Simon Week 2022 Policy Proposal: Vacancy and Homelessness

## Introduction:

The Simon Communities of Ireland has been working with people experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness in Ireland for over 50 years. The worsening housing and homelessness crisis is a growing concern, but Simon Week 2022 is focused on providing solutions. The Simon Communities have developed proposals for a reformed Repair and Lease Scheme that will rapidly increase housing supply for people trapped in homelessness and on social housing waiting lists. Single adult households are of particular concern. One-bed properties remain in short supply and completely unaffordable for single income households, leaving them vulnerable to housing insecurity.

A crisis like the one we are seeing in homelessness requires a crisis response. Action on vacant homes is one of the few areas where the State can instigate that crisis response to meet the challenge of homelessness.

## Single People in Homelessness

There are 5,177 single adults living in emergency homeless accommodation accounting for 78% of all households in homelessness. Single people also make up the largest proportion (55%) of those waiting on the social housing waiting list.

### Number of Single Adults, Children, and Adults in Families in Homelessness, 2016 to Present

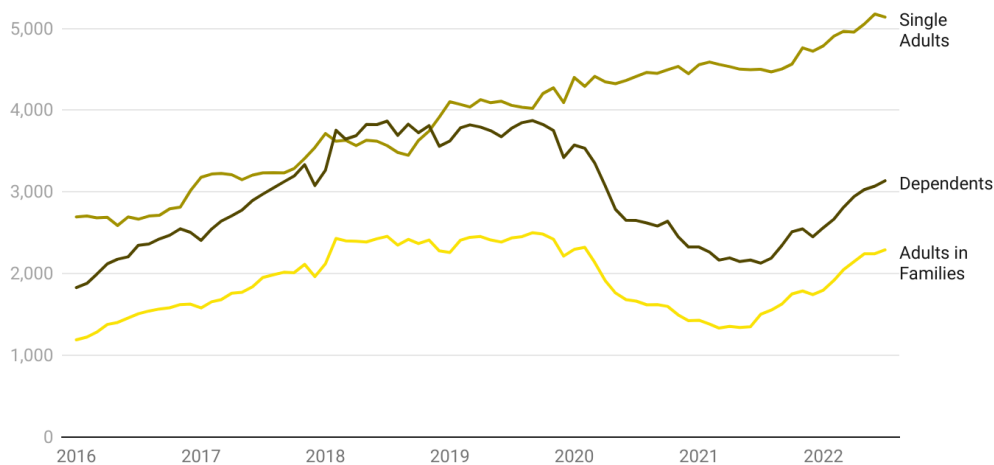


Chart: Simon Communities of Ireland • Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage • Created with Datawrapper

Housing policy, legislation, and prices are designed with couples, families, and co-habiting in mind. Single bed properties are near impossible to find, and those that are available are completely unaffordable. The average rent in new tenancies is now €1,203 per month for a one-bed house. A single person would need to be taking home €4,010 after deductions in order for this to be affordable. All the while, a person working full-time on minimum wage in Ireland will earn €1,622 a month after deductions.

## A Renewed Repair and Lease Scheme

The Simon Communities of Ireland are proposing that the government bring 5,000 vacant properties into use in 2023 through the Repair and Lease Scheme (RLS). These homes could be allocated to people in homelessness and on the social housing waiting list – particularly single people.

**Increase ambition:** *Housing for All*, has set out low targets for the delivery of properties under the Repair and Lease Scheme, with only 130 units envisioned for 2023.<sup>1</sup> SCI propose that a target of **5,000** vacant units in 2023 and again in 2024 be set, with the potential for review in 2025. These homes would increase the social housing supply while the Government continues building as outlined in *Housing for All*. Each Local Authority should have individual minimum targets.

5,000 homes is a significant increase on what has been achieved in the scheme so far. In setting this level of ambition we have taken account of the evident demand for the scheme. While only 279 properties have been brought into use through the scheme since 2016, delivery accounts for only 11.8% of **2,353 proposals**<sup>2</sup> received during this time. With sufficient funding, staffing and awareness raising, it is possible to deliver, or even exceed the proposed number of homes through RLS.

**Increase RLS loans available and introduce a grant element:** *Housing for All* increased loan RLS amounts from €40,000 to €60,000. While this increase is welcome, we believe that there is a need for even greater flexibility. SCI propose the introduction of a grant element under the scheme that accounts for 33% of the total cost up to a maximum of €40,000. Along with this, loan amounts available under the scheme would increase to a maximum of €150,000. As is the case currently with the loan element, the value of the repairs is offset incrementally against the agreed rental payment over a defined period within the lease. This would allow a maximum of **€190,000** under the scheme against cost of repairs, widening the scope of properties that would come under the scheme.

**Reformed minimum lease:** Under our proposals, to avail of this scheme, vacant property owners must commit to lease the property to the Local Authority for a minimum of 15 years. Similar to the current running of the scheme, the local authority will agree the appropriate offset period with the property owner on a case-by-case basis. These arrangements may include scenarios whereby the offset is by way of a rent-free period; a consistent reduction over the duration of the lease or a term, which is scaled against the duration of the lease.

**Focus on increasing the supply of one-bedroom properties:** As a scheme, RLS is particularly successful at bringing one-bedroom properties – particularly apartments – into the social housing system. 48% of all homes repaired through the scheme 2016-2020 were one-beds.<sup>3</sup>

To incentivise the refurbishment of one-beds, funding may be made available per one-bedroom unit. This will mean that an owner of a large multi-room or multi-story property – who can convert the building into appropriate one-bedroom properties, will have funding available for each one-bedroom unit that can be created within Local Authority standards.

**Increased Staffing and Personnel:** *Housing for All* commits to 'ensure Vacant Homes Officer position is full-time'<sup>4</sup>; more than one person in each Local Authority is needed to bring a wider number of vacant properties back into the market. SCI propose that at least five full time staff are deployed in each Local Authority to manage vacant properties in the area that would include a Project Lead, two

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/d32c4-repair-and-leasing-scheme-rls-further-information/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/6060e-overall-social-housing-provision/#repair-and-leasing-scheme-rls>

<sup>3</sup> Spending Review 2021 – Analysis of Social Housing Current Expenditure. Available at:

<https://assets.gov.ie/205491/ab71c182-54e3-4cd0-ae94-8069761d952e.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> *Housing for All* Objective 19.6

Vacancy Officers, and an administration role. Local Authorities with larger volumes of vacancy should have increased resources made available to them.

**Awareness Campaign:** Public awareness and engagement is key to the success of the scheme. To ensure the success of this reformed scheme, owners of vacant properties (identifiable through census data and previous sign-ups to the scheme) will be contacted with information and requests to join the scheme.

**The Future of this Scheme:** With the resources, momentum, and qualified personnel in place, this scheme can continue to tackle vacant properties and deliver social housing units throughout the country in 2024, giving the State time to meet social housing stock building targets. SCI envision that this scheme will be reviewed and expanded to tackle dereliction, vacant commercial spaces, and over-the-shop spaces in the years following.

### Cost of this Policy Initiative

**Total Cost: €556,011,109<sup>5</sup>**

- **€502,832,776** capital expenditure in 2023 to bring 5,000 vacant properties into the market for social housing use through the repair and lease scheme, with a focus on one-bed properties developed through universal design lens in line with local Social Housing Needs Assessments.
- **€47,428,333** current expenditure to fund leasing and running of the scheme.
- An additional four staff (minimum) to tackle vacancy in each of the 28 local authorities at an approximate cost of **€5,600,000**.
- A nationwide awareness raising campaign of the scheme at a cost of **€150,000**.

### Benefits of this Policy Initiative:

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- A quick increase of our social housing supply in areas close to established amenities, support systems, and communities.
- Cost effective:
  - Costing is in line with Government spending for similar levels of housing delivery, such as *Croí Conaithe*, where €450m is available to support 5,000 new builds;
  - Introducing this scheme will over time reduce the State's reliance on HAP and thus alleviate pressure on the existing private rental and housing market;
  - Mitigating against additional cost of homelessness to the individual such as health, educational disruption, and reduced earnings.
- A boost of social housing supply that would lift thousands of low-income households out of housing insecurity and homelessness.
- Increase the availability of one-bed properties desperately needed for single people over-represented in homelessness and on the social housing waiting list.
- Wide-scale reduction in the number of vacant properties in our villages, towns, and cities. This will breathe life back into our communities, improve social cohesion, and increase footfall to local businesses and amenities. It will also support objective laid out in many Government policies such as *Housing for All*, *Town Centre First policy*, *Our Rural Future*.
- Support a sustainable, environmentally friendly method of social housing delivery.

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<sup>5</sup> further information on costings is available in the Simon Communities Pre-Budget Submission 2023: <https://www.simon.ie/e-publication/pre-budget-submission-2023/>