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Housing and the West Cork islands: a national crisis in microcosm

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Abstract

This article explores the first academic study on the housing crisis on Ireland's offshore islands through a case study of the experiences and views of islanders on the West Cork islands. The paper covers the risk which the current housing crisis in Ireland represents for the ability of the West Cork islands, already susceptible to depopulation, to retain the next generation of existing inhabitants and attract newcomers. Through a participatory research project conducted between October 2021 and November 2022, the article reveals the challenges facing the West Cork islands in terms of housing affordability, availability and quality, and how these impact on the sustainability of island living. It also documents innovative policies and initiatives that islanders would like policymakers to implement to ensure the housing crisis is addressed and full-time populations on the islands are secured and sustained. The article concludes by reflecting on the recent *National Islands Policy 2023–2033* in light of the current study.

Keywords: housing crisis, West Cork islands, participatory research, perspectives of islanders, sustainability of island living, National Islands Policy

Introduction

The West Cork islands and the housing crisis

This article is the first to explore the impact of the national housing crisis on the West Cork islands. The seven inhabited offshore islands

of West Cork, located off the south-west coast of Ireland, are Bere, Dursey, Heir, Long, Oileán Chléire, Sherkin, and Whiddy, with a total population of 511 inhabitants according to the 2022 census. Offshore islands are defined in the *Islands Policy Consultation Paper* (Government of Ireland, 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'. Along with other inhabited offshore islands in Ireland, the West Cork islands represent a unique lifestyle and way of life, as well as being a vital part of Ireland's national heritage, identity, and culture. As the *National Islands Policy 2023–2033* (p. 6) states '[t]he inhabited offshore islands are an integral part of the fabric of rural Ireland. Although they support a relatively small proportion of our population, they make an important contribution to our national economy, our culture and our heritage'. This contribution is also highlighted in the *Rural Development Policy 2021–2025* (Government of Ireland, 2021, p. 90) which notes 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'.

Over many years, however, island organisations have raised issues that are affecting the sustainability of the islands, with housing seen as 'a critical issue' for many islands across Europe by the European Small Islands Federation (ESIN) (Sorensen, 2021, p. 4). While the islands vary in terms of their remoteness, their external linkages, employment opportunities, and connectivity to services, housing is identified as central to the habitability of islands, and to sustaining and increasing all-year island populations (Relander et al., 2020; Sorensen, 2021).

In a consultation paper with residents of the West Cork islands in 2020 (O'Keeffe & Crowley, 2020), housing emerged as the single greatest challenge for the islands, both in terms of retaining existing island populations and attracting people to live in these more remote areas. A housing seminar workshop report compiled by Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann, the Irish Islands Federation (2021, p. 3), 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'.

This article explores the results of a joint project between University College Cork (UCC) and the Bere Island Projects Group, Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann (Irish Islands Federation), the Sherkin Island Development Society, Comharchumann Chléire Teoranta (Cape Clear Cooperative), Comhar na nOileán CTR

(Integrated Local Development Company for the Irish offshore islands), the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme, and the West Cork Development Partnership, to research the experiences and views of West Cork island residents on the availability, affordability, and quality of housing (O'Sullivan & Desmond, 2022). As the article will show, on the islands, the national housing crisis is being felt in a context where population numbers are already small, the fight for services is ongoing, the population is older, and the depopulation of full-time inhabitants is an ongoing risk. This article therefore argues that the national housing crisis poses a significant threat to the sustainability of island life in West Cork and to the location of West Cork islands as sites of full-time, long-term residence.

Housing is a fundamental human need, and adequate housing is recognised as part of the right to an adequate standard of living in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), 2014). The United Nations Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights has emphasised that the right to adequate housing 'should be seen as the right to live somewhere in security, peace and dignity' (UN-Habitat, 2014, p. 3). This underlines the need for the availability of good quality, secure homes. As Finnerty et al. (2016, p. 238) state, 'a poorly functioning housing system will have profoundly negative consequences for households and for society at large'.

In recent decades, the right to adequate housing has become increasingly challenged by the well-documented housing crises in Ireland and many other countries (Lee et al., 2022). It is recognised that these crises have arisen largely as a result of the application of neoliberal principles to housing (Byrne, 2022), and the commodification (Marcuse & Keating, 2006; Dewilde, 2017), financialisation (Rolnik, 2013; Dewilde, 2018; Lima et al., 2023) and 'marketisation of housing' (Hearne, 2020, p. 2; Norris, 2016). This results in housing being seen as a commodity, investment, or speculative opportunity which, according to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing (Farha, 2017, p. 3), 'disconnects housing from its social function' or as 'a home meeting a fundamental social need' (Hearne, 2020, p. 2).

Rolnik (2013, p. 1059) argues that the commodification of housing has 'profoundly affected the enjoyment of the right to adequate housing across the world' and resulted in 'the abandonment of the conceptual meaning of housing as a social good' (ibid.). Hearne &

Murphy (2018) and Finnerty et al. (2016), among others, explore how the Irish Government has increasingly withdrawn as the primary social housing provider over the past three decades in favour of subsidised provision by private landlords. Kitchin et al. (2015) argue that the crisis in housing in Ireland pre-dates the economic crash of 2008 and has been building through three distinct phases (the Celtic Tiger years of 1993–2006; the crash from 2007–12; and the post-crash period from 2013 to the present).

In Ireland, the housing system is now characterised by falling homeownership levels and a growing proportion of renters (including older renters: Slaymaker et al., 2022; Byrne, 2022). According to data from the census in 2022 (CSO, 2023a), more than 330,000 homes were rented from a private landlord in 2022 and '[t]here was a significant increase in the number of households with people aged 65 and over renting from a private landlord to almost 17,000 households, up 83% since 2016'.

The housing system in Ireland is furthermore characterised by supply shortages and rising prices that render home purchase and rental housing unaffordable for many (Slaymaker et al., 2022; Dewilde, 2018), insecure tenure due to rental precarity (Waldron, 2023), and high levels of homelessness with 12,691 people accessing emergency accommodation in August 2023 (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2023). By 2018, the then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, described the housing crisis as a national emergency (Finn, 2018). In 2021, Taoiseach Micheál Martin described it as a social emergency (Martin, 2021). Hearne (2020, p. 2) argues that '[t]he housing crisis is a moral and policy failure of a system that has the resources and wealth to solve it'.

The housing crisis in Ireland exists in a context where there is a prevalence of second homes, vacant homes, and derelict houses. Norris et al. (2010, p. 672) observed 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'. Census 2022 shows that almost 8 per cent of the housing stock nationwide is comprised of vacant dwellings (163,433 houses), while holiday homes that were unoccupied on census night accounted for just over 3 per cent of housing stock (66,956 houses) (CSO, 2023b). Some of the West Cork islands had particularly high rates of vacant dwellings (e.g. 22 per cent in Oileán Chléire) and holiday homes unoccupied on census night (e.g. 54 per cent on Bere and 43 per cent on Sherkin) according to small area statistics.

The housing crisis in Ireland co-exists with an ongoing concern for the decline of parts of rural Ireland, especially less accessible and remote areas that are experiencing youth migration and a fall in traditional industries (Meredith & Gilmartin, 2014). Some of these areas also experience limited services, including the closure of banks, post offices, shops, pubs, and garda stations, that impact particularly on the ability of the older population to age in place (O'Sullivan et al., 2022).

The issues of decline being experienced in rural Ireland more generally are evident on the offshore islands; however, their impact is exacerbated by the islands' separation from the mainland. As the *National Islands Policy 2023–2033* describes:

> Many of the challenges faced by island communities are similar to those in other parts of rural Ireland, but they are more pronounced and more complex to address due to the islands' separation from the mainland. Issues such as the provision of housing, the delivery of education and healthcare, access to high speed broadband and employment opportunities are magnified on the offshore islands. There is also an added challenge of retaining young people on the islands as the population profile is ageing.

Regarding the West Cork islands, the *Cork County Development Plan* (Cork County Council, 2022, p. 152) similarly 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.

Occurring in conjunction with these forces of decline are counter urbanisation trends that have seen flows of people and households into the Irish countryside over the past two decades (Meredith & Gilmartin, 2014). In the context of a housing crisis, however, the potential for rural regeneration through counter urbanisation is significantly restricted. The impact of these countervailing forces evident at the national level can be seen in microcosm on the West Cork islands.

Depopulation and housing on the West Cork islands

According to Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann (Irish Islands Federation) (2022), there were 34,219 people living on Ireland's offshore islands in 1841. In the 2022 census, the twenty-three inhabited offshore islands had a population of just 2,922. Although the long-term trend has been one of population decline on the offshore islands, the possibilities of remote working since the Covid-19 pandemic have presented some opportunities for a reinvigoration of island living. Census figures show that while the permanent offshore island population in Ireland fell by 5 per cent between 2011 and 2016 (from 2,872 to 2,742), it rose by 7 per cent between 2016 and 2022 (to 2,922).

The population of the West Cork islands also declined between 2011 and 2016 by 4 per cent (from 516 to 495) but rose by 3 per cent between 2016 and 2022 (to 511). Bere, Oileán Chléire, and Sherkin account for 86 per cent of the population of the West Cork islands and are referred to as 'the Big 3'. Bere Island – the most populated of the seven West Cork islands – lost almost 23 per cent of its population between 2011 and 2016, but since then it has increased its population by 31 per cent. In overall terms however, this reflects a 1 per cent increase in its population over the eleven-year period between 2011 and 2022. Notably, the population of the second most populated island of the West Cork islands, Oileán Chléire, fell by 25 per cent between 2016 and 2022.

Island populations are subject to fluctuation as inhabitants move off the island for seasonal employment or study, and second-home owners come and go. More unusually, Sherkin's population increased by 50 per cent in August 2022 (after the census was collected) with the arrival of 57 Ukrainian nationals who are currently being housed in the island's hotel.

Royle and Scott (1996) note that population decline on the Irish islands followed the Famine of the 1840s and has been an ever-present threat for island dwellers since then. According to Burholt et al. (2013) 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. Burholt et al. (2013) 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 *National Islands Policy* (Government of Ireland, 2023, p. 17) notes that:

> [o]ver 20% of the islands' population in 2016 were aged 65 years and older; this is considerably higher than the national average of 12% for that age cohort. Meanwhile, just 5% of the islands' population was under 4 years old in 2016, compared to an average of 8% nationally.

The *Rural Development Policy* (Government of Ireland, 2021, p. 88) also highlights that '[a] higher number of retired people live on the islands (19%) compared to the national proportion of retirees (13%)'. The *National Islands Policy* (Government of Ireland, 2022, p. 17) states that this 'age profile represents a challenge to the ongoing viability of the islands as places to live'.

Access to services, accessibility of islands, and the ability to secure an income have been identified as key factors to sustaining populations on offshore islands. Sorensen (2021, p. 3) observes that: '[g]ood broadband is now equivalent to electricity in importance for the future development of the [European] islands'. In their study which focused on the correlation between accessibility and depopulation, Cross and Nutley (1999) concluded that population stability on the Irish islands they studied was most affected by the ability to earn a living. On the Irish islands, however, the *Rural Development Policy* (Government of Ireland, 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.

Housing is also increasingly recognised by islanders and island representative groups as essential to enabling the types of population numbers which would secure investment for services and developing employment opportunities on the islands. Yet, despite its avowed commitment to maintaining populations on the Irish islands, there has been little government investment in housing on the islands in recent decades. The housing seminar workshop report (Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann, 2021) highlights the lack of community-owned and council housing on the Irish islands. O'Riordan (2020) also documents the 'acute shortage of permanent social housing' on the West Cork islands, with Sherkin island being one of the few islands with social housing (six units).

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'. Much of the housing on Heir and Long islands date back to the Congested Districts Board's provision of dwellings in West Cork (*c.* 1910). At the European level, a report from the ESIN (2005, p. 7) also observes that there is 'not a lot of social housing or authority/state-built houses [on the Irish islands]'. Given the older population profile on the islands, the lack of sheltered housing and supports for older people, including housing modifications and home help, is also a significant issue. This is also highlighted in the ESIN report (ibid.), which notes the uncertainty associated with ageing on an island.

The importance of young people being able to build or refurbish a house on the islands is recognised in the *Rural Development Policy* (Government of Ireland, 2021, p. 89). This 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'. There are, however, significant additional costs associated with the transport of building material and contracting in skilled personnel to islands. In its report on housing, ESIN estimates that these additional costs make building a house on an Irish island at least 40 per cent more expensive than building a similar house on the mainland (ESIN, 2005). This report also notes the shortage of land to build on the Irish islands, as well as the difficulties with planning permission on some. Furthermore, it highlights the precarity of renting on the islands and the difficultly of accessing a rental house 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 [from the tourist trade]' (ESIN, 2005, p. 8). These issues can make it very difficult for those who have grown up on the islands to remain and can also prevent those who wish to try island living shorter term to do so.

The research explored in this article aimed to provide an evidence base on the views of island residents on housing in the West Cork islands in order to gain the government's recognition of the particular issues presented by the housing crisis for the islands. As such, it provides the first academic study to document the perspectives of islanders on this national issue.

Methodology

The research involved a participatory, sequential mixed-methods approach that included a co-constructed survey, followed by focus groups. Following the approach of community-based participatory research, the methodology placed an emphasis on knowledge exchange and collaboration between academics and research partners. Scholars in community-based participatory research argue that this type of research should involve people as 'active participants or co-researchers and not simply construct them as sources of information' (Hugman et al., 2011, p. 1276). The benefits of a participatory approach include a better understanding of an issue by bringing the distinctive experiences and knowledge of participants into the research process (Campus Engage, 2017). The collaboration with island residents acknowledges that, as stated in the *West Cork Islands Integrated Development Strategy* (RPS Planning & Environment, 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'.

Structures of engagement included the establishment of an advisory group to enable ongoing partnership, the benefits of which are explored by O'Sullivan et al. (2023). A research advisory group comprising community development and island representative organisations and the research team was established in March 2021. The advisory group assisted in recruiting a participatory research group of sixteen West Cork island residents (from all of the islands, apart from Whiddy), who met between October and December 2021 to co-design the survey. The group included nine females and seven males, aged between twenty-five and seventy-four years.

Following a plenary meeting, the group was split between the two researchers for two meetings to workshop the survey, and the group reconvened in a final plenary meeting. At these workshops and meetings, participants 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. 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 circulated through the island development groups' networks in February and March 2022, via an online link, and respondents could also request a postal version. Sampling involved purposive and convenience sampling methods (Sue & Ritter, 2012) and the inclusion criteria were that respondents should be full- or part-time residents on one of the seven West Cork islands and be over the age of eighteen. To ensure that different generational perspectives were represented, the survey could be completed by more than one member of a household.

The survey was completed by 238 island residents, 98 per cent of whom took part online. The estimated survey response rate was 44 per cent of island residents over the age of eighteen. Most respondents lived full-time on the islands. For 71 per cent (n=170), their home on the island was their main residence; 56 per cent (n=134) of these respondents lived in a home that was owned by them or their family and 15 per cent (n=36) rented their home. For 29 per cent (n=68) of respondents, their home on the island was a second home. Fifty-six per cent of the respondents were female (n=131), 44 per cent male (n=104), and 0.4 per cent other. The highest number of respondents were aged between forty-five and sixty-four years of age (48 per cent of respondents), while 27 per cent were aged between eighteen and forty-four years, and 24 per cent aged sixty-four to eighty-four years (there were no participants in the survey aged eighty-five and over).

As well as the survey, the research also involved two focus groups and two interviews with ten island residents (six females and four males) from all of the islands, apart from Dursey and Whiddy. (Due to technical difficulties experienced by one participant, a focus group with two participants had to be managed via two separate meetings). The aim of these focus groups was to explore the survey issues in more depth. Given the small size of island communities and the commitment to preserving anonymity, identifiers such as gender, age, and island location were omitted from the focus group findings. Eight focus group participants were full-time resident homeowners and two were second-home owners; there were no renters in the focus groups. Of the eight full-time residents, four had been introduced to the island through their own or their family's second-home ownership.

Research findings

The significant impact of the housing crisis on the islands is evident in the views, experiences, and opinions of the residents of the West Cork Islands. The findings are presented under thematic headings and subsections related to housing availability, affordability, quality, and policy options for sustaining the islands.

Availability of housing

Overall, 93 per cent of respondents are concerned for the future of young people on their island in terms of housing availability and affordability (68 per cent very concerned; 25 per cent somewhat concerned). Eighty-six per cent of survey respondents said the lack of availability of houses for sale on the islands was a problem on their island (70 per cent a major problem; 16 per cent somewhat a problem). 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'. 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'. A survey respondent reflected on the general lack of available housing (both to buy and to rent), 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.

Eighty-one per cent of respondents stated that the lack of available properties for year-round rent is a problem on their island (62 per cent a major problem; 19 per cent somewhat a problem). The heightened precarity of renters, which is a feature of the mainland housing crisis,

is also significant on the islands. Of the questions directed at renters only, 86 per cent of renters said they were impacted by the lack of suitable housing for long-term rent, and 67 per cent by the length of time on the council housing waiting list.

Several renters in the survey wrote about the lack of housing security they are experiencing in relation to renting on the islands, with some having to leave the islands or facing the prospect of homelessness. Almost half of renters (46 per cent) stated that they have no formal written lease/tenancy agreement. 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.

High levels of concern were also expressed in relation to derelict, vacant, and second homes on the islands. Eighty-four per cent of respondents expressed concern about the numbers of derelict houses on the islands (38 per cent saw it as a major problem; 46 per cent as somewhat a problem). Seventy-one per cent stated there were too many second homes (42 per cent saw this as a major problem; 29 per cent as somewhat a problem) and 69 per cent said there were too many empty and habitable homes on the islands (which 33 per cent saw as a major problem and 36 per cent as somewhat a problem). Forty-three per cent of respondents highlighted the issue of council land left undeveloped on the islands (with 30 per cent seeing this as a major problem and 13 per cent regarding it as somewhat a problem). Seventy-seven per cent of respondents noted the challenges of obtaining planning permission on the islands (59 per cent a major problem; 18 per cent somewhat a problem) and 71 per cent the limited availability of land for building new houses (54 per cent a major problem; 17 per cent somewhat a problem).

Affordability of houses

The affordability of houses to buy was a problem highlighted by 77 per cent of respondents (54 per cent a major problem; 23 per cent somewhat a problem). Fifty-four per cent of respondents noted issues with the cost of rental properties (23 per cent a major problem; 31 per cent somewhat a problem). A permanent resident on one of the smaller islands in the focus groups reflected on 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 €1 million. 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'.

Quality of housing

It was not just the availability and affordability of houses to rent or buy which were seen as issues with regard to island housing. The often-hidden problem of the quality of existing island housing was also highlighted. A total of 68 per cent of respondents noted problems with maintaining their homes (15 per cent a major problem; 53 per cent somewhat a problem), while 65 per cent noted a problem with heating their homes (19 per cent a major problem; 46 per cent somewhat a problem). Related to this was the cost of upkeep of houses on the islands. Just over half (52 per cent) of island residents stated this was a problem for them (8 per cent a major problem; 44 per cent somewhat a problem). In the focus groups, 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 and vulnerability to more severe storms due to the impact of climate change. 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.

This participant added: 'we have looked at getting this waterproofing cover to go on the outside…hopefully, if we get a good [tourist] season this year…we'll have the money to be able to do that'. This quote highlights 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 highlighted, particularly given the current energy crisis: 'in terms of energy, it's very costly and with everything that's going on now [increases in inflation] it's even more ridiculous for costs'. Overall, 89 per cent of island residents stated that the cost of building, retrofitting, and renovating houses on the islands was a problem for them (66 per cent a major problem; 23 per cent somewhat a problem).

The quality of rental homes was a concern for 69 per cent of renters in the survey. Far fewer homes of renters had been renovated (33 per cent) or retrofitted (6 per cent), compared to homeowners (57 per cent of homes renovated; 21 per cent retrofitted) and second-home owners (67 per cent of homes renovated; 23 per cent retrofitted). The poorer quality and lack of suitability of homes for rent was also of concern for non-renters. A homeowner participant on one of the Big 3 stated: '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'.

Sustaining island communities: policy preferences

Wider issues related to the sustainability of island living were also of concern to respondents. Of these, the ageing population gained the highest response in the survey, with 95 per cent of respondents

highlighting this as an issue of concern (61 per cent very concerned; 34 per cent somewhat concerned). This was closely followed by a concern with depopulation (94 per cent), where 61 per cent were very concerned and 33 per cent somewhat concerned. Lack of island-based and remote working employment opportunities (49 per cent very concerned; 38 per cent somewhat concerned), broadband connectivity (46 per cent very concerned; 38 per cent somewhat concerned), access to services (45 per cent very concerned; 39 per cent somewhat concerned), not having a school (43 per cent very concerned; 22 per cent somewhat concerned) and access to public transport (25 per cent very concerned; 38 per cent somewhat concerned) were also significant.

Participants in the focus groups argued that housing was the key to generating and sustaining island life. The need for a mixture of housing required to support a diverse community was highlighted. As 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 socioeconomic backgrounds...[T]hat gives you…a much better, more resilient kind of community if you have variety.

Focus group participants noted that having a variety of housing options, particularly those that are appropriate for young families, including social and affordable housing, would help to sustain island populations. One participant said: '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'.

Recognising the interconnectedness of the issues they face, another participant 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'. A 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'.

In relation to the policy options which were most favoured by survey respondents to tackle housing and sustain populations on the West Cork islands, the need for increased grant aid to tackle the derelict housing situation on the islands was the top answer and favoured by 90 per cent of respondents. This was followed by a need to review the current Repair and Leasing Scheme (78 per cent) with regard to the level of funding available and the duration of the leasing period to the council, as well as the desire for gateway housing (71 per cent) to support new households to try island living for a set period of time. Sixty-five per cent supported a rural resettlement fund to incentivise people to move to the islands, while 58 per cent favoured the compulsory purchase of long-term derelict homes.

Other options that were supported, albeit with lower proportions, included higher taxation of derelict homes with the tax receipts allocated to the islands (54 per cent), reservation of houses for sale to permanent residents (49 per cent), more tourist accommodation (46 per cent) and higher taxation of second homes with tax receipts allocated to the islands (45 per cent). The need for greater regulation of Airbnb rentals given their impact on long-term, year-round rental accommodation and lack of security of tenure for tenants was highlighted in the focus groups.

With regard to the housing developments most favoured by respondents, by far the most popular was the conversion of derelict buildings (94 per cent). This was followed by sheltered housing for older island residents (77 per cent), social and affordable housing provided by Cork County Council or approved housing bodies (68 per cent), plots for self-builds (67 per cent), and community-owned co-operative housing schemes run by the island residents which could deliver affordable housing for island residents (67 per cent). The least favoured option was small-scale private developments of new houses – these were still, however, supported by just over half of respondents (51 per cent).

In the focus groups, residents expressed their dissatisfaction with the way in which policy formation for the islands had been conducted, with island residents feeling their particular needs were neglected in national policy. One participant stated: 'for housing and for renovation…all those policies that come out…they just don't fit with what's going on on the island'. Another participant argued that 'the national plan does not take account of what we need on islands' given the smaller populations involved.

This sense of neglect led to a 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'. It is important to note that these reflections preceded the publication of the *National Islands Policy 2023* which islanders had been waiting for expectantly at the time of the survey.

Participants felt there was a need for an independent housing association for the islands, particularly in relation to derelict housing. One participant noted the types of issues such a body could focus on, stating: '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'. 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.

Given their concerns regarding the potential for partiality in the small communities that are characteristic of islands, most focus group participants argued for the need for an independent multi-agency association to develop housing on the islands. Most also viewed the Council as having a key role in this. As one participant noted, this wider input of independent advisers 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 in turn challenged this, arguing: 'we can't do it on our own'.

Discussion

The research highlights the particular impact of the national housing crisis on the West Cork islands. The findings highlight the considerable implications of the housing crisis for the long-term habitability

and sustainability of full-time populations on the islands. 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'.

The housing situation on the West Cork islands represents a microcosm of the nationwide housing crisis, particularly as it impacts more remote rural areas. The islands, however, face the added risk that the lack of homes poses to the ability of the islands to prevent depopulation, to attract and retain a full-time population (including existing inhabitants and their offspring, newcomers, and those offering essential services), to sustain families on the islands, and to preserve island living into the future.

As the findings reveal, the lack of available, affordable, secure housing – both of homes to buy and to rent year-round – is of significant concern to residents regarding their children's ability to remain on the islands, and is resulting in people having to leave who would otherwise have stayed. Many residents are living in poor quality, older houses which are difficult to maintain and heat. The exposure of the islands to extreme weather, which is becoming more pronounced with climate change, and rises in the cost of living and energy prices, means the need for home maintenance and retrofitting for energy efficiency on the islands is a major priority.

It is clear from the research that renters on the islands face particular precarity in terms of accessing long-term, secure tenancies in suitable homes. As Byrne (2022, p. 7) highlights, the private rental sector is at the 'epicentre' of the housing crisis. The paucity of social housing on the islands (as on the mainland) means that renters are not 'shielded from the market' (Dewilde, 2017, p. 390), but rather have to compete to access the private rental sector in a limited market (Rolnik, 2013; Lima et al., 2023).

Although Byrne (2022) signals the emergence of a partial de-commodification of housing through national level regulation of the private rental sector (including longer statutory tenancy lengths, increased length of notice periods, and specific grounds for terminations), these are not being felt on the islands where many tenants do not have formal leases. Furthermore, these reforms are insufficient as tenants across Ireland continue to lack security of tenure and 'tenancy termination continues to be the main cause of family homelessness' (ibid, p. 11). Thus, for renters, including those on the islands, the crisis remains one of availability, affordability, insecurity of tenure, and the inability 'to create meaningful homes' (Byrne, 2022, p. 2).

The research highlights several key issues for policy, in particular the development of a variety of housing to support the diverse populations that are key to the resilience of island communities. This includes affordable housing, social housing, and long-term rental housing. Innovative government initiatives to attract people to the islands such as gateway housing, as well as a more responsive planning system, increased funding for retrofitting and renovation on islands, bringing derelict homes back into use where possible, and a holistic approach which addresses wider contributors to the sustainability of populations (e.g. an adequate and subsidised ferry service, schools, and access to broadband) are also noted as essential. Islanders identified the need for a multi-agency approach to tackle their housing issues which involved the inclusive representation of island residents.

The recent *National Islands Policy 2023–2033 'Our living islands'* reflects many of the concerns and recommendations of island residents. The policy was informed by a consultative process with islanders. The research documented in this article also informed the policy. Strategic objective 1 is to revitalise population levels on the islands 'to halt population decline on the islands and, in collaboration with island communities, create the conditions that will encourage young people to remain on, or move to, the islands to live, work and raise families' (Government of Ireland, 2023a, p. 21).

The policy recognises that a coordinated approach is required across government to maintain populations on the islands and enable them to grow. Housing is included under objective 1, and the policy acknowledges that '[w]hile housing supply and affordability are key issues at national level, many of the factors affecting housing supply and construction generally are amplified on the islands' (Government of Ireland, 2023a, p. 26). It affirms that '[a] mix of housing types, including long-term private rental accommodation, is considered key to attracting families and essential workers, including teachers, nurses and GPs, to the islands' and that 'dilapidated houses' could be 'brought back into use to meet housing demand' on the islands (Government of Ireland, 2023a, p. 26).

The policy goes on to state that '[d]elivering a mix of tenure types, whether private rental, private ownership, or social housing, while at the same time maintaining a sufficient number of short-term lets, will help secure the long-term viability of communities and attractiveness of island living' (Government of Ireland, 2023a, p. 27). It also recognises the need to quantify housing stock on the islands – with analyses of existing and projected demand – to help 'inform the

quantum and mix of housing needed to meet corresponding island population targets' (Government of Ireland, 2023a, p. 27).

The *Policy Action Plan* (Government of Ireland, 2023b) comprises a number of housing measures. These include planning guidelines for rural housing to acknowledge island challenges, vacant home officers to identify and develop a reactivation programme for derelict properties on the islands, grant support for vacant housing on the islands to be increased under Croí Cónaithe (the current findings also highlight the need for funding on retrofitting island homes be increased), a targeted programme for new social housing on the islands to be put in place, and the potential role for approved housing bodies to support a community-led response to housing on the islands (including gateway housing).

The implementation of the policy is crucial and will involve local authorities and other key stakeholders. However, as is clear from scholarly research and critique, policy implementation is a complex and often non-linear process, and policies can have a degree of generality which means that their implementation is subject to interpretation (Cairney, 2012). Implementation is also dependent on financial resources and organisational structures, dynamics, and potential resistance (Morgan-Williams, 2019). These factors can lead to implementation gaps (Cairney, 2012). It is essential, therefore, that the implementation of the *National Islands Policy* is financially well resourced, well structured, clearly communicated, and occurs in close collaboration with island residents and representative groups. It is also vital to maintain the momentum arising from this focussed period of research towards sustaining full-time populations on the West Cork islands through access to secure, affordable and good quality housing as a basic human right of islanders.

Conclusion

Until recently, the focus of much commentary and policy on the housing crisis has been on the Irish mainland, in particular on urban areas. This article highlights the particular challenges facing rural areas at risk of depopulation through a case study of the West Cork islands. Exploring the viewpoints and experiences of islanders on housing affordability, availability, and quality, the article shows how these aspects impact on the sustainability of island living.

Housing on the West Cork islands is central to supporting the population numbers needed to attract and maintain employment and

services – which, in turn, support the islands as locations for full-time residence. The mismatch between the level of need for housing and the limited extent of its availability, as well as the lack of affordability, means that island residents (and potential residents) are unable to compete for, or access, adequate secure housing. This represents a microcosm of the crisis occurring on the Irish mainland, as well as internationally (Lima et al., 2023; Rolnik, 2013), with the added threat the housing crisis poses to sustaining the islands as places of full-time habitation.

With regard to renting, it is clear, as Dewilde (2017, p. 390) states, that the private rental sector is 'unable to safeguard the right to housing for all households in need'. Islanders have articulated for some time that the market cannot solve the housing crisis on the islands and that the islands need special arrangements and investment. Farha (2017, p. 21) argues that states and local governments should develop strategies, including 'a full range of taxation, regulatory and planning measures in order to re-establish housing as a social good' and 'promote an inclusive housing system'. The *National Islands Policy* is an important step in tackling the housing crisis on the islands and re-asserting housing as a fundamental human right of islanders as citizens of the Irish state. Its implementation is crucial to ensuring the islands remain viable as locations for full-time habitation now and into the future.

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