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# Housing and Sustaining Communities on the West Cork Islands

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**Dr. Siobhan O'Sullivan and Dr. Elaine Desmond**



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**School of Applied Social Studies and Institute for Social Science in the 21st Century (ISS21),  
University College Cork. Funded by the Irish Research Council New Foundations Grant.**

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**The offshore islands and their communities embody an extraordinary repository of language, culture and heritage which constitute a unique element in the fabric of Irish society.**

(Rural Development Policy, 2021, p.90)



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With huge thanks to the island residents who took part in the participatory research group, who included:

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Kevin McCormack	Sinead McCormick	John Moore	Ruairí Ó Donnabháin
Mary O'Driscoll	Pat Rodgers	Gerard Sullivan	Helen Tilson
Iris Fillie Utz	Roisin Youell		

## Glossary of Abbreviations of Irish Strategy and Policy Documents

<b>CCDP1:</b>	Cork County Development Plan (2022) Volume 1: Main Policy Material. Produced by Cork County Council. The plan came into effect 6 June 2022
<b>CCDP5:</b>	Cork County Development Plan (2022) Volume 5: West Cork. Produced by Cork County Council. The plan came into effect 6 June 2022.
<b>HFA:</b>	Housing for All: A New Housing Plan for Ireland (2021) Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
<b>HSW Report:</b>	A Housing Seminar Workshop Report (2021) compiled by Comhdháil na hÉireann (the Irish Islands Federation), produced in conjunction with Comhar na nOileán and funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development
<b>IPC Paper:</b>	Islands Policy Consultation Paper (2019) Department of Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht
<b>NDP:</b>	National Development Plan (2021-2030), Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
<b>RDP:</b>	Irish Government policy Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 (2021)
<b>WCIC document:</b>	West Cork Islands Consultation document (2020) Dr Brendan O'Keeffe and Dr Caroline Crowley
<b>WCIIDS:</b>	West Cork Islands Integrated Development Strategy (2010) compiled by a West Cork Islands Interagency group



## Executive Summary

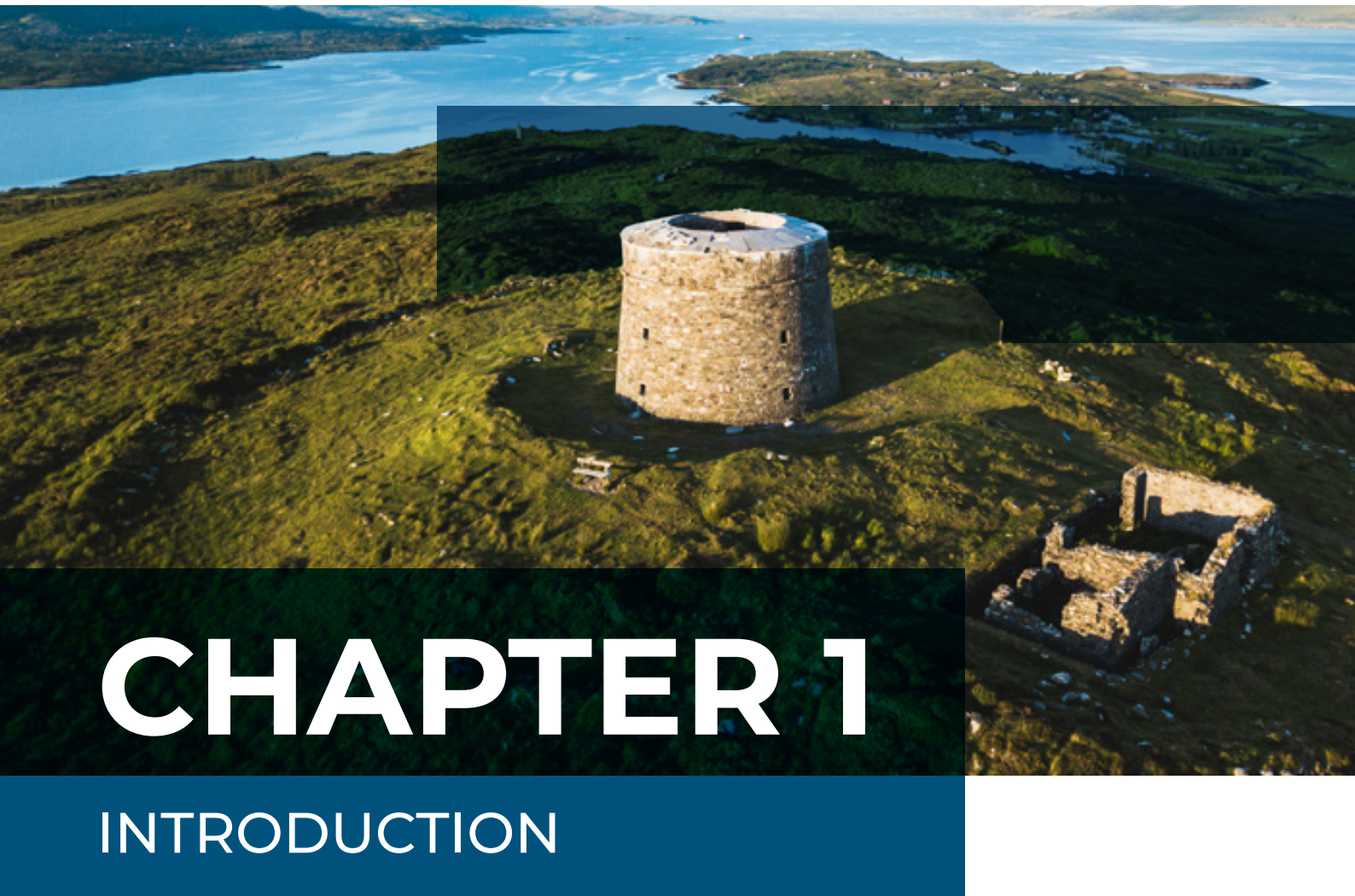
Government policy recognises the Irish islands as integral to Ireland's cultural heritage, identity and economy. Within the context of a national housing crisis which is recognised as having reached the status of a national emergency, this report examines the impact of the availability, affordability and quality of housing on the sustainability of life on the seven inhabited West Cork islands. The research was undertaken using an innovative research process which foregrounds the voices of island residents through a participatory mixed methods approach, involving a survey that was co-constructed with island residents and in-depth focus groups.

The lack of affordable, good quality, housing – both to buy and to rent year-round – is impacting on the ability of islands to attract newcomers and retain existing inhabitants and the next generation of islanders. This is a significant issue which threatens the future of the islands as locations for full-time habitation. The research recommends that government attention be directed to the provision of social and affordable homes and sheltered housing on the islands, addressing the precarity of renters on the islands, tackling derelict houses through increasing grant thresholds and appointing a Vacant Homes Officer specifically to the islands, and increasing grants for retrofitting on the islands to enhance the quality and energy efficiency of islanders' homes. The findings indicate the immediate need for a full-scale housing audit on each of the islands, as well as target population figures, to ensure that the housing needs on each island, and the solutions for satisfying these, can be assessed.

Island residents also call on the government for innovative approaches to attracting new inhabitants, including an island resettlement fund and a gateway housing scheme which incorporates full-time housing options for those wishing to settle on the islands. Along with housing, improved access to broadband and a subsidised ferry service timed to facilitate employment and schooling on the mainland, also emerged as key factors in supporting a diverse and vibrant population on the islands. The importance of continued consultation is also recommended, especially in relation to the crucial issue of planning on the islands.

This engaged research project highlights the centrality of housing to the sustainability of life on the islands, and the added threat which the national housing crisis poses for small island communities. On the West Cork islands, this housing crisis is occurring in small communities in contexts already beset by concerns of permanent depopulation. Unlike the mainland, if the housing situation on the islands is not resolved, there is the risk over time of the loss of entire island communities and, with them, the vital contribution of the islands to Ireland's heritage, culture and economy. Strongly focussed policy in the key areas identified in this report, which is implemented in close collaboration with island residents, is now urgently required if the ongoing sustainability of full-time populations on the West Cork islands is to be secured.





This report documents the views of West Cork island residents on housing and identifies policies and practices that can contribute to sustaining island life. The project was funded by the Irish Research Council New Foundations Grant and involved collaboration with Bere Island Projects Group, Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann, the Sherkin Island Development Society, Comharchumann Chléire Teoranta, Comhar na nOileán CTR and the SICAP programme, and the West Cork Development Partnership.

The Rural Development Policy (hereafter RDP) (2021, p.90) recognises that '[t]he offshore islands and their communities embody an extraordinary repository of language, culture and heritage which constitute a unique element in the fabric of Irish society.' The sustainability of island communities is a national policy goal in Ireland and the Department of Rural and Community Development is due to publish a new National Islands Policy in 2022.<sup>1</sup> A central objective of this new policy, according to the National Development Plan (hereafter NDP) (2021-2030, p.69), 'will be to ensure that sustainable vibrant communities continue to live on the offshore islands'.

The analysis of housing on the West Cork islands presented here is located within a wider context of a national housing crisis. It must, however, also be recognised that the impact of this wider crisis is distinct on the islands given its potential to contribute to their widespread depopulation. Mainland policy responses to onshore housing needs are not necessarily applicable to island circumstances; therefore, there is a need for community-informed solutions to address housing concerns related to the availability, affordability and quality of island housing. Despite this, little research has been carried out with residents themselves regarding their views on housing on the islands. This is an omission which the current report seeks to address.

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<sup>1</sup> The Islands Unit was transferred from the Department of Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht to the Department of Rural and Community Development during the formation of the government in 2020, according to communication from the Department of Rural and Community Development to Dr O'Sullivan in November 2022.



## 1.1 The West Cork Islands

The seven inhabited West Cork islands which are the focus of this study are Bere, Dursey, Heir, Long, Oileán Chléire, Sherkin and Whiddy. According to the 2016 Census, these islands have a total population of 495 inhabitants. Table 1 provides details of the changing populations and accessibility of each of the islands. All are located off the south-west coast of Ireland; Oileán Chléire is the furthest island from the mainland, while Heir is the closest. Despite their relative proximity to each other, the islands vary in size, populations, ecologies, economies, and accessibility to the mainland. A brief overview of each of the islands is provided in Appendix 1.

Island*	Population (Census 2016)	Population (Census 2011)	% Change	Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Distance from Mainland (km)	Accessibility	Nearest Urban Centre
<b>Bere</b>	167	216	-22.7	17.6	6.4	10 min ferry from Castletownbere	Castletownbere
<b>Oileán Chléire</b>	147	124	+18.5	6.2	12.8 (Schull) 14.5 (Baltimore)	45 min ferry from Baltimore	Schull/Baltimore
<b>Sherkin</b>	111	114	-2.6	5	4	10 min ferry from Baltimore	Baltimore
<b>Heir</b>	28	29	-3.5	1.5	0.18	5 min ferry Cunamore Pier	Baltimore
<b>Whiddy</b>	18	20	-10	8.8	3.7	10 min ferry from Bantry	Bantry
<b>Long</b>	20	10	+100	1.5	1 (Colla Pier)	10 min ferry from Schull	Schull
<b>Dursey</b>	4	3	+33.3	5.6	6.5	10 min cable car from Ballaghboy	Castletownbere

\* In order of 2016 population size

**Table 1: Populations and accessibility of the islands**

As Table 1 shows, Bere has the largest population of the islands, followed by Oileán Chléire and Sherkin. Bere, Sherkin and Oileán Chléire are together described as the 'Big 3' and accounted for 86 per cent of the population of the West Cork islands in 2016.<sup>2</sup> As can be seen from Table 1, Dursey has the fewest settled inhabitants and is threatened with permanent depopulation. The West Cork Islands Integrated Development Strategy (henceforth WCIDS) (2010, p.15) noted that, apart from Heir and Sherkin which showed some growth between 1996 and 2002, population numbers on the islands have declined over recent years. According to Census data, in the years between 2011 and 2016 all islands, apart from Long and Oileán Chléire, had experienced decline – most notably, Bere which had lost almost a quarter of its population.<sup>3</sup> Volume 5 of the Cork County Development Plan (2022, pp.235-267) (hereafter CCDP5) highlights the need to stabilise and increase the permanent population on each of the seven islands.

<sup>2</sup> Island residents themselves note the fluctuating population of the islands as inhabitants move off the island for seasonal employment or study and second-home owners come and go.

<sup>3</sup> Sherkin's population increased by 50% in August 2022 with the arrival of 57 Ukrainian nationals who are currently being housed in the island's hotel.



## 1.2 Research Methods

### 1.2.1 Survey Design: Residents as Research Partners

This engaged research project involved partnership between researchers in UCC, civil society organisations (CSOs), and island residents on the seven West Cork islands. The methodology – a participatory, sequential mixed-methods approach – placed an emphasis on knowledge exchange and collaboration between partners through a co-constructed survey, followed by focus groups. The benefits of this research approach include a better understanding of an issue by bringing the distinctive experiences and knowledge of participants into the research process (Campus Engage, 2017, p.49). The co-creation of research also helps to ensure it is relevant to people's lives and oriented to stimulating policy change (Goodson and Phillimore, 2012, p.11). The collaboration with island residents which is the basis of this report acknowledges that, as stated in the WCIIDS (2010, p.iv): '[i]slanders have knowledge of both the problems and also the solutions on how to get on with a sustainable island life for the future.'

An inter-sectoral research advisory group was established in March 2021 and a participatory research group of 16 West Cork island residents met between October and December 2021 to co-design the survey which is central to the research. Sixteen island residents took part in the participatory research group – nine females and seven males, aged between 25 and 74 years.<sup>4</sup> The group discussed the questionnaire themes they considered to be of relevance to the research focus, as well as the phrasing and order of the questions, and the length of the survey.<sup>5</sup> Input on the survey was also obtained from the research advisory group.

The research funding was awarded in February 2021 at a time when Ireland was still facing restrictions due to COVID-19. Because of this, participatory methods were conducted solely online, followed by an online and postal survey, and online focus groups. The research advisory group also met online. Ethical approval for the study was granted by UCC's Social Research and Ethics Committee (Logs 2021-143 and 2021-209).

The survey was targeted at three groups of island residents – those who live full-time on the islands where their home is owned by them or their family (henceforth homeowners); those who live full-time on the islands in rented accommodation (henceforth renters); and second-home owners who do not live permanently on the islands (henceforth second-home owners). Most questions were common to all groups; however, additional sections were also directed at second-home owners and renters in order to capture specific information relevant to these groups only. The survey was piloted in January 2022 with eight island residents – five of whom completed the survey online and three who received postal versions. Feedback on the clarity of the survey, its completion time, and the ease of use of the technology (for online respondents) was overwhelmingly positive.

### 1.2.2 Data Collection

The final survey was distributed to island residents in February and March 2022. The online survey was hosted through Qualtrics XM; it was also possible to complete the survey by post. Sampling involved purposive and convenience sampling methods (Sue and Ritter, 2012, p.44). The inclusion criteria were that respondents should be full-time or part-time residents on one of the seven West Cork islands and should be over the age of 18. To ensure that different generational perspectives were represented, the survey could be completed by more than one member of a household.

Survey distribution was managed by the island development group representatives on the research advisory group who distributed it through their networks. An online link was widely distributed on the islands' social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) where it was also highlighted that a hard copy of the survey could be requested from the island development groups and returned to the UCC research team by post. Information about the project and the online link to the survey were also highlighted on Radio na Gaeltachta and local

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<sup>4</sup> Participant recruitment was arranged by the island development group representatives on the research advisory group who widely promoted the project. An online project information and Q&A session was also held with island residents in the summer of 2021. All the islands, apart from Whiddy, were represented in the participatory research group. One participant was aged between 25 and 34 years, five between 35 and 44, three between 45 and 54, one between 55 and 64, five between 65 and 74, and one in their 70s. Each participant completed a consent form and was contacted individually to ensure the purpose of the study and research process were understood, and to check that the participant was comfortable with the technology (Google Meet).

<sup>5</sup> Because of the size of the group, after the first meeting participants were randomly divided between the two researchers who worked with them separately in two meetings in November 2021. Between these sessions, the researchers worked with each other to ensure the views of both groups were represented and to draft the survey. Survey drafts were discussed in the smaller groups and, again, when the 16 participants convened together in a fourth and final plenary session in December 2021.



radio stations on Bere, Oileán Chléire and Sherkin. Island development group representatives also worked one-to-one with residents to encourage participation.

A total of 238 island residents completed the survey (170 permanent residents and 68 second-home owners), 98 per cent of whom took part online.<sup>6</sup> Island development groups estimated the population of the islands at the time of the survey to be 467. Omitting children and young people, the estimated survey response rate is 44% of permanent residents over the age of 18.<sup>7</sup> Two focus groups and two interviews were held with 10 participants in May 2022, following expressions of interest from survey participants who indicated that they would be happy to discuss their views on housing and the sustainability of island living in more detail.<sup>8</sup>

### 1.3 Report Structure

Following this introductory chapter, Chapter 2 explores the literature and policy on housing on Irish and European islands. Chapter 3 provides a profile of research participants and presents the research findings. And, finally, Chapter 4 presents the report's discussion, conclusions and recommendations.

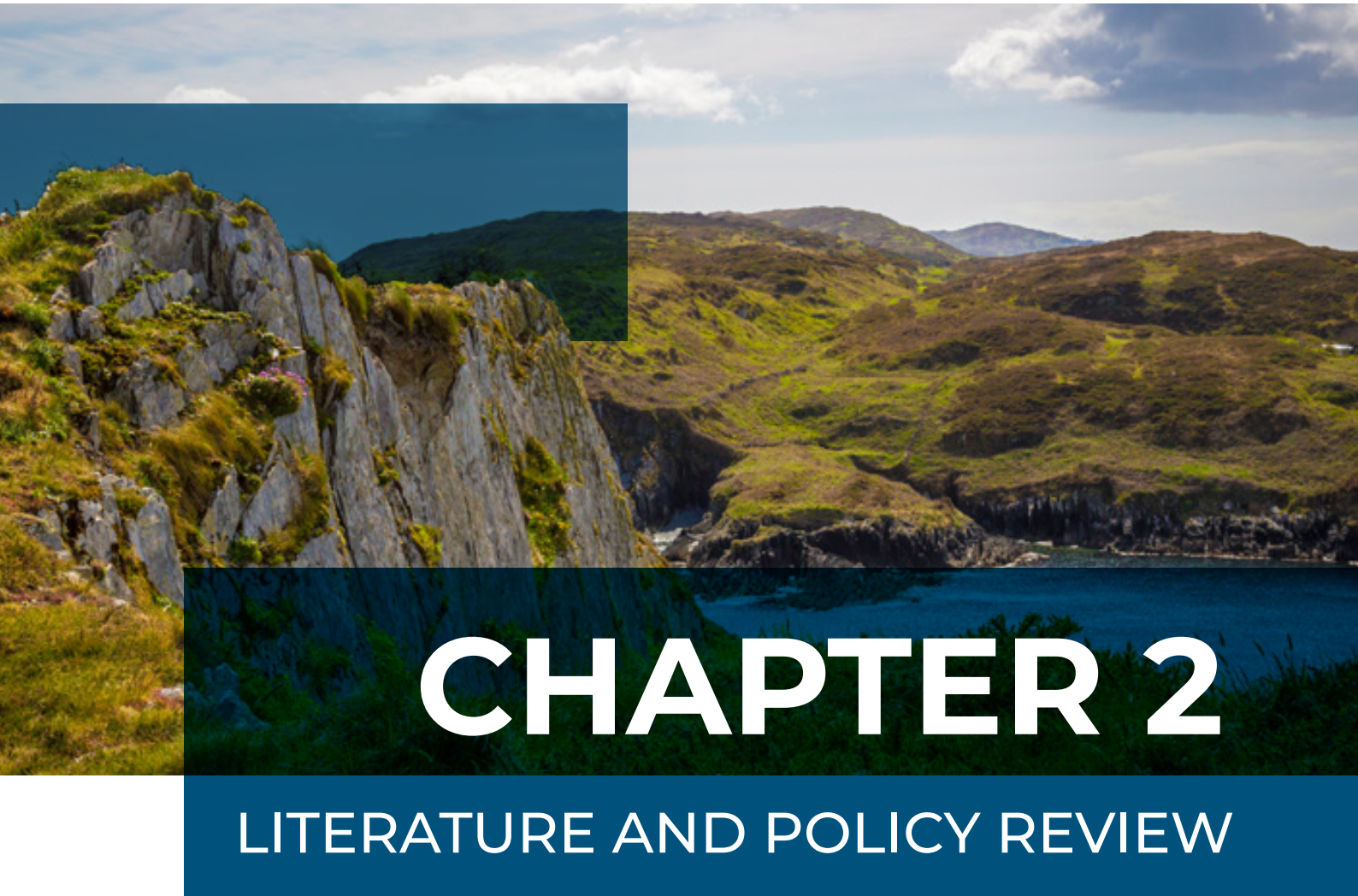


<sup>6</sup> 262 island residents began the survey, with 238 people completing it, giving a high completion rate of 91%. This is high compared to other online surveys where completion rates ranged from 29% to 65% (LaRose and Tsai, 2014, p.110).

<sup>7</sup> This is a high response rate for an online survey. According to Qualtrics XM, online survey response rates usually fall within the 20% to 30% range.

<sup>8</sup> Due to technical difficulties in a focus group of two participants, one participant was obliged to leave mid-discussion and was later interviewed separately.





# CHAPTER 2

## LITERATURE AND POLICY REVIEW

### 2.1 The Importance of Housing on Europe's Islands

Within the European context, Haase & Maier (2021, p.7) note that 'there are about 2,400 inhabited islands in the EU-28 [and that these are] home to a total population of 20.5 million inhabitants.' This represents 4.6% of the EU's population (ibid.).<sup>9</sup> In Ireland, the 27 inhabited offshore islands had a permanent population of 2,734 in 2016 according to Census figures from the Department of Rural and Community Development.<sup>10</sup> The offshore islands are defined in the Islands Policy Consultation paper (hereafter IPC Paper) issued by the Department of Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht (2019, p.5) 'as islands which are cut off daily by the tide, are not connected to the mainland by a bridge, have permanent populations and are not in private ownership.'

While the remoteness of the European and Irish islands, their external linkages and connectivity to services, as well as the ability of inhabitants to secure incomes vary, it is noted in an ESIN report that housing is a critical issue for many (Sorensen, 2021b, p.2). Housing is identified as one of the central tenets of habitability in a report on the Finnish Åland island of Kökar (Relander et al., 2020, p.5) which argues that:

'[i]f those who were born and raised here want to stay or move back, if new families move here, if there are children in school, if there is work, housing, connections, service and security, then we are habitable. Kökar should be habitable all year round, with a mixed population of all ages, genders, origins and opinions.'

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<sup>9</sup> This includes countries that are islands, as well as smaller islands which form part of those countries.

<sup>10</sup> These figures are based on Census 2016 and provided by the Department of Rural and Community Development on <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/31da3-populated-off-shore-islands/>



The importance of housing on offshore islands has also been emphasised by the Scottish Housing Minister who states that good quality, affordable homes are ‘essential to help attract and retain’ people in Scotland’s remote rural and island communities (BBC News, 2020). In a consultation paper with representatives of the West Cork islands (hereafter WCIC paper) in 2020 (p.8), housing emerged as the single greatest challenge for the islands.

The provision of housing is essential to the Irish government’s stated commitment to retain populations on Ireland’s islands, highlighted as a national goal in the IPC Paper (2019, p.5). This paper notes the government’s ‘aspirations to retain the next generation of islanders, to attract people to come to live on the islands and to help overcome outstanding issues based on island separation from the mainland.’ This goal recognises two concerns relevant to island populations – the attraction of newcomers and the retention of existing inhabitants and their offspring. These must be central to any island housing policy as both are crucial to sustaining full-time populations on the islands.

Housing provision is part of the Government’s National Planning Framework (Project Ireland 2040), which includes the islands. Housing for All: A New Housing Plan for Ireland (2021, p.17) (hereafter HFA) highlights the government’s objective that every Irish citizen ‘should have access to good quality homes:

- to purchase or rent at an affordable price
- built to a high standard and in the right place
- offering a high quality of life.’

In HFA (2021, p.17), the government commits to addressing the nationwide housing crisis through four objectives: Supporting Homeownership and Increasing Affordability; Eradicating Homelessness, Increasing Social Housing Delivery and Supporting Social Inclusion; Increasing New Housing Supply; and Addressing Vacancy and Efficient Use of Existing Stock. The HFA (ibid., p.123) report states that ‘[t]he housing needs of island communities will be fully considered in the development of the forthcoming National Policy for the Islands’. This is also highlighted in the NDP (2021-2030, p.69). Such a national islands housing policy has been requested by islanders for some time and its expected publication at the end of 2022 is eagerly awaited.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.2 Depopulation and Resilience on the Irish Islands

The commitment to maintaining populations on the Irish islands is highlighted within a context of fear of depopulation which affects islands in many European states. The permanent offshore island population in Ireland fell by five per cent between 2011 and 2016 (from 2,879 to 2,734), according to government figures.<sup>12</sup> Royle and Scott (1996, p.111) note that population decline on the Irish islands followed the Famine of the 1840s and has been an ever-present threat for island dwellers ever since. According to Burholt et al. (2013, p.3) depopulation can be dramatic, as in the case of the Great Blaskets in 1953; or it can be gradual such as the case of Gola, County Donegal, in the 1960s.<sup>13</sup> On the West Cork islands, Volume One of the Cork County Development Plan (hereafter CCDP1) (2022, p.152) notes:

The unique group of islands off the coast of County Cork have *[sic]*, for decades, experienced the forces of decline that, only more recently, have been experienced in some rural areas. Of course, the added isolation of an island location has exacerbated the effects of these forces of decline.

Burholt et al. (2013, p.3) highlight that gradual depopulation can occur when the remaining population of an island has an older age profile which slowly wanes. Island demographics indicate that populations on the Irish islands are older than the national average. The RDP (2021, p.88) notes that ‘[j]ust 5% of the population of these islands was less than four years old in 2016, compared to an average of 8% nationally. Over 20% of the islands’ population are aged 65 years and older; this is considerably higher than the national average of 12% for that age cohort.’ The RDP (ibid.) also highlights that ‘[a] higher number of retired people live on the islands (19%) compared to the national proportion of retirees (13%) and states that ‘[t]his age profile represents a challenge to the ongoing viability of the islands as places to live’ (ibid.).

<sup>11</sup> This expected publication date is according to communication between the Department of Rural and Community Development and Dr O’Sullivan at the end of August 2022. It was also highlighted at the Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann AGM in September 2022. This meeting included Heather Humphreys TD, Minister for Social Protection and Rural and Community Development as a guest speaker, as well as Dr Desmond who presented the recommendations of the current research.

<sup>12</sup> Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/31da3-populated-off-shore-islands/>

<sup>13</sup> Gola has since been repopulated and, according to Census 2016, its current population stands at 5. It should be noted that a relatively high population does not safeguard an island from depopulation. O’Péicín and Nolan (1997, pp.81-91) note that, despite having a population of over 200 at the time, Tory was threatened with evacuation in the 1970s and early 1980s. According to the then ‘King’ of Tory (Rodgers, 2018, pp.295-298), the outflow of population from the island during this time was due to a succession of severe winters and an offer of housing on the mainland for the islanders by Donegal County Council.

In their study which focussed on the correlation between accessibility and depopulation, Cross and Nutley (1999, p.329) concluded that population stability on the Irish islands they studied was most affected by the ability to earn a living. For those who stay, the Irish islands have long been characterised by 'occupational pluralism' (Royle, 2021, p.481) whereby residents often engage in multiple sources of employment, including tourism, fishing and farming.<sup>14</sup> The WCIC (2020, p.1) document, however, notes the downward pressures in both fishing and farming on the West Cork islands, highlighting that one of the reasons for this is the tendency 'among policy-makers, advisors and practitioners to emulate larger-scale models and to impose them on island, coastal and upland communities.' The WCIIDS (2010, pp.40-43) argues for supports in both fishing and agriculture. Given the traditional centrality of these areas of employment to island living, their decline has the potential to contribute significantly to depopulation if innovative means to reverse these downward trends, or to diversify into niche areas within them, cannot be found.

In recent years, changes in technology have meant that there is also potential to develop non-traditional occupations on the islands. As the RDP (2021, p.88-89) states: '[i]mproved broadband and mobile phone access present an opportunity to change the dynamic for the islands.' The RDP (ibid, p.89) highlights the potential for new sustainable and attractive employment opportunities for island-based micro enterprises, the self-employed and potential entrepreneurs, as well as remote workers, arising from digital connectivity through the ongoing roll-out of the National Broadband Plan.<sup>15</sup>

Burholt et al. (2013, p.6) note that, in order to attract newcomers, islands are now expected to meet the same standards of services in many aspects of living as are available on the mainland. Sorensen (2021b, p.3) observes that: '[g]ood broadband is now equivalent to electricity in importance for the future development of the [European] islands.' In Ireland, however, the RDP (2021, p.88) highlights that:

**'digital connectivity has been a challenge for islanders. Access to computers (58%) and broadband/internet (55%) on the islands is considerably less than on the mainland where 73% of the population have access to a household computer and 72% have access to broadband/internet.'**

The hope that technology may alleviate some of the difficulties associated with the remoteness of island living is central to the ability of islands to attract newcomers, as well as to retain a new generation of islanders. This is crucial to ensuring a diverse full-time population on the islands.

The centrality of accessibility to sustaining island populations is also important. Royle (2021, p.493) highlights the need for 'regular, reliable and subsidised ferry services', arguing that:

**While islanders may aspire to self-sufficiency, the reality is that the majority have to commute to the mainland to access employment, schools, retail outlets etc. and their economies are rarely viable without some external support. Regular, reliable and subsidised ferry services are, therefore, vital to ensure low-cost and efficient delivery and collection of goods and people travelling between islands and, more especially, to and from the mainland.**

Given the challenges faced by the islands, the CCDP5 (2022, p.234) recognises that 'island communities have an unparalleled reputation for resourcefulness in surviving daunting physical and economic conditions and have retained, and even developed, their unique culture and identity.' Brinklow and Whitten Henry (2020, p.9) highlight that the sometimes challenging reality of island life means that island communities must work together to survive: '[i]slands have been able to benefit from having tight-knit communities, rich in social capital; a 'lifeboat' mentality enables islands to pull together against external threats.'<sup>16</sup>

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14 With regard to tourism, the IPC paper (2019, p.9) highlights that the Irish islands are important sites of national heritage and draw visitors from around the world. Oileán Chléire is one of six of Ireland's inhabited Gaeltacht islands. As Royle (2003, p.23) observes, this heritage aspect is often crucial to an island's economy through tourism.

15 Access to technology has already significantly changed island living and has the potential to transform it still further. This is highlighted in the RDP document (2021, p.88) which notes that 'Údarás na Gaeltachta is rolling out a network of innovation and digital hubs with high-speed broadband connectivity. Hubs on 13 islands form part of this growing digital ecosystem and will support employment opportunities on these offshore islands.' The island of Arranmore off the coast of Donegal, for instance, has been described as 'the most connected island in the world' (Glass, et al., 2020, p.18). This enhanced digital connectivity is being used to market the island globally as an idyllic place to work, removed from the bustle of city living.

16 Similarly, in their study on two islands (unnamed) off the west coast of Ireland, Burholt et al. (2013: 6) found that the most frequently mentioned positive attribute of life on the islands was 'the socially cohesive nature of their communities and the sense of belonging that this creates.'



This is not to suggest that differing views around the question of ‘what is an islander?’ which arose during this research do not exist. Burholt et al. (2013, p.9) note numerous differences in islander identities, including those who were born and raised on the island and never left, those who left for work/education/marriage and returned, and those who moved from elsewhere on a permanent or seasonal basis. It is recognised that these questions of islander identity are important, not only to a sense of belonging but also, politically, to how one’s views are represented in decision-making. Nevertheless, in times of crisis, it is also clear that it is the ability of island communities to work together in order to preserve a mutually valued island life which has traditionally been key to their resilience.

## 2.3 Housing on the Irish and European Islands

In an ESIN report on housing on the European islands, Sorensen (2021b, p.4) notes that ‘[h]ousing is a critical issue. Solving this challenge will allow for the increase of all year population on the islands.’ The issues of the availability, affordability, and quality of housing are crucial, both for retaining existing island populations and attracting people to come to live on the islands. Housing, however, is a particular area where the goals of retaining the next generation of islanders and attracting newcomers may conflict, especially given potential inequalities in income between island residents and those seeking to buy from elsewhere. Glass et al. (2020, p.20) observe that a housing audit which ‘tracks housing availability, which properties could be renovated easily and what might take more time and input’ was a vital aspect of repopulation on Arranmore. Housing then, and its careful management, has come to be seen as key to the regeneration of island living.

The WCIC document (2020, p.6) notes the main issues with housing on the West Cork islands as being derelict houses and issues with titles; holiday homes and a lack of rental properties; private ownership and inheritance issues; houses that are too old or in the wrong location; and wide price ranges. As previously highlighted, such housing challenges on the islands are situated within a national housing emergency that Hearne (2020: 2) describes as ‘a deep and profound structural crisis that is in danger of becoming a permanent crisis’. This housing crisis affects many households, especially those with a mortgage, those renting, and those residing in, or waiting for, social housing (Kitchin et al., 2015, p.2).<sup>17</sup> This research seeks to explore the distinct impact of this wider crisis in the context of the West Cork islands.

### 2.3.1 The Availability and Affordability of Housing

A Housing Seminar Workshop (2021, p.3) (hereafter HSW) report compiled by Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann (the Irish Islands Federation), produced in conjunction with Comhar na nOileán and funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development, states that ‘[t]he availability of affordable, quality homes for permanent residents on the islands is essential to ensure the long-term viability and sustainability of island communities.’ The lack of available and affordable housing has been of concern to islanders for several decades – problems with housing in the Bantry Bay coastal zone were highlighted in the Bantry Bay Charter as early as 2000.<sup>18</sup>

The importance to sustainability of young people being able to build or refurbish a house on the islands is recognised in the RDP (2021, p.88), which states that ‘[t]he opportunity to build or refurbish a house on an island, particularly for young people who have grown up there, can make a significant difference to the long-term sustainability of an island community.’ The ESIN Inter Island Exchange Project on housing (2005, p.8) notes, however, in relation to the Irish islands, the additional costs associated with ‘transport/cargo costs of building material...which [do] not apply to the mainland. Other skilled personnel, such as plumbers, electricians, etc. have to be contracted in also.’ Because of these factors, the ESIN report (ibid.) estimates that it is more than 40% more expensive to build a house on an island compared to the mainland.<sup>19</sup>

The ESIN report (2005, p.8) notes the shortage of land to build on the Irish islands, as well as the difficulties with planning permission on some. There are also obstacles to purchasing existing houses to renovate. Sorensen (2021b, p.2) highlights the difficulty in obtaining financing to buy houses on small islands. In terms of house prices, there are also concerns about the differing income levels of existing island residents and non-residents, meaning that existing residents and their offspring can be priced out of housing.

<sup>17</sup> Kitchin et al. (2015, pp.2-3) argue that the crisis in housing pre-dates the crash of 2008 and has been building through three distinct phases. These include the Celtic Tiger years of 1993-2006; the crash from 2007-2012; and the post-crash period from 2013 to the present. Hearne (2020, p.2) attributes this crisis primarily to ‘the marketisation of housing’.

<sup>18</sup> The Bantry Bay Charter was an innovative participatory and consensus-based strategy for Integrated Coastal Zone Management for Bantry Bay, funded by the EU Life Programme (Stevens and Associates, 2006, p.1). Further details are included in Appendix 2.

<sup>19</sup> On Irish speaking islands, the ESIN report (2005, p.8) notes that the Island Department provides a grant of approximately €15,300 to Irish speaking people. This covers about 25% of the extra cost for building.



The issue of the lack of rental property on the islands makes it very difficult for those who have grown up on the islands to remain there; it can also prevent those who wish to try island living shorter-term to do so. In an article on housing in the West Cork islands in *The Examiner*, O'Riordan (2020) argues that the 'main issue [on the West Cork islands is] the availability of affordable housing that can be occupied on a year-round basis.' Many rental properties are given up for holiday lets, given the premium price which can be gained from tourists in the summer. This differential in prices available for short-term and long-term rental, and the need for island residents themselves to maximise their incomes through renting, is highlighted in the ESIN report on housing (2005, p.8):

'[t]he nature of island life in Ireland is that there are few job opportunities, and fewer still with high or adequate income meaning that many islanders move to the mainland and let their houses to someone else during the summertime. It is also difficult for those who wish to move to an island to access houses to rent on a permanent basis as one may be required to leave the house during the summer months when the owner can get a higher rental income. Very few can rent a house on a permanent basis at summertime rates.'

The HSW report (2021, p.8) highlights the lack of community-owned and council housing on the Irish islands. Similarly, O'Riordan (2020) notes that there is an 'acute shortage of permanent social housing' on the West Cork islands. This is recognised at European level with the ESIN report (2005, p.7) observing that there is 'not a lot of social housing or authority/state built houses [on the Irish islands].'

The ESIN report (2005, p.9) also highlights the uncertainty associated with ageing on an island:

'[d]ue to a lack of public health services, a lot of older people have to go to mainland nursing homes when they get too old to care for themselves in their own island houses. The future for older islanders can be uncertain as they may have to face leaving their island homes.'

The lack of sheltered housing and supports for older people, including housing modifications and home help, is a significant issue. Recent research with older people living in rural areas in Ireland found that most older people would like to age in place and live independently or with supports in their homes (O'Sullivan et al, 2022). If people were to require additional supports which could not be provided in their homes in the future, their preferred options were retirement villages, co-operative housing, and supportive and sheltered housing in their own communities (ibid, p.37). For older adults on islands requiring additional care, however, ageing may necessitate a move to the very different context and community of the mainland.

The media highlights that the emergence of COVID-19 exacerbated the housing crisis on many islands. A BBC News item (2020) noted a post-lockdown housing boom in the Hebrides, for example, due to the increase in home working and the perceived lower rates of COVID-19 on the islands. According to Hookway (2020), this put greater pressure on the islands' housing stock and impacted house prices. And this situation was



not restricted to the Scottish isles.<sup>20</sup> A report on the Canadian islands (Brinklow & Whitten Henry, 2020, p.3) notes that 'islands around the world have proven for the most part to be safer havens in which to 'ride out the storm' of this global pandemic. This sudden increase in island populations often caused problems of over-capacity given that many islands did not have sufficient resources or infrastructure to accommodate such unforeseen influxes of people.'<sup>21</sup> While the post-pandemic situation suggests that COVID-19 may have built upon a pre-existing counter-urbanisation trend, the pandemic also highlighted the need to ensure that any potential increases in population numbers on the islands are sustainable in terms of services, infrastructure, environmental impact and housing.<sup>22</sup>

With regards to housing policies and strategies, given the needs of different groups within islands populations, some European islands have concentrated on providing a diversity of housing provision. In Kökar, Finland, for example, there has been significant investment in the construction of rental properties to make it easier for people to relocate to the island, as well as homes for the elderly and other services. According to Relander et al. (2020, p.19), this has resulted in significant population growth: '[o]ur society grows by about five people each year thanks to good jobs and housing (for rent and to buy).'

On the Danish islands, Sorensen (2021a, p.1) notes that, in May 2021, the Danish government devoted approximately €4m to encourage the building of rental properties for long-term whole-year lettings. The funding recognised the additional costs of building on an island. In a report on Community Impact Assessments on the Scottish islands, Atterton (2019, p.16) notes that '[a]lternative housing delivery models, such as self-build, are already well established in the [Scottish] islands.' On the West Cork islands, the WCIC document (2020, p.6) proposes the development of affordable housing for permanent island residents through tax breaks for island construction, penalties for not bringing existing housing stock into use, and supported housing for the elderly. The CCDP5 (2022, p.235) also acknowledges the need for different types of housing on the West Cork islands, including affordable housing and the prioritisation of the refurbishment of existing dwellings:

**'It is acknowledged that there is a need to provide sustainable housing for permanent occupation and to improve the availability of affordable housing on the islands and to recognize the differing circumstances between island and mainland housing needs. Preference will be given to the reuse/refurbishment of existing dwellings over new build.'**

Island residents on the West Cork islands have been calling for social and affordable housing for decades. In a section on Proposed Policies, the Bere Island Conservation Plan (2002, p.8) states, for instance, that '[a]ffordable housing should be available on the island for all existing and permanent residents, including social/council housing, if required'. While there is no specific island policy on social housing, the IPC Paper (2019, p.22) states that 'the Department will undertake to assess the situation regarding social housing needs on the islands and will consider the matter with the relevant Local Authorities.' And the CCDP5 (2022, p.235) recognises the need for sheltered housing for older people on the West Cork islands, stating: 'Given the aging population, provision should be made for small-scale sheltered housing developments located close to existing community facilities.'

There is also increased recognition of the need for policy makers to engage with island residents themselves to spearhead solutions to the growing challenges of island living and to develop island-specific approaches. In a study on COVID-19 on the Scottish islands, Currie et al. (2021, p.26) highlighted the need for 'local intelligence-gathering about local needs'.<sup>23</sup> Brinklow and Whitten Henry (2020, p.3) document the importance of islands having 'a strong and effective governance structure' to create and enact 'made-on-the-island solutions'. On the West Cork islands, the WCIIDS (2010, p.1) also highlights the need for an island-specific approach to development. The need for guidance on housing is recognised in the CCDP5 (2022, p.234), which states:

20 During the pandemic, two uninhabited islands in Roaringwater Bay in West Cork were purchased for significant prices. Horse Island was sold to a European buyer for €5.5m (Keogh, 2020), while Castle Island was on the market for €1m (Lyons, 2020).

21 Haase and Maier (2021, p.8) highlight that the pandemic 'had a negative impact on island communities in terms of islander health, job losses, food security, movement and travel and remittances.' An ESIN report (Ó Méalóid, 2021, pp.1-2) called for financial supports for the small islands given the effect of the pandemic on tourism, the restrictions on transport to the mainland, the problems with getting islanders to mainland hospitals for treatment, as well as the mental health impacts of the additional isolation which COVID-19 entailed for islanders.

22 In spite of islands being increasingly connected, modern island life is often portrayed as a relaxing alternative to frantic urban living. As such, island life serves as part of a 'counter urbanization' trend, a role which many of the small European islands fulfil according to Sorensen (2021, p.7). The WCIC (2020, p.1) notes that the West Cork islands are envisaged as 'places of refuge and sanctuary'. The natural beauty and solitude of the islands also lend themselves to their being regarded as artistic retreats. In 2021, the West Cork islands received a three-year €450,000 Arts Council investment to sustain creative opportunities for all ages. Available at: [Arts Council project to preserve culture on West Cork's islands | Southern Star](#)

23 The Scottish government passed a National Islands Act in 2018 and have since developed a National Plan for Scotland's islands to improve outcomes for island communities, central to which is consultation with island residents.

**‘The key consideration is the need to reverse population decline and increase the number of permanent residents living all year round on the island. However, guidance is required on the appropriate forms of residential development which are acceptable on the island.’**

The CCDP5 (ibid., p.235) also goes on to state that ‘the Council will consider innovative housing policy issues which recognise the islands particular circumstances. This could involve utilising the potential of a voluntary housing association on the islands.’ The HSW report (2021, p.12) also recommends the setting up of a National Island Housing Association, whose remit would be to buy and build homes for permanent island residents, the ownership of which would be kept within the community.

Innovative housing policies have also been used on many islands to attract new residents and improve the retention of incomers to the islands. Glass et al. (2020, p.15) note that the smaller Orkney islands have adopted gateway housing to improve retention. According to these authors (ibid., p.14), a gateway home is ‘a residence where potential residents who wish to experience island life without committing to buying a property can live.’ The aim is to allow people to experience whether the reality of island life is for them. A 12-to-18-month timeframe is considered ideal for the availability of gateway homes. As Glass et al. (ibid., p.14-15) highlight, however, there needs to be suitable housing available should the person or families wish to remain once the gateway period has ended.<sup>24</sup> On the West Cork islands, the WCIC document (2020, p.6) proposes the need for gateway housing; at the time of writing, a planning application for gateway housing is underway in Oileán Chléire.

### **2.3.2 Derelict and Empty Houses**

The housing shortage on many islands often coincides with high numbers of empty and derelict houses. A report by the Orkney Islands Council (2018, p.3) notes that Orkney has the highest percentage of empty dwellings anywhere in Scotland. The report (ibid.) observes that ‘[e]mpty homes represent a significant drain in rural communities, affecting their ability to rejuvenate and grow.’ It (ibid.:4) highlights that residential house vacancies can be transitional (while the property is being renovated or awaiting sale) or long-term (vacant for more than six months).

The issue of empty and derelict homes in a context of a severe and long-standing housing crisis is one which exists throughout Ireland. Norris et al. (2010, p.672) noted over a decade ago that ‘long-term vacancies [in the Republic] constitute[d] a large proportion of the rural housing stock relative to the norm in north-Western Europe.’ The ESIN Inter-Island Exchange Project on housing (2005, p.8) states that, on Ireland’s islands, the number of derelict dwellings is due to issues with the title rights to the properties or because absentee owners have no intention of maintaining or disposing of their property. On Orkney, Glass et al. (2020, p.15) offer several other reasons why homes are not refurbished or are left empty:

- Buyers purchase agricultural land that includes the house, but the buyers have no need for the house;
- Inheritance and potential legal issues;
- Property owners in long-term care;
- Resource constraints and homeowners unable to renovate the property;
- A relatively high number of second homes.

Quite apart from derelict houses, there is also the issue of houses which are habitable and empty. In Ireland, Keaveney (2007, p.21) noted that eight per cent of housing stock in Ireland was empty and habitable at a time when the building of new houses continued. Keaveney (ibid., p.22) also found that holiday homes accounted for the second highest proportion of vacant dwellings in Ireland. In a survey conducted by the Orkney Islands Council (2018, p.15), the most popular reasons for properties being left empty were that they were second homes or people were unable to afford renovations.

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<sup>24</sup> Relander et al. (2020, p.12) note that the Finnish island of Kökar has a ‘unique moving-in team who actively meet everyone showing interest in living [on the island] and after arrival help continued integration’. Among other services, they offer free day care for four months to newcomers (ibid.). Inis Meáin in the Aran Islands developed an initiative in 2022 to offer a family free accommodation for one year, which garnered significant media attention and public interest (O’Donoghue, 2022). As Glass et al. (2020, pp.14-15) note, the offer of shorter-term housing options aimed at attracting newcomers need to be embedded within a wider housing framework that supports longer-term settlement on the island, if desired.



The large number of derelict and abandoned houses is noted as a significant issue on the West Cork islands. The WCIC document (2020, p.9) suggests that derelict houses on the West Cork islands are properties ‘whose registered owners are either deceased, living elsewhere and/or ...have little if any contact with the island. Some may be used for only a few days in the summer.’ The WCIC document (ibid.) also notes that the situation is more complex on Dursey, and to some extent on Oileán Chléire, where a number of properties and parcels of land do not appear to have a registered owner.

With regards to policy and practice, tackling vacant and derelict houses is a central concern on islands across Europe. Glass et al. (2020, pp.14-16) note that most Scottish Local Authorities employ an Empty Homes Officer whose role is to support community-led home refurbishment through providing assistance with applying for community funding, as well as developing gateway housing on the islands. The WCIC document (2020, p.6) proposes that this is a strategy which could also be adopted for dealing with derelict and empty homes on the West Cork islands. The IPC Paper (2019, p.22) noted that there are schemes available, such as the Repair and Leasing scheme (RLS)<sup>25</sup> and the Buy-and-Renew<sup>26</sup> scheme which ‘provide a framework and funding structure to bring vacant and derelict properties back into use for social housing’ and which could be used on the islands. Both schemes target properties that have been vacant for a minimum of 12 months. The HSW report (2021, p.7) notes, however, that there are ‘anomalies’ with the Repair and Leasing scheme in relation to the islands due to the higher cost of building on islands. It (ibid, p.12) argues that higher grant aid should be available for the renovation of old homes on the islands.

The WCIC document (2020, p.9) recommends that legal experts be engaged to establish the ownership status of vacant and derelict properties on the islands, so that those that are without title can be taken into public ownership or allocated to island communities for the common good. This is similar to the idea of Community Land Trusts highlighted by Scott and Heaphy (2022, p.209). These involve the transfer of land assets to community ownership. The land trust can then enable community-based organisations to develop affordable or local needs-focussed housing and put any profit or rent into wider community projects (ibid.).

### 2.3.3 Second Homes

According to Baltaci and Cevirgen (2020, p.274), a second home can be defined as ‘a dwelling, used by owners or other people for a certain period of time, that is bought or rented for vacation or recreational purposes and does not have the status of being a permanent home.’ Norris et al. (2010: 672) note that, by 2006, 6.3 per cent of Irish households owned at least one second home.

The varying views on the impact of second-home ownership on local communities in the literature highlight the ambiguity of the issue. On their potentially positive effects, in her study on housing in the Irish countryside, Keaveney (2007, p.22) notes that second homes are traditionally associated with tourist areas and have ‘the potential to add to local economies.’ Similarly, Norris et al. (2010, p.674) argue that second homes can ‘contribute to regional economic growth by helping to maintain existing business and employment and encourage entrepreneurial start-ups.’<sup>27</sup> The impact on services is highlighted by Baltaci and Cevirgen (2020, p.275) who find that second-home buyers can lead to an ‘acceleration in infrastructure investment (water, electricity, health, education, etc.)...which in turn serves to improve the quality of life for the residents.’ Socially, Gallent (2014, p.174) argues that there is ‘a particular social value to temporary and seasonal rural residence’ as temporary residents enhance social networks in some rural communities, while Müller (2011, p.139) notes that second-home owners can have a ‘high degree of place attachment.’

There are also significant concerns, however. Norris et al. (2010, p.674) highlight issues around the sustainability of employment associated with second homes (related to their construction). These authors (ibid., p.668) argue that second homes can create price pressure on housing in rural areas ‘as lower income ‘locals’ are priced out of many attractive coastal or countryside areas’. ‘Housing price inflation’ is also noted by Baltaci and Cevirgen (2020, p.276) in areas ‘heavily populated with second-home owners’ (ibid.). Sorensen (2021b, p.2) also expresses concern that ‘[w]hilst tourism is an important source of income on many islands,

25 If a property requires repairs to bring it up to a standard for letting, a Local Authority or approved housing body will pay for the repair work in return for the property being made available for social housing for a lease period of at least five years. More information is available at: [gov.ie - Repair and Leasing Scheme \(RLS\): Further information \(www.gov.ie\)](http://gov.ie - Repair and Leasing Scheme (RLS): Further information (www.gov.ie))

26 The Buy-and-Renew Scheme complements the Repair and Leasing Scheme. With this scheme, the Local Authority or approved housing body buys the vacant property outright, as opposed to leasing it. This is subject to the suitability of the property to social housing, the condition of the property and the cost of remediation. More information is available at: [Buy & Renew Scheme - Aims to support Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies to Purchase and Renew Housing Units - Vacant Homes Ireland](http://Buy & Renew Scheme - Aims to support Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies to Purchase and Renew Housing Units - Vacant Homes Ireland)

27 In relation to their local economic contribution, Norris et al. (2010, p.675) noted that second homes which are rarely occupied were viewed as least economically useful to the local area.

when many houses become holiday homes, local people and newcomers, some with essential skills like health professionals or teachers, are no longer able to access the housing needed to keep the community viable.' Social and community impacts are also documented in Burholt et al.'s (2013, p.6) study, where the prevalence of second homes meant 'there were fewer people with whom to interact socially, especially during the winter months.'

Other research suggests the impact of second homes is context-dependent. Marjavaara (2007, p.296), for example, finds that 'no evidence of displacement caused by second home demand can be traced on a regional geographical level' in Sweden. Gallent et al. (2003, p.271) argue that 'second homes are a relatively small component of wider processes affecting rural communities in Wales' although they also find that second homes can severely affect some areas. Second homes are likely to have the most significant local impact in contexts where the pressure for housing is greatest. Keaveney (2007, p.22), therefore, urges the need for planning controls on second homes, arguing that challenges arise when 'planning legislation and development control do not have the capacity to deal with holiday homes appropriately.'<sup>28</sup> Norris et al. (2010, p.668) note that several Local Authorities in Ireland have been taking steps to try to improve access to housing for locals, such as preference for those planning to stay full-time in their homes in decisions regarding planning permission.

The CCDP1 (2022, p.112) situates the West Cork islands within a Tourism and Rural Diversification Area that recognises these are areas with considerable pressure on rural housing due to higher demand for second home development, high housing construction costs, and higher housing vacancy rates than elsewhere in the country. It (ibid., p.152) notes, in relation to the West Cork islands, the 'increasing desire among those who live in urban communities to holiday or own second homes in very remote locations', and states that 'the impact of development proposals will need to be carefully assessed to prevent adverse physical or social impacts' (ibid.). It (ibid., p.113) also states that it will limit the building of new houses to those with demonstrable need, based on people's 'social and/or economic links to a particular local rural area'.<sup>29</sup> The CCDP5 (2022, p.235) states:

'The development of second homes except where existing dwellings are restored or extended will be restricted. Consideration of small-scale managed holiday home developments may be considered in or adjacent to existing housing clusters, where there are clear and identifiable economic and social benefits (that endures beyond the construction phase), and that is compatible with the capacity of the local community to accommodate it.'

These policies inform decisions related to planning permission on the West Cork islands. Planning is a significant issue which will now be explored as the final part of this section on the availability and affordability of housing.

### 2.3.4 Planning

The issue of sustainable planning and development is a crucial one for the islands. The HSW (2021, p.7) highlights that '[t]he difficulties faced by those looking to build their homes on an island are often compounded by planning regulations. If refused planning permission on a site on the mainland, one can look to alternative, nearby sites – this is not always the case on the islands and a refusal of planning permission may mean that the person leaves the island or does not settle there.' This is a particular concern given the risks of island depopulation.

In its section related to the Irish islands, the ESIN report on housing (2005, p.8) notes the difficulties in obtaining planning permission on the Irish islands. It (ibid.) also highlights that planning decisions are, at times, disputed. Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Sustainable Rural Housing were produced by the then Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government in 2005.<sup>30</sup> Scott and Heaphy (2022, p.206) summarise the guidelines as providing that 'anyone wishing to build a house in rural areas suffering persistent and substantial population decline will be accommodated, subject to good planning'. These authors (ibid.), also note that good planning refers to issues regarding 'siting, layout and design, rather than planning in a strategic or spatial sense'.

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<sup>28</sup> The ESIN report on housing (2005, p.5) notes that, in Denmark, there are designated areas for permanent living where 'one has to be registered as a permanent resident to achieve the right to own a house.' 'Foreigners' are not allowed to own a summer house (ibid. p.6). Houses in areas reserved for permanent living cannot be sold on the summer house market (ibid., p.5).

<sup>29</sup> Applicants must demonstrate that their proposal complies with one of seven categories of housing need that focus on permanent occupation.

<sup>30</sup> Updated rural housing planning guidelines are currently being prepared, according to the Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2021-05-05/72/>



It is recognised that planners must tread a careful line between conservation demands related to environmental impact and the protected status of wildlife and heritage sites on the islands, and the promotion of sustainability of island populations. As an ESPON report on the development of European islands (2013, p.12) highlights, poorly planned housing can be a threat to the quality of life and natural and cultural assets of islands. However, where the awareness of housing policy is limited, or where the wording of policy is vague, planning decisions can appear to island residents as arbitrary, unnecessarily restrictive and unhelpful. Failed submissions also increase local frustration as island residents, concerned for the sustainability of populations on their islands, watch potential newcomers, or a new generation of islanders, being obliged to leave.

It is vital, therefore, that there are strong links between the islands and the planning authorities and that decisions are understood at a local level. In this regard, the Bantry Bay Charter (2000, p.81) includes an agreed approach to housing in the coastal zone area which is detailed in Appendix 2. This includes

**promoting a complete system for monitoring of housing applications in the coastal zone; those that are granted, and refused, and the reasons for this. This information should be made public, be used to see how present policies are working, and to help develop future policies.**

Planning Applications to Cork County Council have been made publicly available online in recent years<sup>31</sup>. Other agreed actions from the housing section of the Bantry Bay Charter (2000, p.82) included conducting surveys of housing and housing need and monitors of annual planning applications and permissions. This approach suggested over 20 years ago remains highly relevant to today's island context and should be revisited for implementation.

The HSW report (2021, p.11) notes the need for planners to be more aware of the context of the islands and to 'work towards the establishment of an island-specific planning procedure which includes the planners being trained correctly, having visited the islands.' The need for 'unique planning interventions' for the islands is also stressed by Ray and O'Sullivan (2021, p.810) who observe that '[t]o date, planning responsibilities have predominantly devolved to Local Authority level, to where mainland models can overlook the nuances and/or cultural components of island life' (ibid.).

Scott and Heaphy (2022, p.209) argue that 'policy innovation, co-producing policy in partnership with rural communities, and place sensitive creative thinking are needed to connect rural dwellings to a wider vision for sustainable rural places.' These authors (ibid.) also argue that this should include retrofitting existing housing stock for energy efficiency and focussing on the renewal of rural areas through developing viable employment and services (including digital connectivity) and ensuring housing supply is increased.

In relation to the islands, the HSW report (2021, p.7) argues that County Councils should acknowledge the vulnerability of islands to depopulation and should, when making planning decisions, take account of whether or not the applicant is an islander building their own home. An Island Housing Association could also ensure that housing policy and planning decisions are clearly communicated to islanders and assist with clarifying planning guidelines for those wishing to apply, thereby limiting the number of applications which have to be re-submitted.

Haase and Maier (2021, p.29) note that there is a need to ensure a "critical mass" on islands ([in terms of] resources, consumers, workforce, land, infrastructure) in order to develop competitive economic activities.' Population targets are crucial in this regard. With regard to the West Cork islands, the WCIC document (2020, p.6) highlights the need for demographic planning to 'decide the desired population target for each island to be reached in the period of the next County Development Plan so that it can aim to achieve it. This will provide information on the housing need for each island too.' While the CCDP5 (2022, pp.237-267) does provide target population figures for county towns, and notes population trends on the West Cork islands, it does not provide target population figures for the islands. These are required. This report will now turn to look, finally, at the vital area of quality in relation to housing on the islands.

<sup>31</sup> See <http://planning.corkcoco.ie/ePlan/searchexact> and the planning viewer app <https://www.corkcoco.ie/en/resident/planning-and-development/free-planning-viewer-app>



### 2.3.5 The Quality of Island Housing

The quality of existing houses on islands across Europe and Ireland is of significant concern. On the Orkney islands, for instance, the Orkney Islands Council (2018, p.8) notes that the standard of repair work for empty and derelict houses is defined within government policy, the Housing (Scotland) Act of 2006, which gives powers to Councils to deal with sub-standard housing. No such standards exist, however, for the state of repair of privately owned properties which are inhabited. While regulations on quality do exist for rental properties in Ireland, data shows 'persistent poor standards in private renting' (Finnerty et al., 2016, p.255). On the Irish islands, the HSW (2021, p.6) notes that many rental properties were originally built as summer houses and so were often 'poorly insulated or difficult to heat.'

The difficulties of getting materials and skilled workers to the islands has been highlighted in Section 2.3.1. This is an issue not only for the building of new houses or renovating empty/derelict properties, but also affects the routine repair work of existing homes. This work, if left unaddressed, can lead to more serious issues.

Such repair work is especially essential on the islands given the vulnerability of island homes to adverse weather and the growing impact of climate change. The WCIC document (2020, p.9) highlights that 'parts of Whiddy and the centre of Heir are increasingly susceptible to flooding, erosion and rising sea levels.' The severity of the weather also leads to difficulties with heating homes on islands. Atterton (2019, p.17) highlights the impact of the older housing stock and adverse climatic conditions on the Scottish islands in relation to fuel poverty. This, she (ibid.) argues, is due to a range of factors, including 'higher fuel prices, more off gas grid properties so it is harder to find opportunities to reduce fuel costs, generally older housing stock which is harder to improve to energy efficiency standards [and] more adverse climatic conditions.' She (ibid., p.18) notes the need for 'robust island data' to identify the prevalence of (extreme) fuel poverty on the islands.'

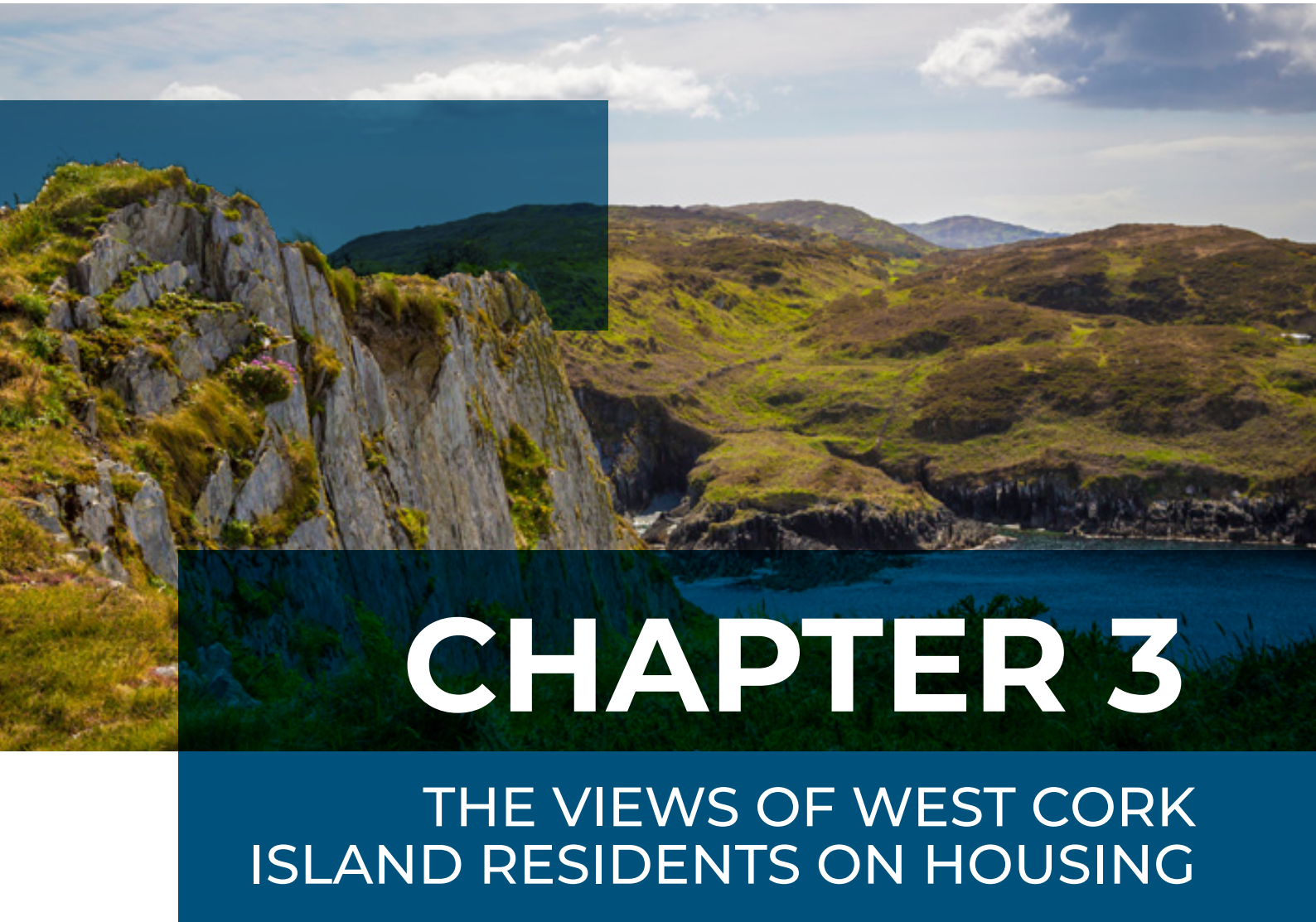
On the West Cork islands, Conlon (2021, p.7) highlights the age of housing stock, which was found to be older than that in the rest of the country. Most homes on the islands pre-date Building Regulations and associated energy standards introduced in Ireland from the 1990s onwards. The Bere Island Sustainable Energy Community (SEC) Energy Master Plan (2021, p.33), a sample Building Energy Rating (BER) audit on 10% of homes on the island, finds that 'domestic properties on Bere Island as a group are older and perform less well on energy measures than the national average'.<sup>32</sup> Given the increased likelihood of adverse and extreme weather events expected due to climate change, as well as the impact of the current energy crisis, retrofitting houses through the SEAI schemes, including the fully-funded energy upgrades to homeowners who receive certain welfare payments, is essential. However, given the costs of building work on the islands highlighted in Section 2.3.1, the grant thresholds for these schemes will need to be increased for islands.

<sup>32</sup> The Energy Master Plan (2021, p.35) finds that the average BER of houses on Bere is E2 (sampling 10% of houses) compared to C3 nationally.



“

**This island way of living is so unique and precious in my opinion that Ireland should look after it, promote it and treasure it.**



# CHAPTER 3

## THE VIEWS OF WEST CORK ISLAND RESIDENTS ON HOUSING

### 3.1 Respondent Demographics

#### 3.1.1 Survey Respondent Demographics

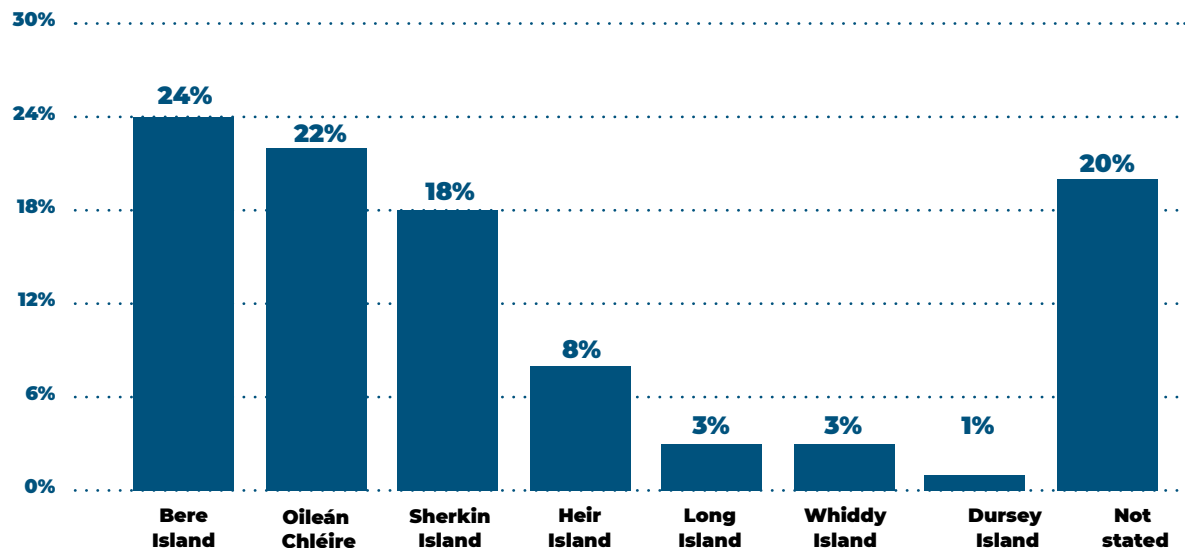
The survey compiled by the participatory research group exploring key themes in relation to housing on the islands was central to this research. 238 people responded to the survey, totalling almost half of permanent residents aged 18 and over as described in Chapter 1. Most respondents lived full-time on the islands. For 71% (n=170), their home on the island was their main residence; 56% (n=134) of these lived in a home that is owned by them or their family and 15% (n=36) rented their home. For 29% (n=68) of respondents, their home on the island was a second home.

56% of the respondents were female (n=131), 44% male (n=104), and 0.4% other.<sup>33</sup> As shown in Figure 1, every island was represented in the survey. The highest proportion of respondents was from the 'Big 3' who comprised 64% of survey respondents: Bere (24%, n=57), followed by Oileán Chléire (22%, n=52) and Sherkin (18%, n=44). The smaller islands comprised 15% of respondents: Heir (8%, n=20), Long (3%, n=8), Whiddy (3%, n=8), and Dursley (1%, n=2). One fifth of respondents (20%, n=47) did not state their island.

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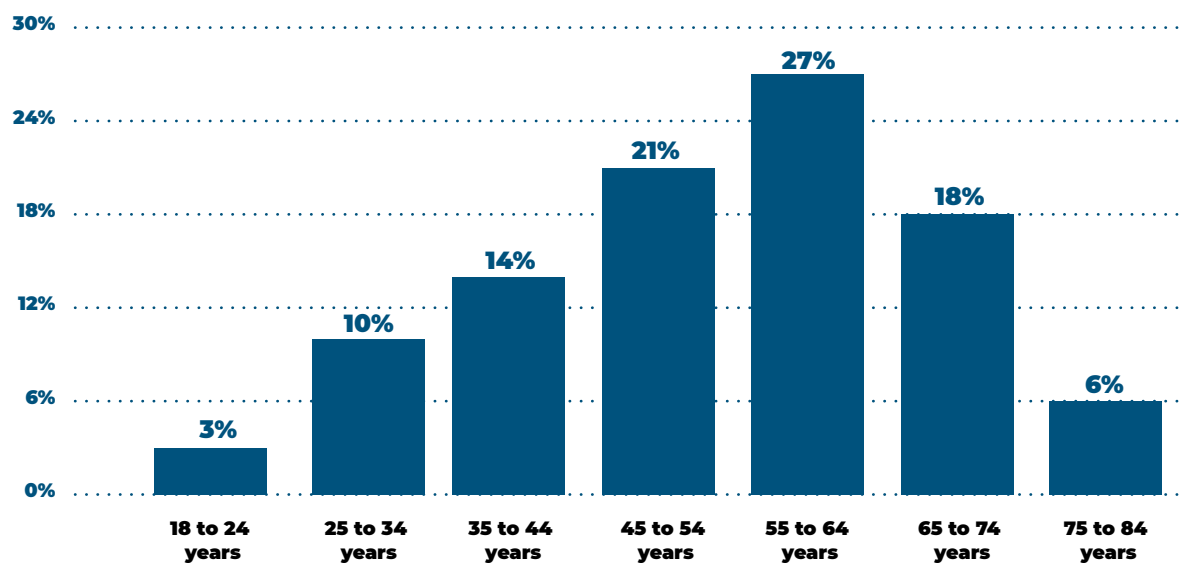
<sup>33</sup> Not all respondents answered all questions. Unless otherwise indicated, 'respondents' refer to those who provided an answer to the question, rather than to the overall total of people who returned the survey. Please also note that some percentages may not equal 100% in the figures, due to rounding.





**Figure 1: Where Respondents Live**

As shown in Figure 2, there was a good spread of respondent ages, which ranged from the 18 to 24-year age group up to the 75-to-84-year age group. There were no participants in the survey aged 85 and over. The highest number of respondents were aged between 45 and 74 years of age (66% of respondents).



**Figure 2: Age Group of Respondents**

Most respondents were married (57%), or lived with their partners (14%), followed by a fifth of participants who were single (20%). Smaller proportions were widowed (2%), separated (2%) or divorced (1%), while 3% preferred not to say. 41% of respondents lived with a spouse/partner, 27% lived with a spouse/partner with children, 18% lived alone, 9% lived in the family home with parents, 2% were single parents living with children, 2% lived with non-family/friends, and 5% had another arrangement, such as an older parent living with them.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Not all percentages add up to 100%, either due to rounding or due to questions allowing for more than one option to be selected.

As shown in Figure 3, respondents had lived on the islands for a range of years, with the highest proportion living on the islands for between 5 and 14 years. More respondents who were full-time residents had lived on the islands for longer periods - i.e., for more than 25 years - when compared with second-home owners.

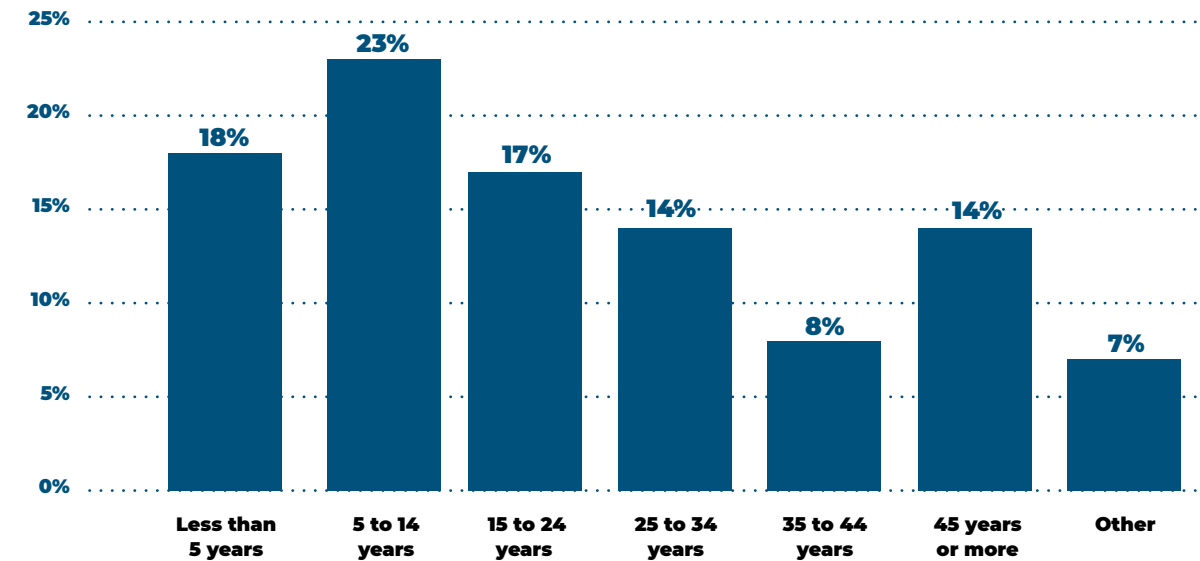


Figure 3: Years on the Island

Most respondents were employed, whether full-time (37%), part-time (17%), or self-employed/working in family business (21%). 19% of respondents were retired, 6% were looking after the family home, 4% were in receipt of welfare benefit, 4% were in third level education, and 1% were unable to work due to sickness or disability. For most respondents who lived full-time on the island, their work was based on the island (60%), or they worked remotely from their home on the island (23%). 18% said they commuted to the mainland or to another island to work, while 15% specified other, which mainly involved a combination of the three locations of work.<sup>35</sup> One third (33%) of second-home owner respondents stated that they worked remotely from their home on the island.

3.1.2 Focus Group Participant Demographics

The 10 focus group participants comprised both full-time residents (8) and second-home owners (2).<sup>36</sup> Six were female and four male. There was a good spread across islands, with Dursey and Whiddy being the only islands not represented. Seven participants were Irish, and three non-Irish. Of the full-time residents in the focus groups, six had lived on their islands from between 3 and 10 years, one for 20 years, and another for their entire life. Of the two second-home owners, their connection to their islands spanned decades, with one visiting their parents' second home on the island since childhood, and the other purchasing their second home almost 10 years ago having first visited the island in the 1970s.<sup>37</sup>

3.1.3 Participants' Connection to the Islands and Island Living

Most survey respondents rated their island as an excellent (49%) or good (47%) place to live. Just 5% rated it as a poor place to live. 81% of respondents stated that it was very important for them to remain on their island, 17% stated that it was somewhat important, and just 2% stated that it was not at all important. While high proportions of all three respondent groups (homeowners, renters and second-home owners) stated that it was very important for them to remain on the island, 91% of those who were renting their homes on the islands stated that was very important for them to do so.

35 These percentages add up to more 100% as respondents could select more than one option regarding employment status and location of work.  
36 Given the small size of the communities on the islands, individual identifying markers, such as gender, age, island, etc. have been removed to safeguard the anonymity of participants in the focus groups.  
37 Three full-time residents in the focus groups owned two properties on their islands.



As shown in Figure 4, in terms of connection to the islands, just under half (46%) of respondents moved from outside the island (this rises to 71% of renters). 14% of respondents had lived on the island all of their lives (rising to 21% of homeowners), and 15% had ancestral connections to the island (rising to 36% of second-home owners). 14% were brought up on the island and moved back after a period away, and 9% inherited a home (rising to 20% for second-home owners). The category of Other included people whose spouse was from the island, who found work or set up a business on the island, or who bought a holiday home on the island. Many survey respondents highlighted the sense of community on the islands, including the close connection of second-home owners to the islands, with one stating: 'The community is as much those who spend part of their lives here as those who are full-time.'

	All respondents	Homeowners	Renters	Second-home Owners
<b>I moved from outside the island</b>	46%	48%	71%	25%
<b>I have lived here all my life</b>	14%	21%	12%	0%
<b>I have ancestral connections to the island</b>	15%	17%	0%	36%
<b>I was brought up on the island and moved back after a period away</b>	14%	17%	6%	13%
<b>I inherited a home</b>	9%	6%	0%	20%
<b>Other</b>	14%	9%	6%	26%

**Figure 4: Survey respondents' connections to the islands**

In the focus groups, two participants had grown up on the island, while three had no connection to their island prior to moving there. For some participants, second-home ownership (either their own or their family's) had served as a form of gateway housing, allowing three permanent residents to get to know the islands prior to moving there full-time. It was also noted that second-home ownership had served as a basis for entrepreneurship on the islands. One participant said: 'Quite a few of the businesses on the island have developed from people who holidayed there [in holiday homes] and then set up businesses.'

The love for their islands among all participants in the focus groups - full-time residents, and second-home owners alike - was clear. One (non-Irish) full-time resident said: 'This island way of living is so unique and precious in my opinion that Ireland should look after it, promote it and treasure it because it is a real precious gem they've got.' Participants also highlighted the natural beauty of the islands, with one noting their island's 'nautical aspects and its flora and fauna.'

For some focus group participants, there was a long family history with the island. When asked why they had moved permanently to the island having visited their family's second home on the island for years, one participant said: 'I suppose I love the place. My Mum is from here and we came back as children and spent every school holiday here.' Both second-home owners were also strongly attached to the island. One expressed their wish to be buried on the island, saying 'I am definitely a second-home owner, but I don't feel like one. I feel I am half a resident, being there for the last 50 years.'

The isolation associated with island life in the literature was not highlighted as an issue in the focus groups. One participant said: 'I can see where people on the mainland would have difficulty understanding the mentality of people who want to live apparently isolated, but we don't think we are.' The heightened sense of connectivity has been greatly enhanced by the expansion of technology. This participant said:

**we get grocery delivered about four days a week from the local supermarket. We go on the internet, place our order, they deliver it to the ferry and the ferry comes down. And that becomes a bit of a social event for everybody.**

The sense of community on the island also served to alleviate feelings of isolation; the arrival of second-home owners as part of this was noted by another participant: 'One of the things that I think a second holiday-home owner brings to enrich the island is...variety...As somebody who is living here, I really look forward to people coming back.' Another participant noted that life in the winter months, traditionally the harshest time for island inhabitants, had become easier due to community activities:

everyone kept warning me about the winters; 'the winters are bad'...Actually, I found there was a lot more going on in the winter months which I'm involved in now, sort of organising classes and different things and events for the islanders... we'd various art classes and theatre groups and that kind of thing happening in the winter months.

One participant summarised it as: 'it's remoteness, but not isolation.'

## 3.2 Housing Circumstances and Living Arrangements

In relation to living arrangements, most survey respondents (79%) lived in a detached house. Of the rest, 7% lived in a bungalow, 5% in a semi-detached house, 3% in a terraced house, 3% in an apartment, and 6% were categorised as 'other' (which included mobile homes and caravans).<sup>38</sup> Most homes were old – 36% were built before 1919, while 20% were built between 1919 and 1945, and 11% between 1946 and 1980. This means that over half of respondents lived in properties which had been built almost 80 years ago. Of the newer houses, 17% were built between 1981 and 2000, 11% between 2001 and 2011, and just 5% of respondents lived in houses which had been built since 2012.

Overall, most respondents were very satisfied (39%) or satisfied (41%) with their living arrangements, with smaller proportions dissatisfied (14%) or very dissatisfied (5%). Those who rented their homes on the islands expressed more dissatisfaction, with almost one third being dissatisfied to some degree with their current living arrangements (22% dissatisfied and 8% very dissatisfied).

### 3.2.1 Full-time Resident Homeowners

Of the respondents who were homeowners, two thirds (66%) owned their homes outright and 16% owned their homes with a mortgage. 16% had another type of living arrangement (which mainly involved living with parents). In the focus groups, all participants, apart from two, owned their own homes (n=8). Of the two who did not own their homes, both were living in their parents' homes. One was renovating a building on the family's land to serve as a future home and the second was trying to save money to buy a home on the island but was not hopeful given house prices and the difficulties of securing land on which to build.

### 3.2.2 Full-time Resident Renters

Of the respondents who were renting their homes, most rented from a private landlord (69%), while 14% rented from the Local Authority, 3% were part of a house share, and 14% had another living arrangement (such as accommodation tied to employment). Although most of these respondents considered their home to be worth the rent paid (69% yes, 31% no), almost half (46%) were experiencing difficulty in meeting monthly rental costs – 43% some difficulty and 3% a lot of difficulty. Renters were also asked about the accessibility of rental supports (e.g., HAP) and 36% of renters expressed concerns about this. The lack of rental security was a concern for 58% of respondents renting their home, with 46% stating that they had no formal written lease/tenancy agreement. These findings highlight the particular precarity of renters on the West Cork islands.

### 3.2.3 Second-home Owners

Of the second-home owner respondents, two thirds (66%) owned their homes outright and 13% owned their homes with a mortgage, while 21% had another type of living arrangement (most of which referred to a family's holiday home). Just over half of second-home owners stayed on the islands for between 1 to 3 months (52%) per year, and 28% stayed for longer periods of between 4 to 6 months (28%). 10% stayed for more than 6 months, and 9% for less than a month.

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<sup>38</sup> These percentages add up to more 100% since respondents could select more than one option regarding living arrangements.

Most second-home owner respondents did not rent out their property (91%). Participants in the focus groups who either owned or had owned second homes in the past spoke about their preference not to rent out their homes when not in use given the impact on their ability to use their homes when they chose. A previous second-home owner, now a permanent resident, noted: 'we weren't going to rent [our holiday home] out off-season because you are kind of stuck then when you could come, when you couldn't come.' Of the 9% of second-home owners who rented out their property, all stated this was for seasonal lettings, with most letting durations being 1 and 3 months or less than one month.

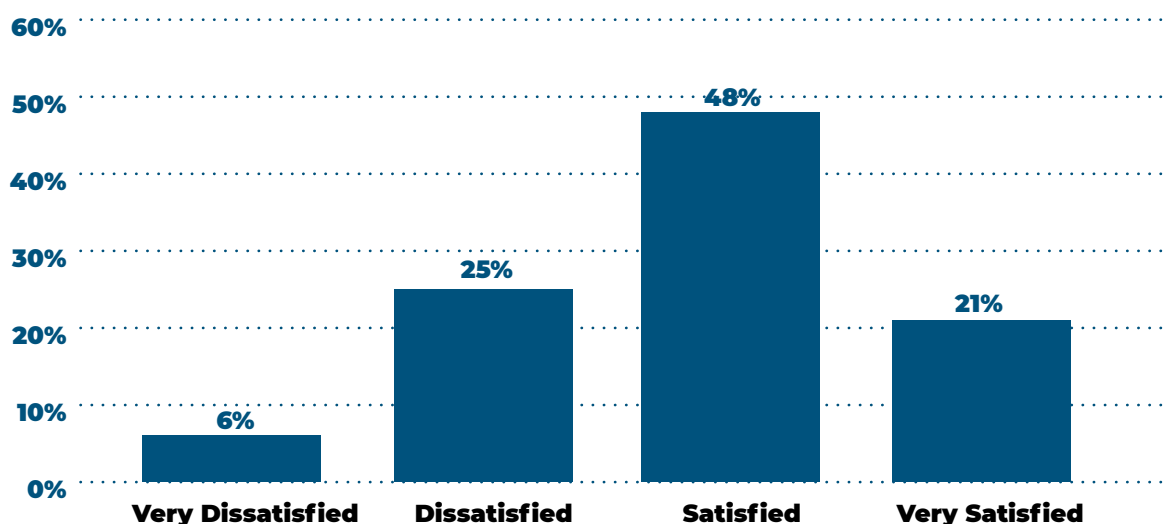
63% of second-home owner respondents would consider moving full-time to the island, now or in the future, while 19% didn't know, and 18% would not consider it at all. In terms of the factors that would influence their decision to move full-time to the island, 22% said they would consider moving to the island on retirement and 31% said they would move if they could work remotely. A quarter of respondents (25%) expressed concerns about moving to the island in relation to the quality of broadband and access to services, in particular healthcare, as they age.

Of the two second-home owners who took part in the focus groups, one visited the island for two months each year, while the other frequently spent weekends and holidays on the island, visiting at least monthly. Neither were considering moving permanently to the island – for one this was due to the potential loss of family contact during the winter, while the other noted the smaller scale of island life as being too restrictive. However, this smaller scale was also central to why this latter participant loved island life: 'It's really too small to spend all my life on the island. I feel I love it because it's different from my daily life.'

### 3.3 Housing Quality and Issues with Living Conditions

#### 3.3.1 Satisfaction with the Standard/Condition of the Home

As shown in Figure 5, most survey respondents agreed (53%) or strongly agreed (23%) that their home is suited to their needs, while 19% disagreed and just 4% strongly disagreed. 69% of respondents were satisfied with the standard/condition of their home (48% satisfied, 21% very satisfied). However, over one-third (31%) expressed some dissatisfaction with the standard/condition of their homes (25% dissatisfied, 6% very dissatisfied). For renters, this rose to 42% (36% dissatisfied and 6% very dissatisfied (as shown in Figure 13 in Appendix 3).<sup>39</sup>



**Figure 5: Satisfaction with the Standard/Condition of Home**

<sup>39</sup> Responses specific to a particular group of island residents (i.e., homeowners, renters or second-home owners) are highlighted only where they differ significantly to the overall total of responses, or where they relate to questions asked only of that group. The breakdown of responses between the three groups on the availability, affordability and quality of housing on the islands can be found in Appendix 3.



### 3.3.2 Issues with the Condition of the Home

Problems with the condition of their homes identified by respondents are shown in Figure 6. The top problems were difficulties with carrying out maintenance/upkeep themselves (a total of 68% of respondents stated this was a problem) and difficulties keeping the house warm (65%). More than half of respondents (52%) stated that difficulties with the cost of upkeep were a problem, while almost half of all participants highlighted problems with damp in their homes (44%).

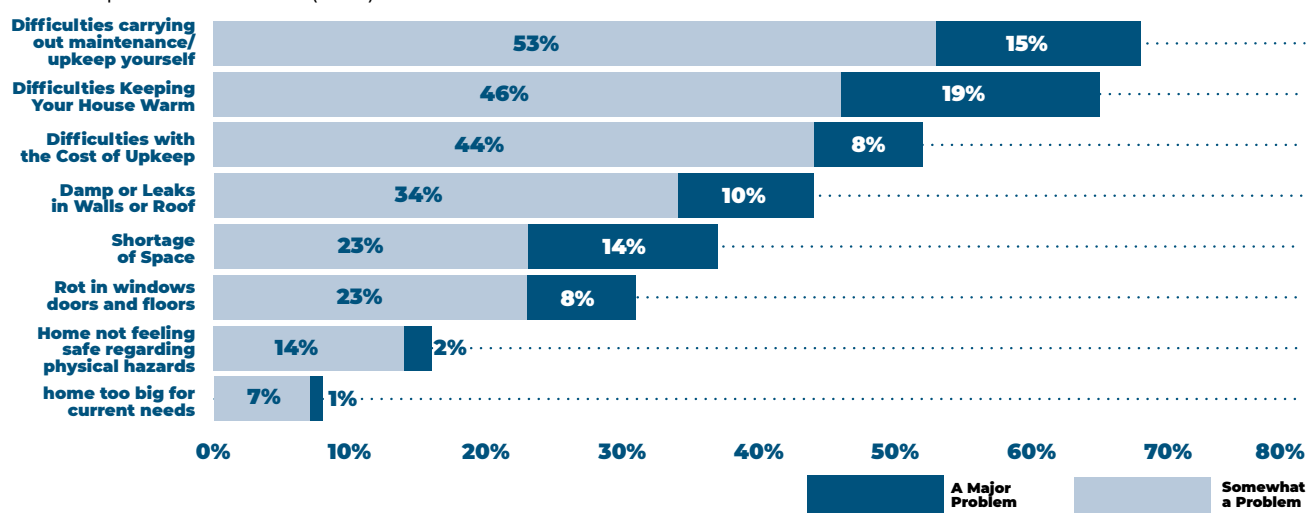


Figure 6: Quality of Homes

While significant proportions of homeowners and second-home owners highlighted problems with keeping their homes warm, a greater percentage of renters highlighted this as a problem (as shown in Figure 14 in Appendix 3).<sup>40</sup> A greater percentage of renters also identified difficulties with shortage of space, and rot in windows, doors and floors than the other two groups. When renters were asked specifically about the factors that concern or impact them regarding renting on the islands, 69% said that the condition of rental properties was a concern. When all three groups were asked generally about their views in relation to housing problems, more than half of all respondents (53%) identified the quality of rental properties as a problem on the islands.<sup>41</sup>

In the focus groups, the varying quality of houses on the islands was highlighted. One participant observed: 'The quality of housing...ranges from the derelict through to the really expensive houses and anything in between, really. So...each house is very, very different. It's a whole range.' Most full-time residents in the focus groups highlighted significant issues with the quality of their housing. Three of the eight full-time residents noted that parts of their homes dated back to the 1800s; a further four highlighted that they had renovated ruins, often requiring building work over a period of seven years or more.

Four of the eight full-time residents noted problems with damp and with heating their homes; three (including two of those who noted their houses were damp) highlighted their need for new windows, with one observing: 'wind just whistles in through the windows.' The age of participants' homes contributed to many of these problems, particularly given the harshness of the island climate. One participant said: 'this house was built before the Famine; so it was built in the early 1800s.' Another noted:

We still haven't had our windows done upstairs so, like everybody else, especially when we have a south wind and storm, we have the water come in and it goes down the wall. So, it's towels come out, pots come out – but it's become part of life now. You just get used to it.

<sup>40</sup> Due to constraints of space, the graphs are not included here but can be found in Appendix 3.

<sup>41</sup> As this finding was from a broader question spanning all three categories of availability, affordability, and quality, this response on the quality of rental properties is not captured on any of the featured graphs.

This participant added: 'we have looked at getting this waterproofing cover to go on the outside...hopefully, if we get a good season this year...we'll have the money to be able to do that.' This means that, given the variable incomes of island residents, necessary renovations can only be undertaken once income permits. The increased expenditure associated with living in an old house was also highlighted, particularly given the current energy crisis: 'in terms of energy, it's very costly and with everything that's going on now [inflation increases] it's even more ridiculous for costs.'

### 3.3.3 Supply of Utilities in the Home

In general, homes on the islands had a good supply of utilities. All survey respondents stated their homes had a reliable electricity supply, 98% stated they had a reliable water supply, 93% a reliable sewerage system, and 78% a reliable heating supply. As highlighted in the focus groups, however, the form and extent of heating could be variable. One participant noted: 'We don't have central heating; we have just a log burner...we've got used to being at a cooler temperature.' Given the issues with damp and poor windows, many focus group participants found their heating was ineffective, often requiring them to inhabit parts of their homes only. One participant, whose home had been renovated from a derelict building, noted: 'Three rooms are very good [in terms of heating]. The rest, not so good.'

Lower proportions of respondents said their home had a reliable supply of mobile signal (62%) and broadband (46%). A focus group participant from one of the 'Big 3' islands said they were obliged to drive to a certain part of their island for a better internet signal. While nearly all respondents had a reliable water supply, there were still concerns for the future given the vulnerability of services. A participant on one of the smaller islands observed: 'water comes on to the island under the sea... It is exposed and, if it was broken, we would have difficulties.'

### 3.3.4 Maintaining the Home

In relation to maintaining their homes, 82% of respondents identified challenges with finding people to undertake home maintenance (42% said this was somewhat a problem and 40% a major problem). Focus group participants expressed concern that this was particularly a challenge for older adults living on the islands. One participant said: 'it's almost impossible now to get tradesmen, it's impossible to get a gardener and it's impossible to get people who could support older people living on the island.'

In terms of renovation and retrofitting, 56% of respondents said their home had been renovated, i.e., improved or modernised to a good state of repair and 19% said their home had been retrofitted, i.e., had a new component or feature installed in order to make better use of renewable energy sources. Most renovations (59%) took place since 2010, with 22% taking place since 2020. Similarly, most retrofits (81%) took place since 2010, with one third (33%) taking place since 2020 (see Figure 15 in Appendix 3 for full details of the years when renovations and retrofits to island homes took place). As shown in Figure 7, home renovation or retrofitting is more common in houses of homeowners and second-home owners, than of renters.

	Homeowners	Renters	Second-home Owners
<b>Home Renovated</b>	57%	33%	67%
<b>Home Retrofitted</b>	21%	6%	23%

**Figure 7: Renovation and Retrofitting of homes**

In summary, with regard to the quality of housing on the islands, difficulties in maintaining homes and keeping them warm, as well as problems with the cost of upkeep, were the main problems identified by survey respondents. In the focus groups, the form and extent of heating was highlighted as variable. While the supply of utilities was rated as good overall by survey respondents, the reliability of broadband and mobile phone connections was highlighted as a particular issue. Overall, the quality of rental properties was a significant concern, not just for renters themselves, but for all islanders. This concern for the quality of rental accommodation was also indicated by the lower percentages of rental accommodation which had been renovated or retrofitted.

3.4 Views on the Availability of Housing

The most significant housing problems on the islands that the survey respondents identified in relation to the availability of housing are shown in Figure 8. These included the lack of availability of houses for sale (86%), too many derelict houses (84%) and a lack of availability of houses for year-round rental (81%). Large numbers of respondents were also concerned about challenges with obtaining planning permission (77%) and limited availability of land for building new houses (71%). Large numbers also stated that there were problems with too many second homes (71%) and too many empty habitable homes (69%), while council-owned land left undeveloped was highlighted as a problem by 43%. For these latter issues (and for the problem of too many derelict houses), lower percentages of respondents stated that they were major problems.

As shown in Appendix 3 (Figure 16), there are many similarities regarding the main problems on housing

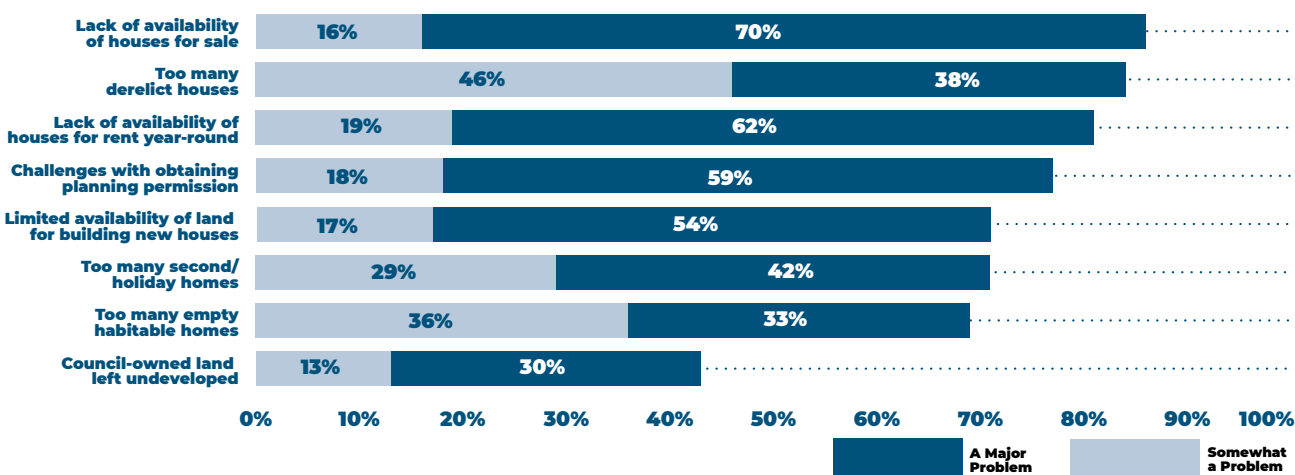


Figure 8: Views on Housing Availability on the Islands

availability identified by homeowners, renters, and second-home owners. As in the case of housing quality, higher percentages of renters consider each of the issues in Figure 8 to be problems, with the exception of planning permission which a greater percentage of homeowners consider as an issue. Greater percentages of full-time residents also consider too many second homes, empty habitable homes, and Council land left undeveloped as problems on the islands.

Of the questions directed at renters only, 86% of renters said they were impacted by the lack of suitable housing for long-term rent (86%), and the length of time on the Council housing waiting list (67%). Several renters in the survey wrote about the precarity they are experiencing in relation to renting on the islands, with some having to leave the islands or facing the prospect of homelessness. A sample of the quotes provided by survey respondents who were renters is as follows:

My landlord may have to sell the property, if this happens, I do not know of any available properties on the island to rent full-time;

Myself and my family have to move off the island this summer as we have to move out of our rented property and there is nowhere to live;

After four years of living on [one of the ‘Big 3’ islands], my [family] and myself have to move out in [the summer], with no help from island officials, the council or government to secure a house... We are staring down the barrel of being homeless.

Overall, 93% of respondents across the three groups are concerned for the future of young people on their island in terms of housing availability and affordability (68% very concerned, 25% somewhat concerned). A



survey respondent reflected on the general lack of available housing, including the lack of development of social housing on their island, and the negative impact this has on individuals, families, and maintaining the island population, stating:

There is a site on the island that has been owned by the council for almost 20 years. This was supposed to be for housing. Nothing has been done and there is a desperate need for housing on the island. Last year, we lost a long-term resident because of housing. They had to move to the mainland. This year, it looks like we are going to lose at least one couple and their two small children, as they have been given notice and there is nowhere for them to go.

The key issues which arose in the focus groups regarding housing availability were as follows:



### 3.4.1 Lack of Available Housing for Sale

Across the focus groups, the shortage of houses to buy on the islands was highlighted. A participant on one of the smaller islands said: 'I guess we have one house for sale every three or four years and it will be even sold before going on to the market.' Another participant on one of the 'Big 3' islands said: 'affordability of houses isn't so much the issue as accessibility of houses, getting the houses onto the market.'

The difficulty in building new houses was also noted. According to the participants, land is rarely available for sale and one participant said: '[i]t tends to be word of mouth...families...give a plot to a son or daughter coming back.' This participant noted the rules associated with planning permission for new builds:

there's one young couple moved back recently, and he was schooled here so they've got planning permission to build a house. If you've not got connections whatsoever to the island...you have to be seven years resident before you can...get the permission.'

Participants also noted the impact of a close-knit community on an island context where housing is constrained. One participant noted: 'because it's a small community there's the usual thing of people kind of selling to people they know.'

### 3.4.2 Lack of Available Houses for Year-round Rent

The lack of availability of houses for year-round rent on the islands was highlighted by a participant who noted that a family member who had been renting was now looking at moving to the mainland. The participant said: '[they don't] want to, but [they've] got no choice.' The shortage of seasonal rental accommodation was also highlighted, with one participant describing how they were obliged to sleep on a mattress on the floor in a room shared with a family member in the home above the family business to accommodate the extra staff needed during the summer months. The impact of Airbnb rentals on the long-term rental housing market was also a concern. One participant noted that 'a few properties that could have possibly come on the market in the past couple of years as long-term rental, they've been used for short-term Airbnbs.'

### 3.4.3 Derelict Houses

The issue of derelict houses was highlighted by many survey respondents and participants in the focus groups. One participant on one of the smaller islands noted: 'we have so many derelict properties on the island that would make beautiful homes.' Derelict houses were particularly noted as problems on one of the 'Big 3' islands: 'we have a lot of derelict houses on this island and they're not used as holiday homes, they're just empty. People have an emotional family attachment to them, but they're just ruins.'

Participants noted a variety of reasons why houses become derelict, including legal issues and probate following a death, people running out money in the process of building or renovating, family connections and sentimental reasons for not wishing for an ancestral home to be sold, or issues around access to land. The impact of prolonged neglect on the degree of dilapidation of derelict homes was a significant concern. One participant observed:

you've got the houses that are derelict because the roof has fallen in but that eight years ago the roof was still on those houses, but nobody is minding them...Because of that, it costs much, much more to bring them back into use.'

Some of the reasons why houses become derelict can also make it difficult to purchase derelict buildings. As a participant argued: 'I'm not really in favour of building new houses but, if you can't get your hands on these houses to bring them back into use, you end up not having a choice.'

### 3.4.4 Lack of Availability of Sheltered Housing for Older Adults

The desire of permanent residents to remain on the island as they aged was highlighted in the focus groups with one participant stating: 'Apart from most of us here getting no younger, we'll leave the island when we die.' Given the absence of sheltered accommodation or care homes on the islands that is, however, not always possible. A participant on one of the smaller islands noted that some inhabitants had gone to care homes on the mainland and expressed concern that '[u]nless you drop dead in your tracks, that's facing most of us. That's a difficulty.'

Another participant on one of the 'Big 3' islands noted the problems regarding the availability of houses suitable for elderly occupants: 'I think there has to be a mix of housing offered because we have quite an elderly population here and a lot of the houses would be very much in the 1950s ... in terms of their build, so not very accessible.' Given that, as we have seen, the population of the islands is comprised of a higher proportion of elderly adults than that of the mainland, this issue of the availability of sheltered accommodation and homes adapted for older occupants was seen as a significant issue.

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### 3.4.5 Issues with Planning Permission

In the focus groups, planning was highlighted as an issue across all islands represented. A resident on one of the 'Big 3' noted: 'planning permission is a big issue... Because either the Planning Authority will shut [the application] down depending on the Authority...or even people from across the way could object to a build even if it's on your own land that you own.'

A resident on one of the smaller islands noted that planning permission did not always seem appropriate to the particular island context. The participant observed:

with planning, they say you've got to have this, and you've got to have that, and you think, well actually that's not going to work on this island, but well that's what the regulations say, that's what you've got to do...I think they need to be more aware and understand what island living is all about.

Island residents did have some sympathy for the conservation demands of living on an island but recognised, too, the impact this had on housing. A resident on one of the smaller islands stated: 'I'm big into nature, so that's not an issue for me, but there are lots of pockets on the island where you're not able to build.'

The frustration of having to re-submit planning applications was highlighted. A resident on one of the 'Big 3' islands stated: '[there's] currently [an application for] a gateway housing scheme [for the island]. [The application is] for planning permission to build a little row of four houses...it's been turned back at the first hurdle, so it's going back in again now.'

Survey respondents also highlighted their concerns about planning. As one respondent stated:

If Bere Island has a healthy population, like it had when I was a child (not that long ago), it will survive and flourish. The key to achieving this is housing. At the moment, there are not enough houses for people to live in and there are too many barriers and restrictions put on planning permission applications.

In summary, with regard to the availability of housing on the islands, the key issues were the lack of houses for sale, too many derelict houses, and lack of availability of houses for year-round rent. The latter leads to precarious and insecure tenancies for those renting and, ultimately, can lead to the loss of potential permanent residents. Challenges with obtaining planning permission was a significant concern and many respondents also felt that the number of second homes and empty, habitable homes were problems on their islands. The lack of sheltered housing also emerged strongly as an issue in the focus groups.

### 3.5 Views on the affordability of homes

As shown in Figure 9, the cost of building, retrofitting, and renovating properties was identified by survey respondents as the most significant issue associated with housing affordability on the islands, with 89% of respondents stating that it was a problem. One issue highlighted in relation to this was the challenge and cost of getting materials and tradespeople to the islands and several survey respondents proposed subsidised ferries.

Logistics of getting materials to the island is a major problem...Tradespeople should be encouraged to come by subsidising their ferry cost... It's hard for trades[people]... Their job is made harder because of our location, and many won't come to work for us even for the extra money we have to pay.

The next most significant issue regarding affordability was the cost of houses for sale, with 77% of respondents identifying this as a problem. Further issues of concern for approximately half of respondents in relation to affordability were the cost of rental properties and the cost of selling land.



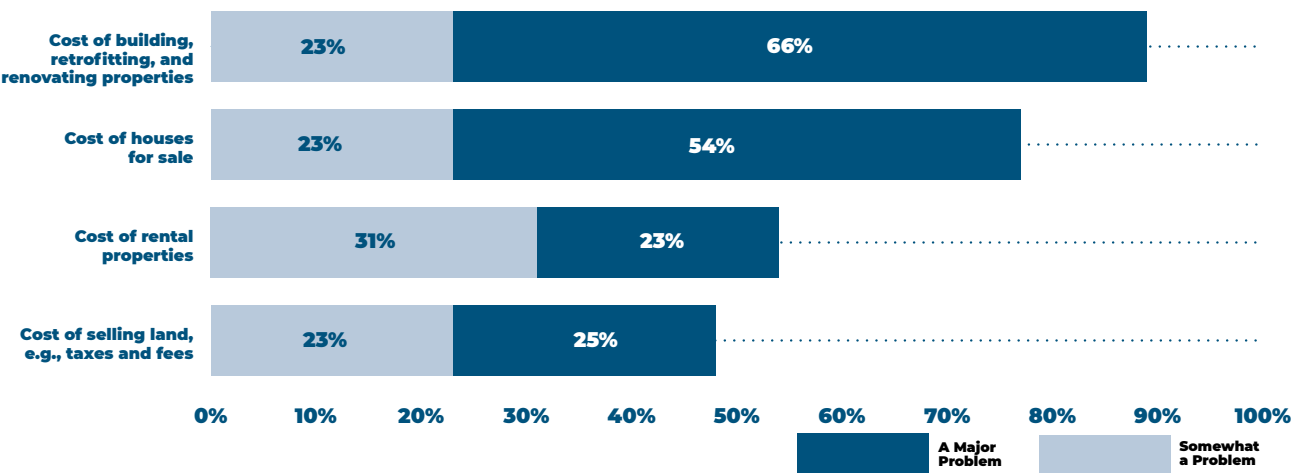


Figure 9: Views on Housing Affordability on the Islands

Higher numbers of renters identified housing affordability (cost of houses for sale and cost of rental properties) as a problem, highlighting their greater vulnerability regarding accessing housing (as shown in Figure 17 in Appendix 3). For the other issues – namely, the cost of building, retrofitting and renovating, and the cost of selling land – higher percentages of homeowners identified these as problems.

Of the questions directed at renters only, renters highlighted the difficulties of breaking out of the precarity of renting given the costs associated with both building new properties and, as highlighted, buying existing houses. The lack of available and affordable houses for sale is a significant issue for renters who are interested in entering the housing market. When renters were asked specifically if they would like to buy or build a house on the island, 75% said yes (26% buy, 23% build, 26% buy or build), while 14% don't know, and just 11% said no. 82% stated that the costs of building, retrofitting, and renovating properties would hinder their ability to buy or build on the island, while 79% identified the cost of properties as a hindrance to buying on the islands. Renters also identified the cost of land and the difficulties of securing mortgage lending for purchasing properties on an island. 70% of renters said the cost of land would hinder their ability to build a house on the island, and 73% stated that challenges in accessing mortgage lending would hinder their ability to buy or build a house on the island (see Figure 18 in Appendix 3).

The key issues which arose regarding affordability of housing in the focus groups were:

3.5.1 Cost of Houses for Sale

One permanent resident on one of the smaller islands noted the prices which houses on their island were being sold for:

There's a house for sale on the island at the moment listed at a million euros. So, you know, the second last house to be sold was €425,000. The third last house to be sold was €350,000. So, unless you have that amount of money in your pocket, you're not going to get existing housing here.

Another resident on one of the 'Big 3' said: 'A property [on their island] sold...for somewhere between €350,000 and €400,000 which is huge money, especially when our cost of living is much higher than somebody on the mainland.' A participant on another of the 'Big 3' islands highlighted that it was not simply the prices of the houses themselves that must be considered, but the additional costs of renovation, saying: '[a] ruin... [was sold for] €200,000 and...you've got...to spend hundreds of thousands on it.' This was reiterated by another participant on one of the smaller islands who observed: 'there's [a house on the island], it's €350,000 with some land but ...it's got to be updated [i.e., renovated]. So, you've got to have the money to do it...you have to have the money to move here.'

The affordability of homes was not only a concern for full-time residents; it was also an issue for second generation second-home owners who wished to buy their own second homes on the island. One second-home owner on one of the smaller islands stated that they were also priced out of the housing market on their island: 'I would really say it [housing] is not accessible at all...We are now going to a new generation of really wealthy people buying... we're kind of becoming like the South of France.' This participant discussed a house that was due to go up for sale on their island following a death, observing: 'the price is going to be so [high] that the locals won't be able to buy it. For sure, young people won't be able to buy it. But even children of current second-home owners looking for it won't be able to [buy it].'

Participants were also concerned that these house prices often meant that it was impossible for those providing essential services crucial to the sustainability of island living – such as teachers or nurses – to afford to live on the islands.

**RIISING HOUSE  
PRICES MAKE IT  
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TO LIVE ON ISLANDS,  
WITH KNOCK-ON  
EFFECTS FOR THE  
COMMUNITY.**

### 3.5.2 Cost of Building, Retrofitting and Renovating

Many participants in the focus groups highlighted the costs associated with building on an island, arguing: 'there is a need for recognition that the cost of doing anything on an island is higher than what it would be on the mainland.' One participant noted it was generally older properties requiring renovation which came up for sale or rent: 'any properties that would be coming up for possible like rent...or for purchase would generally... need quite a bit of work.' As many participants highlighted, this caused problems given the complexity of getting equipment and labour on to the island. One participant noted:

[j]ust getting some repairs on our own house has been a challenge ... so having any building work done is really tricky to get all the equipment over. You've got to get the barge and suchlike.'

The difficulty in getting people who were willing to undertake building jobs on the islands was also highlighted. One participant on Oilean Chléire, the furthest island from the mainland, noted:

it's incredibly difficult to get workers out here because they are so put off that they have to spend a whole day with you...and then, generally, they need a night's accommodation...Then the amount of stuff that they're bringing to make sure they have everything they need.

The complexity involved in building on an island means that the work on individual projects takes longer. One participant observed: 'we ended up buying a ruin and we have been renovating it for seven years.' Participants were also concerned about the current rise in inflation rates that is further increasing costs. This led one participant to argue that islanders needed to be trained so they could undertake building work for themselves, proposing:

maybe educate people in how to do stuff, how to build or how to renovate your house and things like that because...most of it is labour you could do ... yourself.

### 3.5.3 Cost of Properties to Rent

Although as highlighted previously there were no participants in the focus groups who rented their homes, the cost of rental properties was nonetheless highlighted by participants who noted the limitations high rents placed on the arrival of newcomers to the islands. One participant on one of the 'Big 3' said:

rental properties are ... an issue and having long-term rental opportunities. Not everyone wants to buy a house...some people just want to come for a couple of years and not long-term.

A participant on one of the smaller islands noted the inflated prices and poor quality of rental accommodation on their island: ‘they’re [houses that are rented out] not of great standard and the price for rental is extortionate.’ Following a discussion of the relative incomes available for long-term rental as opposed to short-term Airbnb rentals, one participant argued: ‘I think there needs to be...[an] incentive for people to rent long-term to people.’

In summary, with regard to affordability of housing, the main issue was the cost of building, retrofitting and renovating properties on the islands. This was due to the expense of transporting equipment and materials to the islands. The extra logistical considerations involved in building work on islands considerably increased costs. The cost of houses for sale and of rents, as well as the cost of selling land, were also highlighted. The high costs of building and of land made it particularly difficult for renters to escape the precarity of their situations, as did their difficulties in obtaining mortgages to buy island properties.

3.6 Other Issues that Impact Island Sustainability

In relation to concerns about other issues that impact island sustainability, Figure 10 shows that there were high levels of concern about the ageing population (95%), depopulation (94%), the lack of island-based and remote working employment opportunities (87%), broadband connectivity and speed (84%), and access to services (84%). Substantial percentages of respondents were also concerned about not having a school on the island (65%) and access to public transport (63%).

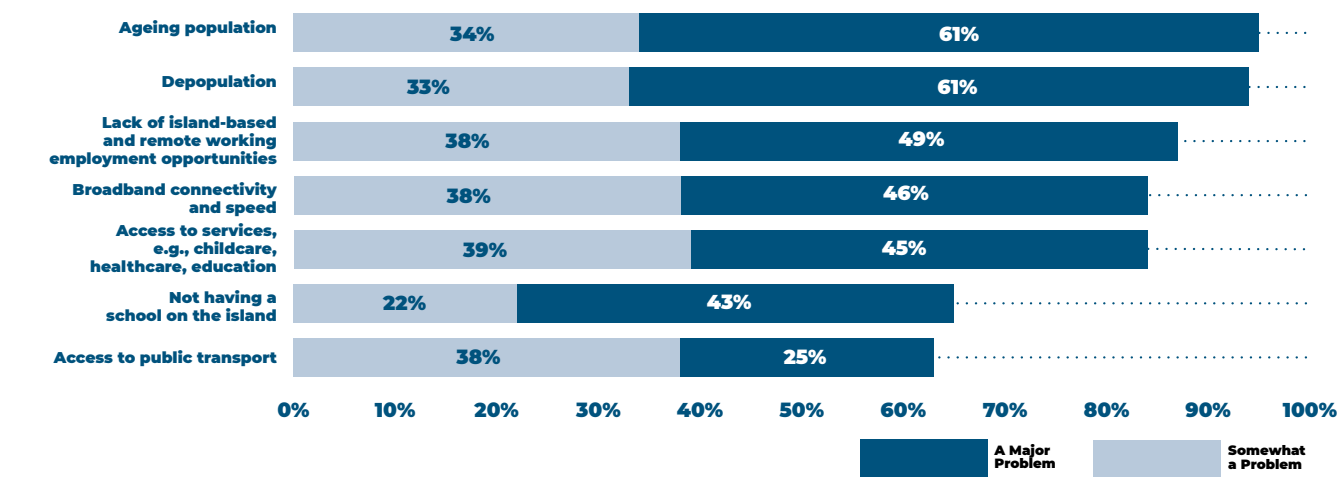


Figure 10: Concern about Other Issues that Impact Sustainability on the Islands





There were many commonalities in concerns among the island residents across homeowners, renters, and second-home owners, particularly about the ageing population on the islands. Higher percentages of full-time residents were very concerned about the lack of island-based and remote working employment opportunities, access to services, and not having a school on the island.

Those who were renting were particularly concerned about not having a school on the island. While there were similar proportions of households with children across the three groups in the survey, given their age profile, renters may have had younger children and, hence, may have been more directly affected by access to schooling. One of the concerns expressed by several respondents in open questions in the survey was the affordability of ferry transport:

I would have concerns about future ...ferry access to the mainland. Concerns re cost, potential cost to island children, already costing €50 a week to bring children to and from school. If children are charged, [the] cost would be unaffordable and make living on the island for families not possible. Also, there is a real danger that future ferries may be reduced thus making it impossible for working people to be able to commute to and from the island. These issues need to be rectified and secured now for the future.

The main themes emerging from the focus groups regarding island sustainability were:

### 3.6.1 Ageing Population

The concern regarding the availability of housing suitable for an ageing population was discussed in the focus groups and has been highlighted in Section 3.4.4. There was also the issue of the specific healthcare which older adults require, and the difficulties presented by island living in this regard. One participant who cared for their elderly mother noted the travel required for medical appointments which were often located in hospitals in regional cities on the mainland. This involved an overnight stay on the mainland, which was a long, expensive journey for older adults.

It was also noted that the lack of care facilities on the islands had a knock-on effect on the already stretched health facilities on the mainland. One participant argued:

some people may be living on their own, they might not be able to manage on their own and the only option is to go into this hospital [on the mainland], which then, it's trying to get a bed there. Whereas if there was some kind of sheltered accommodation, they could be based here, you know, have someone kind of just monitoring – [an] overnight caretaker, some medical staff...to keep people in their own home...on the island. That's one thing they hate, I know - a lot of the older people - is having to leave.

### 3.6.2 Broadband Access and Remote Working

As described in Section 3.3.3, lower percentages of respondents in the survey said their homes had a reliable supply of broadband (46%) compared to other services. Just 23% of respondents said that broadband on the islands fully met their needs, 42% stated that it somewhat met their needs, and 35% that it did not meet their needs at all.

The ongoing need for good quality broadband was also discussed in the focus groups<sup>42</sup>. One participant noted that, particularly since COVID, their freedom to work remotely had increased, but their ability to spend more time on the island depended upon the quality of broadband connectivity. They said:

the place where I work doesn't depend on where I stay, and this has increased after... COVID... so that would be no issue for me to go on the island as long as we have broadband.'

**HOUSING IS THE KEY  
TO GENERATING AND  
SUSTAINING ISLAND  
LIFE ACCORDING  
TO FOCUS GROUP  
PARTICIPANTS.**

<sup>42</sup> It should be noted that the quality of broadband during the focus groups was average, with time delays which, at times, interrupted the flow of the discussion and made it difficult to hear.

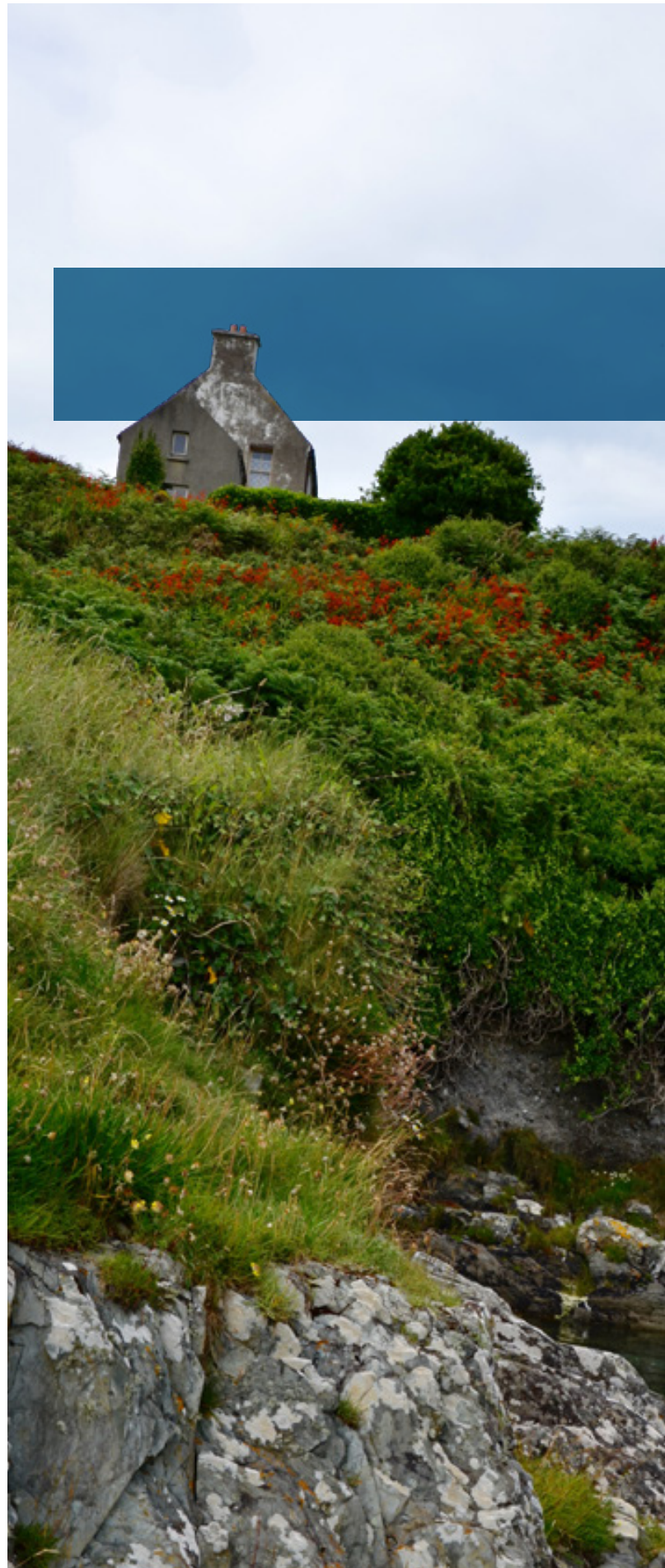
The impact of COVID and remote working on the use of second homes on the islands was also highlighted, with one participant noting that the pandemic had caused a number of second-home owners to move to the island on a more permanent basis: 'there are a few people...who moved over during COVID and they are working from home – office is London, they were in the UK but their working location is now [the island].'

One participant on one of the 'Big 3' islands found that internet access was good, but weather-dependent: '[m]ost of us on the island have no problem with internet connectivity because if we're in line of sight to the mainland, we can get internet access.' The potential disruption of broadband connectivity due to adverse weather was highlighted by a participant on one of the smaller islands, who observed: 'you need to have a very good internet service, and, in the stormy weather, we lose our power quite regularly so that would interfere with remote work on this island.'

The ongoing work in this area being carried out by the government was highlighted by focus group participants. One participant on one of the smaller islands noted: 'I heard we will have fibre coming at the end of the year. So that would...make it an easy place to go.' A participant on the 'Big 3' noted, however, that broadband connectivity, without housing, will not be enough to attract people to live and work on the islands. They observed:

**I think the island is trying really, really hard to make it easy for people to be here but in the absence of houses...you're still not going to get people to come.'**

In summary, with regard to issues related to sustainability on the islands, apart from housing, the island's ageing population and concerns for depopulation were the two major issues. Employment was also crucial and closely linked to this was access to broadband to facilitate opportunities for remote, island-based work. Access to other services, such as childcare, healthcare and education were also key issues, as were having a school on the island and public transport.



## 3.7 Policy options and housing solutions for the islands

### 3.7.1 Support for Housing Policy Options on the Islands

Several policy options for the islands were formulated in the participatory process of constructing the questionnaire; as shown in Figure 11, these received significant support from survey respondents. 90% of survey respondents supported increased grant aid for the conversion of derelict, disused and substandard houses, with one respondent stating:

The focus should be on improving the existing housing stock to make ...[it] more energy-efficient and comfortable, with better insulation and quality of build. Derelict buildings should be the first source of new housing rather than new builds.

Large numbers of residents supported alternative options, other than renting to the Council, for derelict homes converted using grant aid (78%), gateway housing (71%), and a rural resettlement fund (65%). More than half supported compulsory purchase of long-term derelict houses and higher taxation of derelict homes with taxation allocated to the islands, while less than half of respondents supported the other policy options of reservation of houses for sale<sup>43</sup>, more tourist accommodation, and higher taxation of second homes.

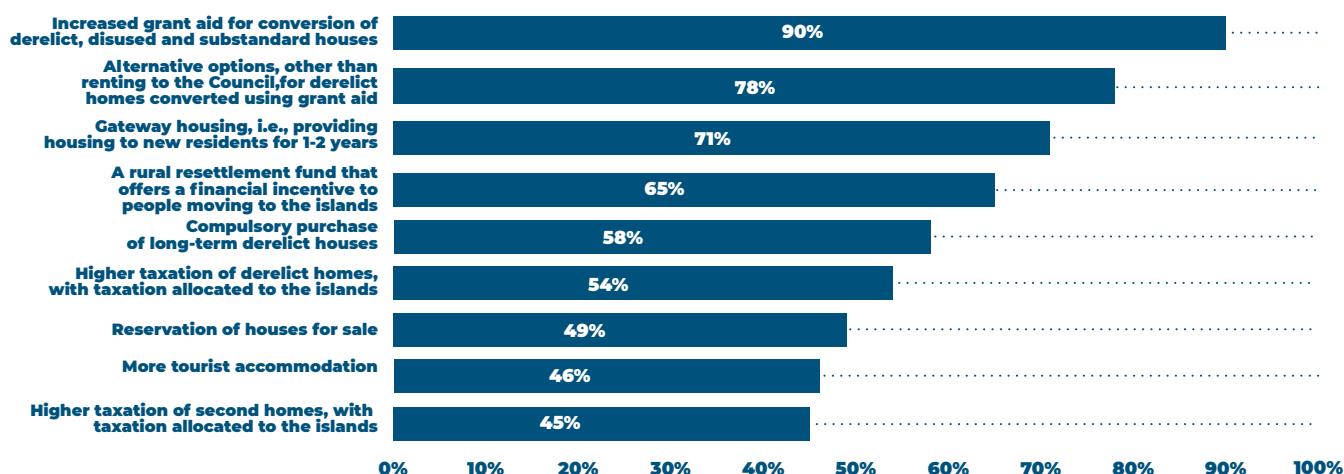


Figure 11: Support for Housing Policy Options on the Islands

Overall, there was a high degree of agreement between homeowners, second-home owners and renters about policies which focus on increased funding for the conversion of derelict, disused and substandard housing, and alternative options for derelict homes converted using grant aid, as well as gateway housing, the need for a rural resettlement fund for attracting people to the islands, and the compulsory purchase of long-term derelict homes. There is a far higher level of support among renters for options favouring higher taxation - both of derelict homes and second-home owners - and of the reservation of houses for sale for permanent residents, than that found among either homeowners or second-home owners.

<sup>43</sup> The potential for houses to be 'reserved' and sold at lower prices to existing island residents and their offspring relates to an idea that was referenced by the participatory research group and the research advisory group in the current research, though not covered in the available literature. Given its emergence in discussions with participants and research partners, it was included as a survey question. The closest example to the idea in the literature was on the Danish islands where specific areas of islands are 'reserved' for permanent residents, rather than second-home owners. This is explored in Section 2.3.3 on second homes.



The main views emerging from the focus groups on housing policy on the islands were as follows:

### **3.7.2 Increase of Government Grants for Building and Renovation Work on the Islands**

Given the substantially higher costs for building work on islands highlighted in section 3.5.2, participants argued that government grants for building and renovation work on the islands need to be increased: '[t]here are government grants [so] that you can renovate your house...it's not enough, it wouldn't go near some of these old stone houses.' Another participant highlighted the need for 'a proper Rent to Improve Scheme [Repair and Leasing Scheme]. Raising the €60,000 grants to maybe €100,000 or more.'

### **3.7.3 Proactive Government Intervention to Develop Housing and Attract People to the Islands**

Participants highlighted the need for the County Council to develop Council-owned land on the islands. A full-time resident on one of the smaller islands argued: 'the County Council should build four houses on the land they own.' It was also felt that the government could do more to attract people to live on the islands. One full-time resident argued: 'I think government support [in] having a promotion to attract people to live on the islands...would be very important.'

The need for gateway housing was emphasised, with another participant observing: 'it's very hard [for] anyone coming here just to look for somewhere if they want to try a year living here. There's nothing to be had.' A further participant said: 'gateway housing, to me, [is] the same as affordable housing. It enables the family to get into the island and to occupy it and to work here.' It was recognised, however, that gateway housing was potentially unworkable within the context of the current housing shortage. One participant argued: 'Gateway housing I think would be incredible to have...The problem is...you can have all the gateway housing you want, where are they going to go after their time period?'

### **3.7.4 Greater Regulation of the Rental Market on the Islands**

The need for more regulation of the rental market was highlighted, particularly with regard to Airbnb. As highlighted in Sections 3.4.2 and 3.5.3, participants expressed concern that Airbnb rentals were contributing to a shortage of rental accommodation. However, there was also recognition that second-home owners could not be expected to provide a solution to the lack of long-term rental accommodation: 'most people who have a second home here, they want to use them themselves in the summer.'

### **3.7.5 Taxation**

There was general consensus on the need for local taxes which were spent directly on the island. One participant stated:

we pay a property tax, but my road is not maintained. I do that. We have no rubbish collection. I do that. I suppose I could call the Garda, but it would take [them] a long time to get over. So, what am I paying for? It's not being ploughed back into the island. It goes to the general parts. It would be great if it went into a pot for the island.

There was, however, less agreement on how these taxes should be generated. Some participants argued that derelict houses should be taxed to encourage owners to sell to those who could afford to renovate them. One participant noted:

we have a lot of derelict houses on this island, and they're not used as holiday homes, they're just empty...if there was a tax on derelict properties, it would force these people, if it started costing them money, they would put them on the market pretty quick.

In line with the survey results, views on the higher taxation of second homes were divided in the focus groups – mainly due to the concern that such a solution could contribute to divisiveness in the community and potentially impact on the community spirit so central to island life. It should also be borne in mind that, as highlighted, some of the full-time residents who took part in the focus groups had initially visited the island through second-home ownership (either their own or their family's) so they were reluctant to penalise second-home owners; they also recognised the value of second-home ownership in leading to full-time residency, entrepreneurship and variety in island living.

Participants in the focus groups argued that second-home owners should not be treated as a homogenous group and that any form of taxation would need to incorporate distinguishing criteria. This could include the length of time spent on the island with higher taxation for those homes which were vacant for longer. One participant highlighted the sensitivity of the issue, however, arguing: 'incentivise, depending on however long you spend here, you pay less...[but] would it cause more friction amongst communities?'

### 3.7.6 Views on National and Regional Policy Formation in Relation to the Islands

There was a general lack of satisfaction with the way in which policy formation for the islands is currently being conducted, with island residents feeling their particular needs were being neglected in national policy. One participant stated:

The government made a commitment to include an island policy in every policy...[T]hat's just lip service...They don't put any thought into it...for housing and for renovation...all those policies that come out...they just don't fit with what's going on the island.

Another participant argued that, similar to other rural areas, 'the national plan does not take account of what we need on islands' given the smaller populations involved. This led to the feeling among participants that their issues were disregarded. One participant noted:

you need to get yourself identified as a population hub to actually attract investment... we're never going to have that population size but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't be looked after as well.

Similar viewpoints were expressed in the survey with one respondent stating: '[i]slands are unique communities with individual ones having different needs. Yet this is ignored by our governing bodies, and we are treated the same as mainland. This is not always successful.'



### 3.7.7 Critical Mass of Populations on the Islands

Participants highlighted the need for decisions around optimal population numbers to be considered in conjunction with housing policy. A participant on one of the 'Big 3' islands argued:

it's this chicken and egg thing...we could do with more people on this island. We are not at capacity yet, I don't think. I don't think we should ever go to the levels...of 500/600 people, I don't think that's sustainable on the island. But if we did have more houses...[then] you could actually encourage people to come in and try island living.

In summary, the most popular policy responses to the housing crisis on the islands among those island residents who participated in the survey were increased grant aid for conversion of derelict, disused and substandard houses, and options other than the leasing of renovated derelict properties back to the Council. Participants in the focus groups strongly urged that government funding for renovations of derelict buildings on the islands be significantly increased. This is considered essential given the escalating costs of building due to rising inflation, the older housing stock on the islands, and the significant additional costs of renovating properties on islands. Gateway housing was also widely supported – though with a recognition of a need for housing at the end of the trial period – as were increased government incentives to attract people to the islands. The requirement for greater consultation with island residents and target population numbers to establish the critical mass of populations and scale of the housing need for each of the islands were emphasised in the focus groups.

### 3.8 Support for Housing Developments on the Islands

Finally, survey participants were asked which housing developments they would support on the islands. As Figure 12 shows, 94% of respondents supported the conversion of derelict buildings, 77% supported housing for the elderly, 68% supported social and affordable housing provided by Cork County Council or Approved Housing Bodies, and 67% supported community-owned/co-operative housing schemes and plots for self-build. Just over half of participants (51%) supported small-scale private developments of new houses.

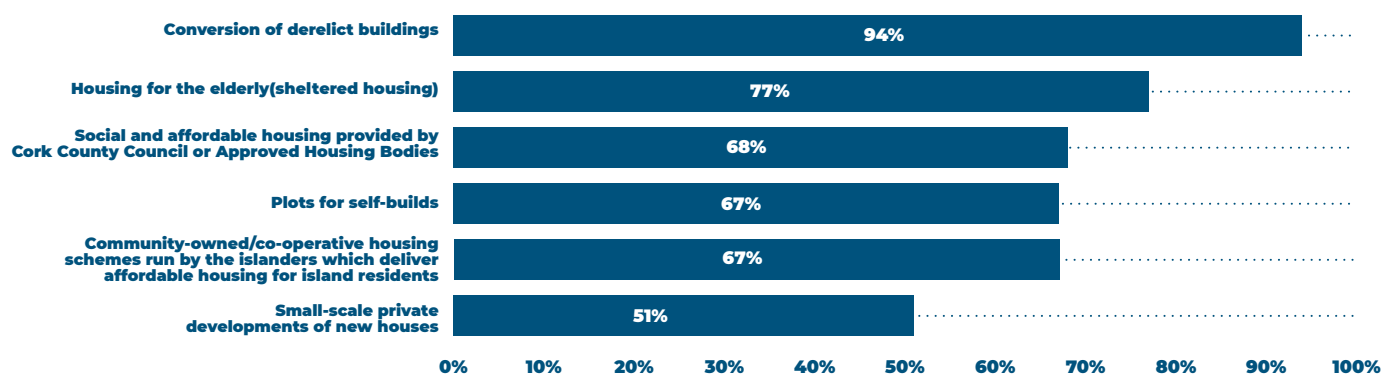


Figure 12: Support for Housing Developments on the Islands



There were many similarities in the levels of support for housing developments across the residents on the West Cork islands, with the conversion of derelict buildings, housing for the elderly, and community-owned/co-operative housing schemes supported by a strong majority of homeowners, renters and second-home owners. High percentages of homeowners and renters also supported social and affordable housing and plots for self-builds. The key themes which arose in the focus groups regarding housing developments were as follows:

### 3.8.1 Conversion of Derelict Buildings

The challenges of converting derelict buildings were widely discussed and were associated with many of the same constraints as other building and renovation work documented in section 3.5.2. One participant on one of the 'Big 3' islands noted the difficulties with converting derelict houses on their island given the problems with finding builders to do the work, stating:

I have a second house that is a derelict house on the island because I haven't been able to renovate it and even though it's my intention to renovate it, when I can finally get someone to come in and do some work for me.

Another resident reflected on the challenges they face in renovating properties to ensure they are of an adequate standard, highlighting the need for greater financial support, as proposed in section 3.7.2:

there's not enough supports for people with derelict properties to actually do much with them. Because I've got a couple of derelict...they're houses, but...there's not enough supports for me to... turn [them] into a liveable housing situation.

The need for clear communication of policy on derelict housing on the islands was also highlighted. This was often expressed as speculation or rumour rather than factual certainty. One participant from one of the smaller islands noted:

I don't know whether it's true or not, but the rumours were that because we have so many derelict homes that you couldn't get planning permission to [do] anything else unless these houses were being renovated.

### 3.8.2 Importance of a Mixture of Housing on the Islands

Participants in the focus groups argued that housing was the key to generating and sustaining island life. One said: 'I think it would be a matter of...getting the housing here up to scratch and getting more people to come and live on the island and that will bring more of the infrastructure that's needed to support jobs.' The need for a mixture of housing required to support a diverse community was highlighted. One participant argued:

what you have is a mix and you want to keep it a mix. You want to keep it...locals, blow-ins, blow-ins from different age groups, different socio-economic backgrounds...[T]hat gives you...a much better, more resilient kind of community if you have variety.

Participants highlighted the need for a variety of housing options, particularly those that are appropriate for young families. A participant on one of the 'Big 3' noted: 'We have a couple of young families that are living in...accommodation that in my own opinion, shouldn't be suitable for them. They should be in better housing scenarios...one of them is a holiday let.'

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**WHAT YOU HAVE IS A MIX AND YOU WANT TO KEEP IT A MIX. YOU WANT TO KEEP IT...LOCALS, BLOW-INS, BLOW-INS FROM DIFFERENT AGE GROUPS, DIFFERENT SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS...THAT GIVES YOU...A MUCH BETTER, MORE RESILIENT KIND OF COMMUNITY IF YOU HAVE VARIETY.**

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This need for housing for young families was also emphasised by another participant who urged the need for social and affordable housing in this regard, saying:

‘there’s young families here, island families especially, for whatever reason they can’t live in the family home and it’s simple - they want to stay on the island but there’s nowhere for them to live.’

Another participant on one of the small islands noted that young families require particular services, as well as housing, saying:

‘It would be lovely to have children here...That new fresh blood and energy would be a real good injection...[but]we have no school here and the ferry service, as it stands at the moment, wouldn’t support school runs.’

### 3.8.3 Sheltered Housing for Older People

There was strong support in the focus groups for sheltered accommodation on the islands. One participant argued:

if there was some kind of sheltered housing here, [older people] wouldn’t have to leave the island... [S]ome people might be living on their own, they might not be able to manage on their own and the only option is to go into [a hospital on the mainland].

Another participant favoured a mixed living arrangement with ‘social housing for families and sheltered accommodation in the same complex’ so that ‘the younger people will be looking out for the older people.’

### 3.8.4 Representation and Community-run Housing Associations

Participants felt there was a need for an independent Housing Association, particularly with regard to derelict housing. One participant proposed: ‘a housing association could, if they contacted people, provide legal assistance [with derelict houses] if someone wanted to sell and...get probate settled or whatever.’ A further participant expressed concern that their development group was under-resourced, stating: ‘we have a Development Society [but]...they’re really being stretched thin...and that means that...housing isn’t a focus.’

The issue of representation in such a community-run housing association was a central theme in many of the focus groups. This related to how both permanent and second-home island residents would be represented on such bodies. A full-time resident on one of the ‘Big 3’ islands noted: ‘...the persons involved are going to have one particular viewpoint. Is it going to be what’s best for the island?’ A second-home owner also expressed concern for how their views would be represented in such a body: ‘Who has a voice or no voice? And if I have a voice, then how is it organised that my voice is being heard just as my neighbour’s is?’

Given their concerns for the potential for partiality due to the small communities characteristic of islands, most focus group participants argued for the need for an independent multi-agency association to develop housing solutions for the islands. Most also viewed the Council as having a key role in this. As one participant noted, this could include: ‘sustainability architects...and the Local Authority, as well as any relevant government departments or community development [representatives].’ One participant, however – an island resident who had lived on their island all their life – argued against this, asserting the need for island residents to maintain their autonomy to make decisions about their own islands. Another full-time resident who had also grown up on the island and returned after several years away challenged this, arguing: ‘we can’t do it on our own.’

It is clear from the focus groups that, as it is in many communities, the issue of representation is a complex one on the islands. Consultation with island residents, to ensure the inclusion of the diversity of their views in policy formation around housing on the islands, is central to ensuring the successful implementation of recommendations in this report. Steps to ensure inclusion need to be very carefully considered.

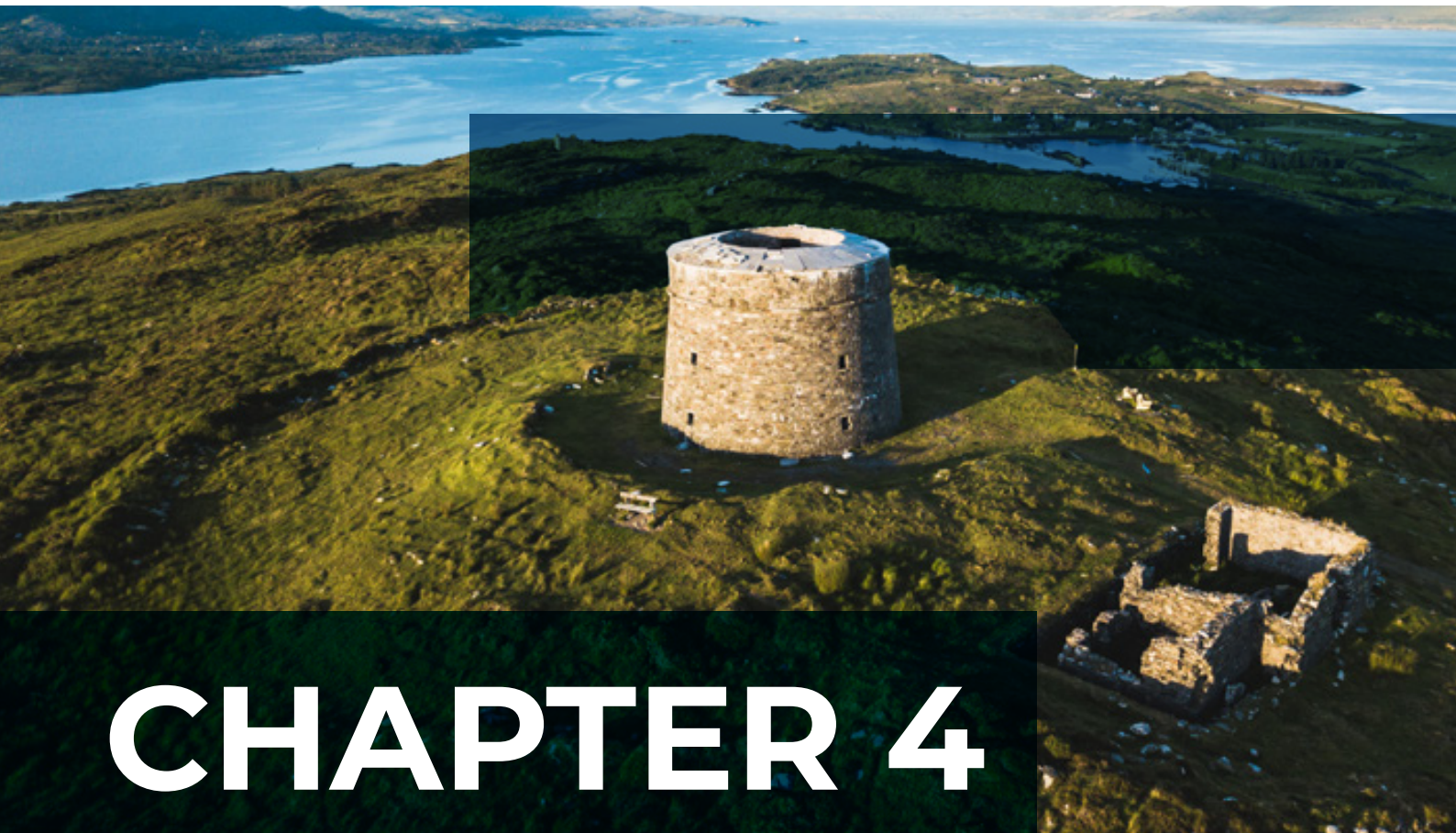
In summary, the housing developments which received the most support were the conversion of derelict buildings (which received almost universal support in the survey – 94% of respondents), housing for older adults, social and affordable housing, community-owned/co-operative housing schemes, and plots for self-build. In the focus groups, the need for a mixture of housing was highlighted, as well as the urgent requirement for a multi-agency housing association.



“

**Participants’ appreciation of their islands, their connection to them, and their desire and determination to remain on them is clear.**





# CHAPTER 4

## CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 The Housing Crisis on the West Cork Islands

This report has been compiled during a housing crisis which, prior to the emergence of COVID-19, was being described as a national emergency.<sup>44</sup> Hearne (2020, p.2) describes the housing crisis in Ireland as one which is 'without end for many people locked out of affordable, secure, high-quality and environmentally sustainable housing'. On the West Cork islands, this crisis is occurring in small communities in contexts already beset by concerns of permanent depopulation. Unlike the mainland, if the housing situation on the islands is not resolved, there is the risk of the loss of entire island communities, and with them the vital role of the islands to Ireland's heritage, culture and economy. The government's NDP (2021-2030) (2021, p.70) recognises that '[o]ur coastal islands are an integral part of the state's heritage.'<sup>45</sup> Within this context, the actions of policymakers and planners in relation to the Irish islands have never been more critical. The new National Policy for the Islands is eagerly awaited. Its separation from the national Housing for All policy appears to begin to recognise the specific threat of the more general housing crisis to the ongoing sustainability of life on the offshore islands and this is welcomed.

The current report has been informed by the voices of West Cork island residents throughout – through an advisory group which managed the survey distribution and provided guidance throughout the research process; a participatory research group which designed the survey that was central to the research; focus group participants who gave up their time to discuss their views on housing and island sustainability; and the close to half of all islanders over the age of 18 on the seven islands who completed the survey.

<sup>44</sup> Taoiseach Leo Varadkar described it as such in 2018 (<https://www.thejournal.ie/taoiseach-homelessness-3930398-Mar2018/>). In 2021, Taoiseach Michael Martin described it as a social emergency (<https://www.gov.ie/en/speech/105d4-speech-by-the-taoiseach-micheal-martin-at-the-launch-of-housing-for-all/>).

<sup>45</sup> This is reiterated in the RDP (2021, p.86) which states '[t]he inhabited offshore islands are an integral part of the fabric of rural Ireland and contribute to our economy, culture and heritage.'

This engagement highlights the credibility of this report's recommendations, and it is strongly urged that they are implemented as part of government policy in relation to sustaining full-time populations on the West Cork islands.

## **4.2 Tackling the Housing Crisis on the West Cork Islands: the Availability, Affordability and Quality of Housing**

The fundamental issues with housing on the seven West Cork islands relate to a) the limited availability of houses to buy and/or land to build them on, and year-round accommodation to rent; b) the costs of housing – the price of houses for sale, of labour, materials and the cost of buying and selling land, as well as the high costs of rent; and c) the quality of island housing stock. The situation with regard to housing on the West Cork islands has significant implications for their communities. It not only means that they are being priced out of the ability to buy or build their own homes and sustain their families on the islands; it has also limited their potential to benefit from an emerging counter-urbanisation trend and post-COVID housing boom witnessed on many islands worldwide. This inability, due to the housing shortage, to attract and retain a full-time population has consequences for the islands in terms of their services, cultural life and ongoing development.

Within the constraints associated with housing more generally, this research highlights the particularly precarious plight of renters on the islands. This is due to several factors, including the unavailability of year-round rental accommodation, the quality of housing, and the absence of security of tenure or formal rental agreements for tenants. The findings suggest the need for existing rental regulations to be more strictly enforced on the islands. Given the shortage of rental accommodation, the survey and focus groups highlighted that people are being obliged to leave the islands who would otherwise have stayed, including those who may have offered services essential to the islands' longer-term sustainability. The costs of buying or building on the islands, and the lack of long-term rental accommodation, make it extremely challenging not only for newcomers, but also for the next generation of island residents, to settle on the islands. In a context where depopulation is a significant concern, this situation is a particular risk to the sustainability of island living.

The report indicates that the housing crisis does not simply relate to those seeking to build new lives on the islands. Many existing full-time residents are living in poor quality, older houses which are difficult to maintain and heat. These issues are exacerbated by the harshness of the island climate, which is likely to become more pronounced with climate change. This renders the need for home maintenance and retrofitting for energy efficiency on the islands as a major priority, especially given the increased risk of fuel poverty due to increases in the cost of living and energy prices. The research highlights the particular costs associated with repair and building work on the islands. These were previously estimated to be 40% higher than on the mainland but, given current and projected inflation rates, they are now likely to be much higher. This means that existing funding to assist with renovation, retrofitting, and maintenance on the islands is insufficient and needs to be increased.

The issue of derelict houses emerges strongly as an area for immediate policy focus. The prevalence of derelict houses on the islands in a context defined by high costs of property, land and building work, as well as the complexities involved in obtaining planning permission highlighted by many in the research, means that bringing as many derelict homes as possible back into habitable condition is crucial. This report highlights that the issues leading to dereliction are varied and often complex; hence, there is a need for a specific role in the Council, similar to the Empty Homes Officers on the Scottish islands (described in Section 2.3.2). On the Irish islands, this Officer could trace and contact owners of derelict houses, assist them with legal issues related to title or probate, support them in accessing funding for repair work to bring their property back into use, offer guidance with planning issues and, where appropriate, help with contacts to arrange the sale of their properties. The research also calls for a review of the government's Repair and Leasing scheme, both in relation to the current ceiling of the funding which is felt to be too low, and the leasing arrangement with the Council which survey respondents felt needed to be revised. The new Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant Scheme – Croí Cónaithe (Townns) Fund – launched in summer 2022 to refurbish vacant properties for occupation as principal private residences, could also be extended to the islands. It is, however, recognised that the funding available will need to be increased given the particular costs involved in such renovation work in the context of the islands.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Eligible towns and villages include those with a population of over 400 people. While individual island population figures are below this, the Scheme (2022, p.7) states that is intended that the Croí Cónaithe (Townns) Fund will also 'apply to some smaller villages, which may not be defined as villages for the purposes of the CSO Census mapping but with sufficient provision of services and amenities'.



Second only to the need for the conversion of derelict buildings, there is significant support for sheltered housing. Given the higher proportion of older adults which comprise island populations when compared to the mainland, this concern for the islands' older residents is not surprising. O'Sullivan et al. (2021, p.27) note that moving from their homes and communities is traumatic for older adults living in rural areas on the mainland; to have to move off an island to the mainland is likely to be particularly distressing. There is also a need to ensure that the existing housing of older adults is modified so that older residents can remain in their homes for as long as possible. Related to this, older residents need to be supported with maintaining their homes, given the more general issues with the cost and availability of tradespeople to carry out home maintenance on the islands.

The findings also suggest that a variety of housing options, which supports the development of a diverse population, is key to the resilience of island communities. Children and young families are seen as essential to the continuity and vibrancy of island life; yet many of these families, and other individuals and households committed to the islands, are priced out of the existing island housing market. Investment in social and affordable housing and long-term rental accommodation is essential to meet their needs and those of other potential full-time residents. Almost half of survey respondents noted undeveloped Council land on their islands. This should be urgently investigated as a means to addressing the dearth of social and affordable housing and sheltered accommodation on the islands.

Another area which emerged strongly in the research was the issue of second homes. Both the literature and the research findings highlight the complexity of the issue in terms of whether they represent a drain on, or a boost to, local communities and economies. A large proportion of survey respondents (71%) believe that there are too many second homes on their islands. The focus groups also suggest, however, that second-homes can, at times, serve as a form of gateway housing, allowing potential inhabitants to experience island life before committing longer-term. Over half of second-home owners who took part in the survey stated that, subject to access to broadband and services as they age, they would consider moving permanently to their islands. This potential for some second-home owners to eventually settle full-time on the islands does not, of course, mitigate the concern with population decline in the immediate present. The crucial question is whether the access to housing on the islands for the purpose of second homes – even dwellings which are renovated for this purpose – is likely to have a detrimental impact on the sustainability of full-time populations on the islands. This does not seek to scapegoat existing second-home owners whose love for the islands and contribution to the diversity of the community emerged strongly in the research.





It is suggested that, given the recognised complexity of the issue of second homes, the situation on the West Cork islands requires a greater focus on the individual contexts of the islands. The most practical starting point would be to establish the numbers of second homes on each island as a proportion of total housing stock. This work should form part of a wider housing audit which should also involve establishing the numbers of derelict homes (and their state of repair), rental properties and houses with full-time residents (including an assessment of their quality and energy efficiency) on each island.

The research also highlights support for a multi-agency approach to tackling the housing crisis, one in which island residents themselves are centrally involved through a representative, well-resourced, voluntary or cooperative Housing Association. This has been highlighted in several consultations with island residents, including the HSW report (2020, p.14) and the WCIIDS (2010, p.38). The focus group findings suggest that the issue of representation – who is involved and how they are engaged with, both in relation to full-time residents and second-home owners – is crucial to the success of such a venture. The need for planners to play a more active role in visiting the islands, communicating policy and seeking to understand the reality of the specific island contexts, was also indicated.

### 4.3 Other Recommendations for Sustaining the West Cork Islands

The findings highlight other key policy areas, along with housing, that respondents felt to be significant in sustaining island populations. Employment was seen as crucial. Linked to this, access to broadband was regarded as central to allowing islanders to avail of opportunities for remote working which would broaden their employment options. This is particularly important given the need to diversify from, or supplement, the traditional island occupations, such as fishing and farming, or to contribute to other part-time or seasonal incomes. Regular, subsidised ferry crossings were also seen as key, not only for those needing to access healthcare and other services on the mainland or to commute to the mainland for work, but also for schoolchildren who attend school on the mainland. This highlights the importance of a holistic strategy which targets particular groups through inter-departmental planning across a number of key policy areas.

It was felt that the government should be more proactive role in incentivising people to live on the islands through, for instance, a rural resettlement scheme aimed specifically at promoting the West Cork islands as places to live full-time. It is important, however, before such promotion work is undertaken that target population numbers for the islands are defined. Though expected, these were not included in the latest Cork County Development Plan (2022). While gateway housing was a popular housing policy option for survey respondents, it was recognised in the focus groups that gateway housing, in the absence of accommodation to move into, if desired, at the end of the trial period, is an ineffective solution to sustaining an island's population longer-term.

The issue of higher taxation for derelict and second homes, with the revenue allocated to the islands, was also a focus of the research and received mixed support. There was a perception in the focus groups that the taxes of island residents were being absorbed into national projects, rather than being spent on the islands. Views on the issue of higher taxation for second-home owners were divided, with slightly less than half of survey respondents supporting the idea. In the focus groups, there was some discussion that second-home owners who left their properties vacant for longer should be taxed more. There was also a concern, however, that such a move would be divisive, given the small size of the communities involved. Just over half of survey respondents supported taxation of derelict houses, with discussion in the focus groups as to how this might encourage owners to sell those properties. It should be noted that derelict houses are omitted from the new Vacant Homes Tax that will be introduced in 2023 and is, therefore, not the type of tax envisaged by participants in this research.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> The Vacant Homes Tax (VHT) is a new tax on residential properties that will be charged at a rate equal to three times the property's existing basic Local Property Tax rate. It will apply to residential properties occupied for less than 30 days in a 12-month period. Derelict properties or properties unsuitable for use as a dwelling will be exempt from the tax, as described at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/cc22-budget-2023-taxation-measures/>

## 4.4 Summary of Recommendations

Given the extent of the engagement with island residents, the innovation of the research methods and the scope of the literature review, this report has taken over a year to complete. The findings highlight the constraints which a severe national housing crisis has placed on the ability of island residents to attract and retain the populations needed to sustain their own futures on their islands. In the course of the research, it was apparent that many of the recommendations of this report have been highlighted for decades in policy documents and consultation papers, and not implemented. This sense of not being heard at a national and regional level has resulted in a perception of neglect by residents of the West Cork islands. It is vital that the recommendations of the current report are heard, and acted on, as a direct appeal from the residents of these islands for government support in addressing their particular housing crisis, and the unprecedented risks to their ability to sustain full-time occupation on their islands which it represents.

It is recommended that the government, Cork County Council, and other relevant policy partners, in collaboration with island development groups, immediately establish an Islands Task Force to undertake the following as priorities:

### **Quantify target population figures and the existing housing situation for each island**

- Define target population figures for each of the islands.
- Conduct an audit of housing on the islands to specify the numbers and condition of inhabited, derelict, second homes, and rental properties.

### **Formalise regular consultation with, and representation of, island residents**

- Establish a multi-agency islands housing body in consultation with island residents to manage housing on the islands. Key to the success of such a body will be to ensure the meaningful and inclusive representation of all island residents.
- Establish a defined and representative consultation process with island residents, involving government and Council partners, to ensure the recommendations in this report are taken forward as part of a clear action plan with agreed timelines.

### **Implement housing solutions in the following areas, relevant to the needs of each island**

- Appoint a Vacant Homes Officer specifically to the islands to examine the issues with regard to derelict housing and empty, habitable homes and bring more of these into use.
- Develop social, affordable and sheltered housing on the islands, exploring the potential for development of Council-owned land on the islands for this purpose and engaging with Approved Housing Bodies as potential partners where appropriate.
- Address the increased precarity of renters on the islands. This should include enforcing existing regulations, including those related to Airbnb rentals, which focus group findings suggest are compromising long-term rentals.
- Establish a gateway housing programme for the islands to attract newcomers, ensuring that plans are put in place to ensure the availability of housing for those wishing to remain on the island full-time at the end of the trial period.
- Include provision for assisted living arrangements, housing modifications and other supports for older people living on the islands.
- Develop a planning process that is more responsive to the needs of island residents. Ensure greater clarity in planning policy, and proactive communication of this policy, to island residents or their representative housing body. It is also recommended that outstanding agreed actions of the Bantry Bay Charter (2000) be revisited, including a publicly available annual survey of planning applications. This should provide an overview of granted applications, as well as those that were refused and the reasons for these decisions.

### **Increase funding for the retrofitting and refurbishment of island properties**

- Extend the Croí Cónaithe Fund/Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant Scheme to the islands and increase the funding available.
- Increase the threshold for government grants for islands under the Repair and Leasing Scheme and explore options other than leasing to the Council.
- Given the higher costs involved in building work on the islands, increase government grants for retrofitting for islands to bring existing housing stock up to acceptable living and energy efficiency standards.

### **Agree inter-departmental actions to ensure a holistic approach to sustaining populations on each island**

- Set up an island resettlement fund, in conjunction with innovative schemes to promote employment and remote working on the islands.
- Continue efforts to improve broadband access and digital connectivity on the islands.
- Support young families on the islands through services and infrastructure, including free ferries where access to schooling is not available on the islands.



## 4.5 Conclusion

This report has provided insights into how the wider housing crisis in Ireland is being experienced by island residents on the seven inhabited West Cork islands. The research highlights the centrality of a diverse housing mix to the sustainability of life on the islands, and the added threat which the national housing crisis poses for small island communities. The ability of the islands to attract and retain the population numbers needed to ensure the continuity of full-time island living is being significantly restricted by the limited availability of affordable, good quality housing, both to buy and to rent year-round. Failure of government to act could mean that the islands, as locations for full-time, year-round residence, are no longer feasible. Throughout the research, the participants' appreciation of their islands, their connection to them, and their desire and determination to remain on them have been clear. Strongly focussed policy in the key areas identified here, and implemented in close collaboration with island residents, is now urgently required if the ongoing sustainability of full-time populations on the West Cork islands is to be secured.





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## Appendix 1: About the West Cork Islands

Heir, Long, Oileán Chléire and Sherkin are located in the Roaringwater Bay area of West Cork, off the Mizen Peninsula. Long Island is separated from Schull by Long Island Sound, while Heir, Oileán Chléire and Sherkin are located closer to Baltimore and are in relative proximity to each other. Bere, Dursey, and Whiddy lie in the Bantry Bay/Beara area of West Cork. Bere and Dursey are located off the Beara Peninsula – Dursey to the west of the peninsula, separated narrowly from its tip by Dursey Sound and Bere to the south-west, close to Castletownbere. Whiddy lies in Bantry Bay, close to Bantry town.

The table below summarises the services and facilities for each island. This is based on the WCIIDS (2010, pp.81-110), CCDP5 (2022, pp.235-267), and inputs from the research advisory group.

Island	Shop	School	Nurse	Community Centre	Bus Service	State of Facilities*	Helipad	Housing Stock
Bere	Yes	Primary	Yes	Yes	Yes (P/T)	Wastewater treatment needs improvement	Yes	Department of Defence Barracks; clusters of housing; holiday homes
Oileán Chléire	Yes	Primary/ Playschool	Yes	Yes	Yes	Poor water supply	Yes	Old; clusters and dispersed housing
Sherkin	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Not all homes have electric, water, or phone supply. No public toilets.	No	Mixed with old and more modern; Social housing (6 units)
Heir	No	No	No	No	No	Water services limited; need to improve waste management.	No	Congested Districts Board housing; Proposed social housing
Whiddy	No	No	No	No	No	Poor waste management	No	Dispersed settlements; cluster of houses near the Kilmore lakes
Long	No	No	No	No	No	No waste management facility	No	Congested Districts Board housing; unoccupied and derelict houses
Dursey	No	No	No	No	No	Limited water mains; poor waste management	No	Irish Land Commission housing; derelict houses

## The Cork County Development Plan for the Islands

The sections that follow draw on the plans for each of the islands outlined in the CCDP5 (2022). They summarise, in particular, those aspects that focus on housing, in addition to drawing on other literature where relevant, and including inputs from the research advisory group. The Cork County Development Plan in relation to the islands, as well as a more detailed overview of each of the islands and their wider general development objectives, is available on the [Cork County Council](#) website (see pp.235-267). The Cork County Development Plan draws extensively on the 2017 [West Cork Municipal District Local Area Plan](#). The Cork County Development Plan (ibid., p.237) highlights that, across the West Cork islands, household sizes are generally low and in decline and states that the ‘issue of a declining and ageing population on the West Cork Islands is a particularly important issue’. It (ibid., p.237) recognises that ‘[t]hese trends also point to a need to make the islands an attractive area for young adults and families to reside.’ For each of the West Cork islands, apart from Dursey, the plan also states (ibid., p.237, p.242, p.251, p.255, p.259, p.264) that ‘the key issue is not the number of houses that are built on the island but the need to encourage growth in the permanent all year-round population on the island.’

### Bere Island

Bere Island has a rich military history, and the Defence Forces maintain a camp at the eastern end of the island which caters for Reserve Defence Force and army personnel training. The CCDP5 (2022, p.237) notes that there are a significant number of holiday homes on Bere, so the population increases considerably



during the summer months. Population numbers are also impacted by army training activity levels. There are a few key clusters where residential development and services are located – including the villages of Rerrin, where many services are located, and Ballynakilla. The CCDP5 (2022, p.237) notes that the ‘pattern of development on the remainder of the island is more dispersed’ and is ‘primarily gathered to the more sheltered northern section of the island’ (ibid.). With regard to development on Bere, Objective No. 1 of the CCDP5 (ibid, p.240) states that ‘[t]he development of multiple housing or employment uses should normally be located in or within a short walking distance of Rerrin or Ballynakilla.’

The CCDP5 (2022, p.237) observes that ‘the population of Bere Island has fluctuated during the past three decades, even through a sustained period of economic growth.’ In their study on the correlation between accessibility and depopulation, Cross and Nutley (1999, p.320) highlight the decline in the population of Bere, despite its being close to the mainland and having a good ferry service. These authors (ibid., p.322) also note that the short distance to the mainland and the regular ferry permitted pupils to make the return journey to school in Castletownbere each day. This strong link to the mainland may paradoxically account for population decline given the ease of moving back and forth between the mainland.

The CCDP5 (2022, p.237) highlights the ageing population on the island, which ‘has implications for sustainable populations in future and for service providers, particularly those involved in supporting older people. These trends also point to a need to make the islands an attractive area for young adults and families to reside.’ The plan states (ibid., p.239) that ‘provision should be made for small scale sheltered housing developments located close to existing community facilities. In this regard, an audit of council owned land on the island would be beneficial.’

Although the CCDP5 (2022, p.238) recognises that ‘there are holiday homes already on the island which are contributing to the economy of the area’, it also expresses concern that the ‘growth of holiday homes or second homes can have a serious adverse effect on the vibrancy and sustainability of island communities and needs to be carefully controlled.’ The plan (ibid.) states that:

‘[t]he development of second homes except where existing dwellings are restored or extended will be restricted. Consideration of small-scale managed holiday home developments may be considered in or adjacent to existing housing clusters, where there are clear and identifiable economic and social benefits (that endures beyond the construction phase and that are compatible with the capacity of the local community to accommodate it’.

The plan (2022, p. 238) also ‘supports the improvement of the range and quality of accommodation on the island and in particular the need to identify a location for a campsite’, while stating that ‘it is important to balance the need for additional physical development and the need to preserve the sensitive environmental concerns’ (ibid.).

Overall, the CCDP5’s (2022, p.237) strategic aim for Bere is to ‘ensure that the island community can pursue their economic social and cultural development, preserve, and enhance their unique cultural heritage and engage in viable socio-economic development in order that the permanent population will be sustained and further increased.’ The CCDP5 (2022, p.238) acknowledges that ‘there is a need to provide sustainable housing for permanent occupation’. Improving the availability of affordable housing, developing the economy, and improving services are seen as central in the plan to reversing population decline. The CCDP5 (ibid.) states:

The key issue for the island is the need to reverse long-term population decline and stabilise and increase the permanent population. The key elements in achieving this are to provide access to affordable housing for permanent residency, expand the productive economy, improve infrastructure, and improve access to social, cultural, and recreational facilities.

The CCDP5 (2022, p.238) also acknowledges that there is a need to ‘recognise the differing circumstances between island and mainland housing needs’. It states that (ibid.):

Preference will be given to the reuse/refurbishment of existing dwellings over new build. During the lifetime of the plan the Council will consider innovative housing policy issues which recognise the islands particular circumstances. This could involve utilising the potential of a voluntary housing association on the island.

## Oileán Chléire

Oileán Chléire (also known as Cape Clear and Clear Island) is Ireland's most southerly inhabited island and is one of seven Gaeltacht islands off the Irish coast. The WCIDS (2010, p.83) notes that Oileán Chléire is located further offshore than the other West Cork Islands and this has implications for services. As highlighted in the CCDP5 (2022, p.242), development and housing on the island are largely concentrated into two main clusters – one between South Harbour and North Harbour where services are located, and one at the eastern end of the island near the church and heritage centre. Objective No. 1 in the CCDP5 (2022, p.245) states that the '[d]evelopment of clustered housing or employment uses should normally be located in or within a short walking distance of the North and South Harbour.'

Most housing on Oileán Chléire has taken the form of individual dwellings. Strzelecka (2018, p.126) notes that the 'construction boom (the so-called Celtic Tiger) did not reach [Oileán Chléire]; only nine houses were built [between] 2001 [and] 2016.' The IPC paper (2019, p.12) notes Oileán Chléire's involvement with the Better Energy Communities (BEC) Scheme which aims to improve the energy efficiency of the island's houses. The input from Comharchumann Chléire Teoranta (Cape Clear Island Development Cooperative) to the Cork County Development Plan 2022–2028 (p.10) proposes an urgent need for island-wide housing development, and renovation and upgrading of existing housing stock.

As with Bere, the CCDP5 (2022, p.242) highlights 'the need to stabilise and increase the permanent population on the island to support the future sustainability of island life and the economic activities and social and cultural characteristics that define it.' The plan (ibid.) observes there 'is evidence of an ageing population on the islands, which has implications for sustainable populations in future and for service providers, particularly those involved in supporting older people. These trends also point to a need to make the islands an attractive area for young adults and families to reside.' Objective No. 2 (ibid., p. 245) for Oileán Chléire encourages 'the provision of a small-scale sheltered housing scheme for the elderly located adjacent to existing community facilities.'

The CCDP5 (2022, p.242) recognises that the 'remoteness of the islands is an attraction to some holiday makers and there may be a future increase in investment in second homes.' However, the plan notes (ibid.) that the growth of second homes 'can have a serious adverse effect on islands where the natural population base is already fragile', can seriously impact 'on the vibrancy and sustainability of island communities' (ibid.), and, hence, 'needs to be carefully controlled'. In this regard, the plan (ibid.) states that the Council will support development that contributes to the retention of the year-round population on

the island, has clear and identifiable economic and social benefits (that endure beyond the construction phase), and that is compatible with the capacity of the local community to accommodate it.

Overall, the CCDP5 (2022, p.242) states that there are several key elements needed 'to reverse long term population decline [and] stabilise and increase the permanent population' on Oileán Chléire. These include the need 'to provide access to affordable housing for permanent residency, expand the productive economy, improve infrastructure, and access to the Island and improve access to social, cultural and recreational facilities' (ibid.).

## Sherkin Island

As described in the CCDP5 (2022, p.259), the housing pattern on Sherkin is generally dispersed, with one cluster of houses called 'The Lane' which is a row of older houses in the centre of the island. A Local Authority-owned social housing development (six units) is located across from The Lane. Larger, more modern houses are located towards the centre and south of the island. With regard to development, Objective No. 1 of the CCDP5 (ibid., p.261) states that '[d]evelopment of clustered housing or employment uses should normally be located in or within a short walking distance of the Harbour'. Objective No. 2 of the CCDP5 (2022, p.261.) recognises that 'much of Sherkin lies within the Roaringwater Bay and Islands SAC [Special Area of Conservation] and within the Roaringwater Bay and Islands proposed Natural Heritage Area.' Hence, it states (ibid.) that 'development on the island shall be compatible with the protection of these sites'.

Cross and Nutley (1999, p.320) highlight that Sherkin had managed to increase its population by a third in the period between 1981 and 1991, with 'a community of non-native incomers attracted for 'quality of life' reasons and working mostly in arts and crafts.' The CCDP5 (2022, p.259) likewise notes that more recently:

**[i]n terms of population trends, the overall population living on Sherkin Island has risen since 2006 which is important as a decline in population has implications for the future sustainability of island life and for the economic activities and social and cultural characteristics that define it.**

The strategic aims for Sherkin outlined in the CCDP5 (2022, p.259) are 'to ensure that the island community can pursue their economic social and cultural development, preserve, and enhance their unique cultural heritage and engage in viable socio-economic development in order that the permanent population will be sustained and further increased.' As with the other larger islands, however, the CCDP5 (ibid.) highlights '[t]here is evidence of an ageing population on the islands, which has implications for sustainable populations in future and for service providers, particularly those involved in supporting older people. These trends also point to a need to make the islands an attractive area for young adults and families to reside'.

The CCDP5 (2022, p.259) also expressed concerns about the growth of holiday home or second homes on Sherkin, which 'can have a serious adverse effect on the vibrancy and sustainability of island communities and needs to be carefully controlled'. The CCDP5 (ibid.) notes that the 'key issue is the need to stabilise and increase the permanent population on the island.' The plan (ibid.), therefore, states that

**The Council will support development that contributes to retention of the year-round population on the island, has clear and identifiable economic and social benefits (that endures beyond the construction phase, and that is compatible with the capacity of the local community to accommodate it).**

The CCDP5 (2022, p.259) also recognises that the 'key issue for the island is the need to reverse long term population decline, stabilise and increase the permanent population.' Like Bere and Oileán Chléire, it (ibid.) states that the 'key elements in achieving this are to provide access to affordable housing for permanent residency, expand the productive economy, improve infrastructure, and access to the Island and improve access to social, cultural, and recreational facilities.'

## Heir Island

According to the WCIIDS (2010, p.107), settlement on Heir is dispersed across the island. The CCDP5 (2022, p.252) notes that the island 'lacks community facilities and has limited services, the development of which is of major importance to ensure population stability.' There is a rural transport service between Heir and Skibbereen on a Friday evening, which is beneficial to islanders. Some of the housing on the island dates back to the Congested District Board's provision of dwellings in West Cork (c.1910). The CCDP5 (2022, p.251) states that '[u]noccupied Congested Districts Board housing on the islands has potential for conversion into studio space for visiting artists, which would attract additional population, albeit of a transient nature onto the island and contribute to the island economy.' The WCIIDS (2010, p.108) also proposed a social housing development on the island, to be built adjacent to a planned community centre; neither the social housing development nor the community centre, however, have been developed.

The strategic aim for Heir outlined in the CCDP5 (2022, p.251) is 'to ensure that the island community can pursue their economic social and cultural development, preserve, and enhance their unique cultural heritage and engage in viable socio-economic development in order that the permanent population will be sustained and further increased.' The CCDP5 (ibid.) affirms the 'need to stabilise and increase the permanent population on the island', recognising (ibid.) that the 'island has been continually threatened by depopulation over the last few decades due to its low population base.' The CCDP5 (ibid.) affirms that the level of basic services on Heir needs to be improved to retain permanent residents on the island; it (ibid.) states that the main tools to do so are in:

**promoting retention and expansion of existing facilities and employment opportunities, encouraging appropriately scaled tourist facilities and economic diversification, and protecting the environmental qualities which attract tourists as well as having their own intrinsic merit.**



The CCDP5 (2022, p.251) recognises, as in other West Cork islands, that the 'growth of holiday home or second homes can have a serious adverse effect on the vibrancy and sustainability of island communities and needs to be carefully controlled.' The plan (ibid.) states that the

**Council will support development that contributes to retention of the year-round population on the island, has clear and identifiable economic and social benefits (that endures beyond the construction phase) and that is compatible with the capacity of the local community to accommodate it.**

With regard to development on Heir, CCDP5 (2022, p. 253), Objective No. 1 highlights the environmental conservation on the island and states '[m]ost of Heir Island lies within the Roaringwater Bay and Islands SAC and all of it lies within the Roaringwater Bay and Islands proposed Natural Heritage Area. Development on the island shall be compatible with the protection of these sites.' Objective No. 2 (ibid.) similarly focuses on the conservation of Heir, stating the need to '[c]onserve the landscape and cultural quality of Heir while recognising the needs of its occupants. All development should be carefully designed, sited, and landscaped to retain the wild and open character of the island, and avoid harm to the environmental qualities of the locality.'

## Whiddy Island

Historically, the pattern of island settlement on Whiddy is generally dispersed, apart from a cluster of houses near the Kilmore lakes (CCDP5, 2022, p.264). The Zenith energy Bantry Bay oil storage facility dominates the south of Whiddy island and is a major employer in the Bantry area. The island was the site of a major disaster in 1979 when the oil tanker, Betelgeuse, exploded, killing fifty people. The WCIDS (2010, p.94) notes that the island is synonymous with the oil tanker disaster and visitor numbers are low, despite the short ferry ride from Bantry. In 2021, it was announced that Whiddy would become home to one of the world's largest energy facilities to produce green hydrogen and green ammonia. The facility is due to become operational by 2028, potentially reducing Ireland's carbon emissions by 2.4m tonnes per year and providing hundreds of jobs in the area (Cronin, 2021). Services are limited on the island, although it has a new community centre that opened in 2021 that will hopefully be a focal point for varied activities.

In terms of population trends, the CCDP5 (2022, p. 264) notes that the overall population living on Whiddy 'has generally declined steadily in recent years', and that this 'has implications for the future sustainability of island life and for the economic activities and social and cultural characteristics that define it.' The strategic aim for Whiddy outlined in the CCDP5 (ibid.) 'is to ensure that the island community can pursue their economic social and cultural development, preserve, and enhance their unique cultural heritage and engage in viable socio-economic development in order that the permanent population will be sustained and further increased'. As with the other West Cork Islands, the CCDP5 (ibid.) highlights that the 'key issue is the need to stabilise and increase the permanent population on the island.' Given the evidence of an ageing population on the island 'which has implications for sustainable populations in future and for service providers, particularly those involved in supporting older people', the CCDP5 (ibid.) points to the need to make the island 'an attractive area for young adults and families to reside.'

The CCDP5 (2022, p.264) also highlights the potential adverse effects of the growth of holiday homes or second homes and states that this 'needs to be carefully controlled'. It (ibid.) notes that the

**'Council will support development that contributes to retention of the year-round population on the island, has clear and identifiable economic and social benefits (that endures beyond the construction phase), and that is compatible with the capacity of the local community to accommodate it'.**

Overall, the plan for Whiddy (2022, p.264) notes that:

**The key issue for the island is the need to reverse long term population decline, stabilise and increase the permanent population. The key elements in achieving this are to provide access to affordable housing for permanent residency, expand the productive economy, improve infrastructure, and improve access to social, cultural, and recreational facilities.**

There are no General Development Objectives related to housing in the CCDP5 (2022) for Whiddy Island.

## Long Island

Long Island is close to the busy tourist town of Schull. The island's population doubled between Census 2011 and Census 2016. There are two main clusters of houses and the CCDP5 (2022, p.255) describes the distinctive style of housing on Long, noting that much of 'the housing on the island was built by the Congested District Board and Long Island is known for having a concentration of this particular style of housing'. It highlights (ibid.) that the island had over 300 inhabitants in the 1840s and 'the remains of this active past are clearly to be seen in the small cottages, abandoned stone ruins, stores and sheds.' According to the CCDP5 (ibid.), the significant number of derelict houses on the island 'may offer redevelopment potential', including for short-term tourist accommodation, such as "[a] hostel or bed and breakfast subject to compliance with nature conservation designations'. Protecting the environment of Long is central to the first two objectives for the island in the CCDP5. Objective No. 1 states (2022, p.257), 'Long Island lies within Roaring Water Bay and Islands Special Area of Conservation and within the Roaringwater Bay and Islands proposed Natural Heritage Area. Development on the island should be compatible with the protection of these sites.' Objective No. 2 (ibid.) states the intention to:

**Conserve the landscape and cultural quality of Long Island while recognising the needs of its occupants and improving service provision to the island. All development should be carefully designed, sited and landscaped to retain the character of the island, and avoid harm to the environmental qualities of the locality.**

The CCDP5 (2022, p.256) also proposes that some of 'the unoccupied Congested Districts Board housing on the islands has potential for conversion into studio space for visiting artists, which would attract additional population, albeit of a transient nature onto the island and contribute to an island economy.' However, it (ibid.) states that the 'distinctive housing style should be respected by any development on the island, which would be best placed in or adjacent to the existing clusters'.

The strategic aim for Long in the CCDP5 (2022, p.255) is 'to ensure that the island community can pursue their economic social and cultural development, preserve, and enhance their unique cultural heritage and engage in viable socio-economic development in order that the permanent population will be sustained and further increased.' Like the other West Cork islands, the CCDP5 (ibid.) highlights 'the need to stabilise and increase the permanent population on the island', which 'has been continually threatened by permanent depopulation over the last few decades'(ibid.). The CCDP5 recognises (ibid.) that 'the level of basic services needs to be improved' to retain permanent residents on the island and identifies that the main tools to achieve this are in:

**promoting retention and expansion of existing facilities and employment opportunities, encouraging appropriately scaled tourist facilities and economic diversification, and protecting the environmental qualities which attract tourists as well as having their own intrinsic merit.**

The CCDP5 (2022, p.255), affirms key elements to stabilise and increase the permanent population, including 'to provide access to affordable housing for permanent residency, expand the productive economy, improve infrastructure, and improve access to social, cultural, and recreational facilities'. It (ibid.) also recognises that the 'growth of holiday home or second homes can have a serious adverse effect on the vibrancy and sustainability of island communities and needs to be carefully controlled', especially where the 'natural population base is already fragile' (ibid.). It (ibid.) therefore states

**[t]he Council will support development that contributes to retention of the year-round population on the island, has clear and identifiable economic and social benefits (that endures beyond the construction phase), and that is compatible with the capacity of the local community to accommodate it.**

## Dursey Island

According to the CCDP5 (2022, p.247), Dursey is threatened with permanent depopulation 'given its remote location and low numbers of permanent residents'. The report (ibid.) notes the island faces 'a danger of complete de-population over time.' Despite its proximity to the mainland (see Table 1), Dursey's location at the extreme south-western point of the rugged Beara Peninsula, across the Dursey Sound, means it is the only one of the West Cork islands not to have a ferry route. The strong tide and reef of rocks in the centre of

Dursey Sound makes it too dangerous for a ferry crossing; hence, Dursey Island is linked to the mainland by cable car. This cable car closed in April 2022 for an estimated €10 million upgrade and repairs following storm damage (McNally, 2022). According to the CCDP5 (2022, p.248), the 'Council is currently progressing proposals to replace the cable car with two new ones and to create an interpretive centre and café on the mainland.'

According to the CCDP5 (2022, p.247), the island has three clusters of development with no settlement outside of these, a settlement pattern which is unique on the West Coast islands. The WCIC document (2020: 9) notes that there are a number of derelict properties on Dursey, some of which are associated with Irish Land Commission transfers of families from the island to East Cork between the 1930s and 1950s. The CCDP5 (2022, p. 247) also observes that there are a significant number of ruins and derelict houses in the three clusters and states that 'any future development should be directed towards renovation or sensitive replacement where necessary, of those structures, apart from exceptional circumstances where new build may be necessary to provide a particular facility.' The CCDP5 (ibid.) also notes that any development must also be sensitive to the unique landscape of Dursey and states:

[t]he island has a particularly unique landscape and cultural quality which differs from the experience on some of the other West Cork Islands. Sensitivity must be exercised in the consideration of appropriate and sustainable forms of development and a balance must be sought between recognising the needs of occupants and visitors alike whilst respecting the character and sense of place of the island.

Given the risk of permanent depopulation, the CCDP5 (2022, p.247) states that the 'key issue is the need to stabilise and increase the permanent population on the island'. It recognises (ibid.) that the level of services needs to be improved in order to retain permanent residents on the island, noting that:

[t]he main tools to this are in promoting expansion of facilities and employment opportunities, encouraging appropriately scaled tourist facilities and economic diversification, and protecting the environmental qualities which attract tourists as well as having their own intrinsic merit.

In relation to Dursey, Objective No. 1 of the CCDP5 (2022, p. 249) states the need to:

Retain a sustainable population base of the Island and build on the existing facilities and economic activities on the Island. Consideration will be given to specific residential proposals in the clusters around Ballynacallagh, Kilmichael and Tilikcafinna where they can be suitably integrated with respect to the setting and context.

## Appendix 2: Bantry Bay Charter: Housing in the Coastal Zone

The Bantry Bay Charter was an innovative participatory and consensus-based strategy for Integrated Coastal Zone Management for Bantry Bay (Stevens and Associates, 2006, p.1). It was funded under the EU Life Programme and involved a partnership between Cork County Council, University College Cork, Cork Institute of Technology, and residents of the Bantry Bay area, as well as the cooperation of over 70 organisations, businesses and regulatory bodies (ibid., p.7). Following the end of the EU Life funding, Cork County Council funded a project officer, assistant, and publicly accessible office for two years from 1999. However, Stevens and Associates (ibid, p.9) state that 'there was a lack of support by regulatory bodies, and budgetary difficulties within the Council led to closure of the office in 2002.'

The primary housing objective of the Bantry Bay Charter (2000, p.81) was '[t]o identify and meet the housing needs of the community in the coastal zone. This involved: providing a choice of housing types; improving the opportunity to obtain and afford housing in the coastal zone; ensuring that housing developments [were] well-planned, sustainable and appropriate to the local area'. The agreed approach (ibid., pp.81-82) to achieving this housing objective was to:

**3.a** 'Develop a clear and fair policy for housing developments in the Bantry Bay coastal zone.

**3.b** Promote the provision of a choice of affordable housing for local residents. Increase the supply of housing available by encouraging the renovation of property in poor repair and by building social



housing in rural areas.

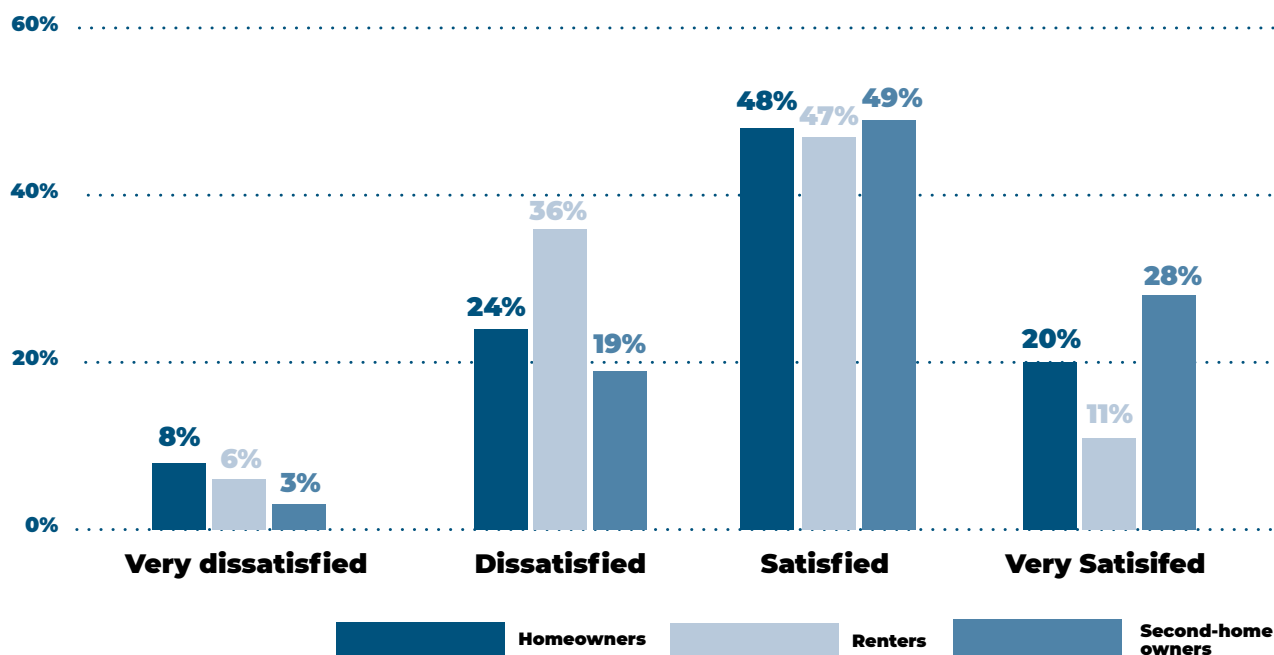
- 3.c** Encourage the development of a fair and standard system for deciding planning permission in the coastal zone. This system should be adopted by Cork County Council to support a more open process of decision-making and greater consistency in planning decisions. This system should be publicised so that people who want to apply to build a house have the full information available to them.
- 3.d** Develop a system where people who want to build a house in the coastal zone are assisted with all the relevant planning information and advice. This should be easy to get hold of, and easy to understand.
- 3.e** Promote a complete system for monitoring of housing applications in the coastal zone; those that are granted, and refused, and the reasons for this. This information should be made public, be used to see how present policies are working, and to help develop future policies.
- 3.f** Encourage the collection of full information on the present housing supply and the demand for housing within the local community.
- 3.g** Support measures to control the negative impacts of second homes within the coastal zone, and excessive development in an area with limited carrying capacity.
- 3.h** Encourage Cork County Council to take the lead in promoting full, clear information on all aspects of the planning system to the public.'

The agreed actions (2000, p.82) were:

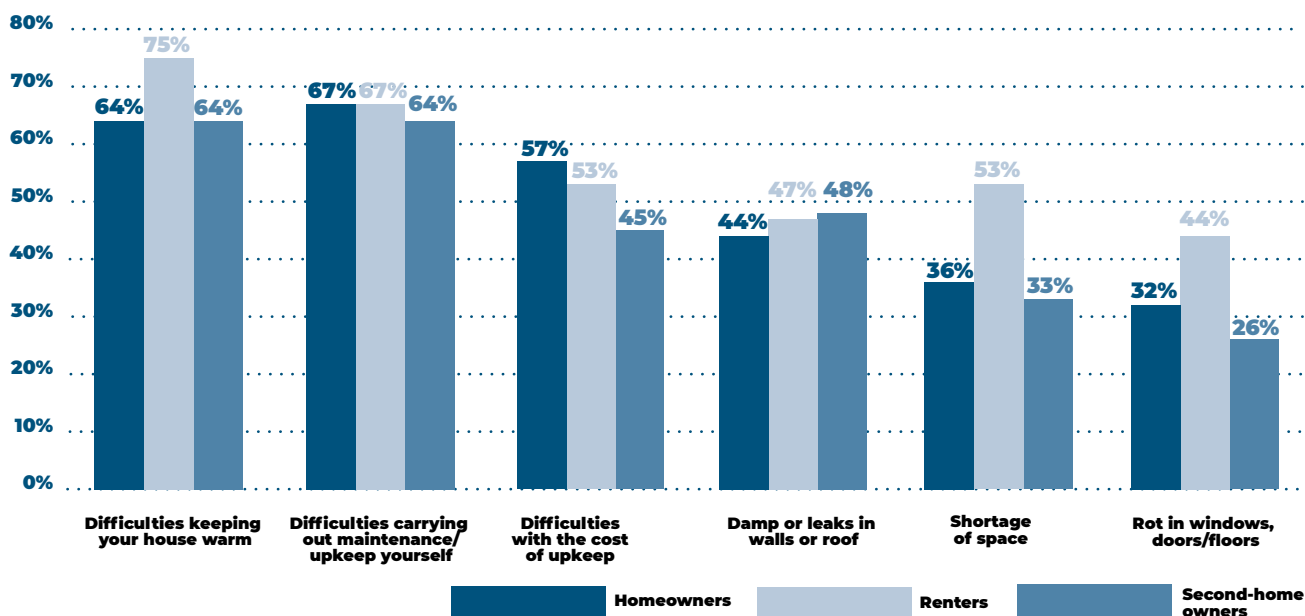
- 4.a** 'Cork County Council should clearly explain coastal zone housing policies and the reasons for these. This should be written in plain language and easily found in the new Country Development Plan and other relevant planning information.
- 4.b** Produce advice leaflets for housing proposals in the coastal zone. – Regulatory bodies to provide clear training and advice to engineers/architects on design/layout issues.
- 4.c** Conduct a survey of the present housing situations. Use this to set up a regularly updated database on housing.
- 4.d** Establish a systematic and clear method of assessment for all housing applications.
- 4.e** Carry out a survey of annual planning applications and permission in the Bantry Bay coastal zone to count those given for residents and non-residents, to clarify the situation.
- 4.f** Carry out survey of second homes in the coastal zone including, quantity and distribution, occupancy rates and services provision.
- 4.g** Strengthen existing planning policies to favour local/social housing through restrictions of planning permissions for non-residents in a ratio to planning permissions for local residents in order to achieve improvement.
- 4.h** Use survey data to develop a rating system, based on how long the property is lived in during the year and the amount of services used.
- 4.i** Carry out a full survey of housing needs throughout the community in the coastal zone to identify demand from potential owners and tenants.
- 4.j** Cork County Council, in consultation with rural coastal communities, should develop an imaginative rural housing policy for the coastal zone.'



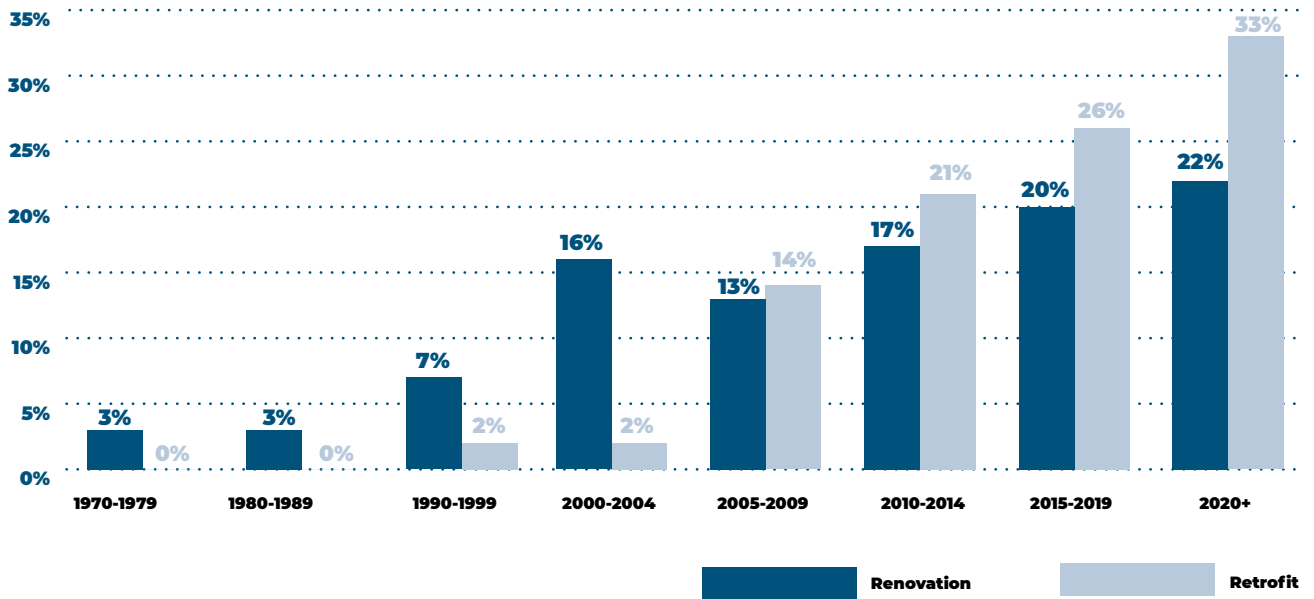
### Appendix 3: Additional graphs



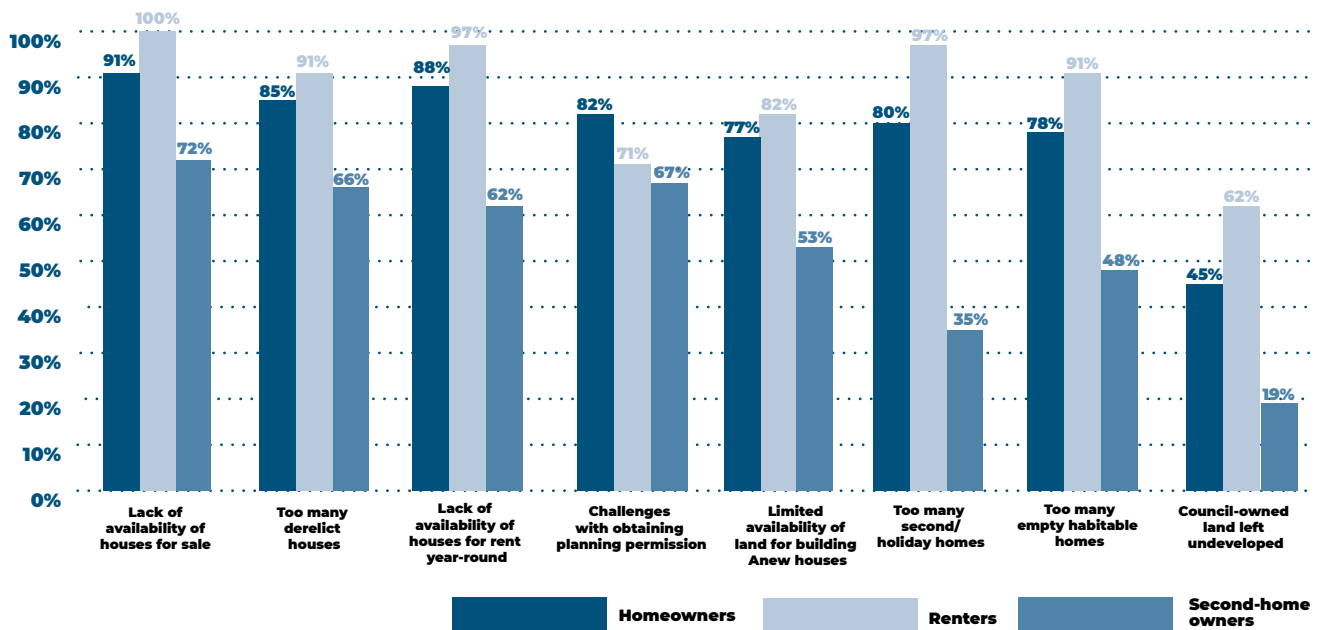
**Figure 13: Satisfaction with the Standard/Condition of the Home**



**Figure 14: Quality of Home for Homeowners, Renters, and Second-home Owners: Housing Issues That are Somewhat a Problem or a Major problem**



**Figure 15: Year of Renovation and Retrofit**



**Figure 16: Views on Housing Availability on the Islands**



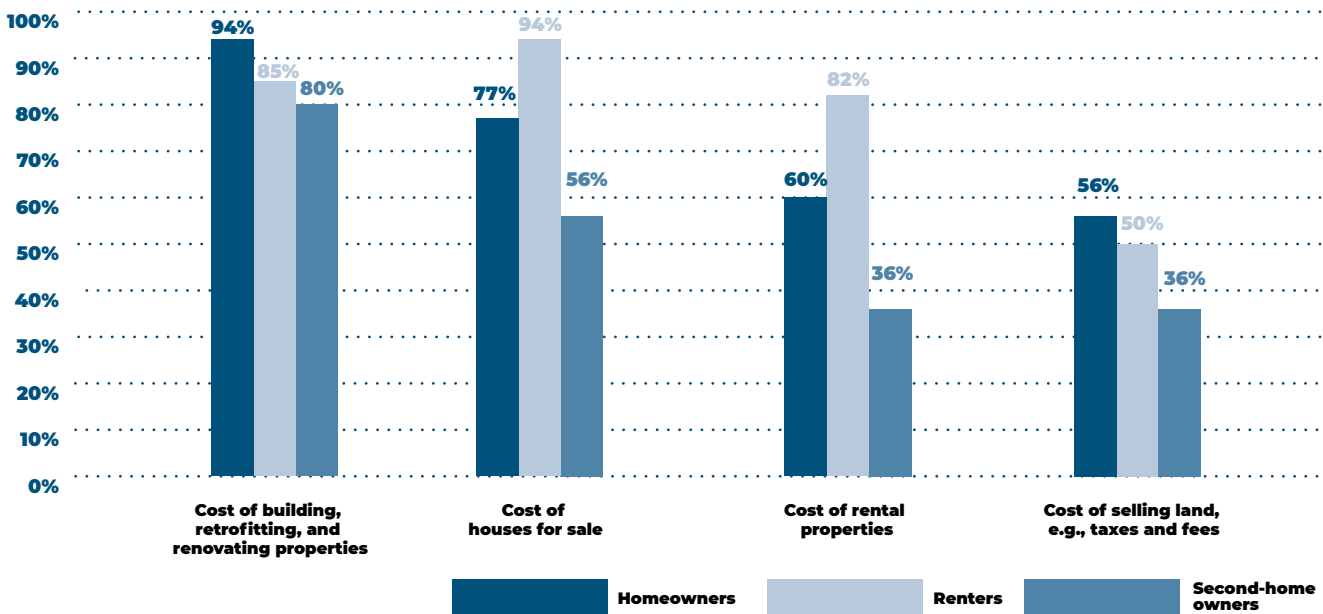


Figure 17: Views on Housing Affordability on the Islands

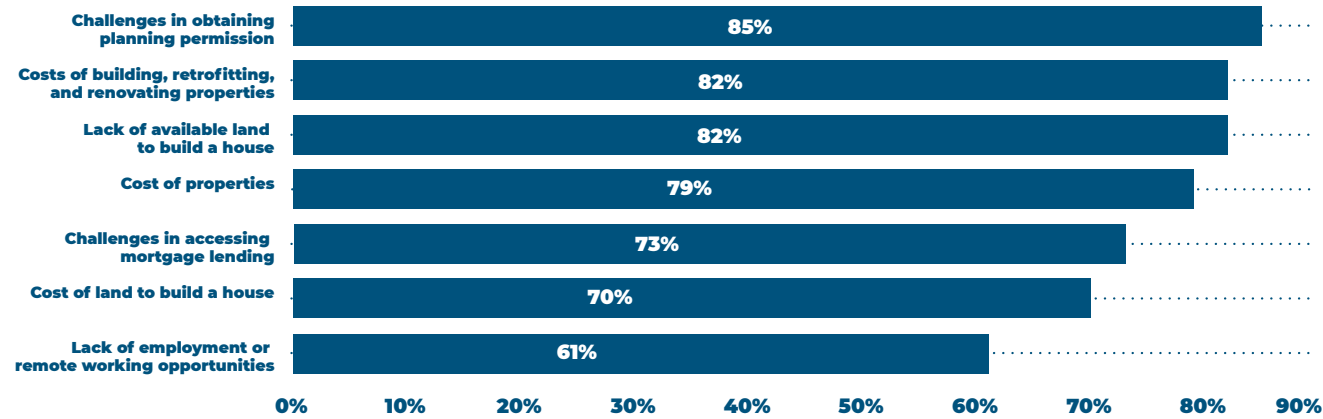


Figure 18: Factors that Would Hinder Ability of Renters to Buy or Build on the Islands







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**There is the risk over time of the loss of entire island communities, and, with them, the vital contribution of the islands to Ireland's heritage, culture and economy.**



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**Innovative approaches are needed for supporting a diverse and vibrant population on the islands.**





# Housing and Sustaining Communities on the West Cork Islands

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