

June 2026



# The People's Transition: Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht



Údarás na  
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# Acknowledgements

This report details the findings of the People's Transition process as it was applied in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht from February 2024 to June 2025. This project has been led by the Think-tank for Action on Social Change (TASC) in partnership with Cumas Ceantar Uíbh Ráthach.

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# Executive Summary

The People's Transition describes a model for participative decision-making that is intended to enable a community to benefit from the transition to a zero-carbon society. It aims to design climate solutions that give local people and communities ownership of the assets and benefits of transition and enhance public support for climate action by tackling inequality and raising standards of living.

The People's Transition in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht began in February 2024. The intention of the project was to listen to and learn from the community's needs and abilities, and then attempt to design a number of climate solutions that would benefit the community and address a number of the main local development priorities.

The project had three phases: a mapping phase, a community engagement phase, and a solutions phase. The mapping phase aimed to build a picture of the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht, outlining a geographical scope for the project that represents the people who live there. In addition to demographics, existing research reports and local development plans were studied, and preliminary community and stakeholder engagement gatherings were held to understand the distribution of institutions, organisations, and community groups that play a significant role in the locality and identify existing local development priorities and needs. It quickly became evident that a current deficit of available and affordable long-term housing is a primary obstacle hindering the regeneration of the Gaeltacht.

The mapping phase informed the roll-out of the community engagement phase. This phase of the project, developed in partnership with Cumas Ceantar Uíbh Ráthach, brought artists and community members together to explore new responses to the rural housing crisis through the perspective of climate justice, using art as a medium. The TOCHAIL socially engaged arts residencies underscored the importance of integrating language preservation, ecological principles, skills development opportunities, and participatory planning into house development in the Gaeltacht. The findings present a compelling vision for housing that extends beyond individual units, creating spaces that sustain language, support local employment, and foster community life within planetary boundaries. Participants expressed that with an enabling policy environment, the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht could become a blueprint for rural and minority-language communities worldwide, demonstrating that housing can be both a social good and a vehicle for resilience and regeneration.

Drawing on the outputs of the mapping and community engagement phases, TASC worked with local experts to identify and substantiate three strategic pathways forward. These pathways aim to build on existing capabilities and strengths while embedding just transition principles into ongoing local efforts to tackle the housing crisis.

The first pathway considers how key aspects of a just transition can be integrated into the development of a community-led housing pilot. These include shared community spaces, food-growing initiatives, the use of sustainable energy systems and local materials, as well as a strong focus on education and skills development.

While the People's Transition model underscores the importance of community ownership and agency in the transition process, it also recognises the need for an enabling environment. In light of this, the second pathway explores what kind of policy landscape is required to support both the implementation of a community-led housing pilot and broader efforts to secure long-term access to affordable housing for the Irish-speaking community. Bringing these first two pathways together, the third proposes the creation of a well-resourced, community-led, just transition housing network in the Gaeltacht. This network would act as a platform for sustained collective action, promote inclusive community engagement, and build connections with other Gaeltacht areas and minority language communities, working collectively to advocate for progressive and supportive housing policies.

These proposed pathways should not be considered the only possible collective climate initiatives in which the communities of the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht could participate. Others, looking at the same set of needs and priorities, may land on different pathways and climate solutions. However, it is hoped that the process, as much as the proposed solutions, provokes thought about how investment in climate action can address, rather than perpetuate, existing development needs.

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# Introduction

# 1. Introduction

Tackling climate change requires urgent and unprecedented action in communities all around the world. Given the interdependent nature of the crisis, if climate action is to be enduring, then it must be inclusive and equitable, ensuring that its burdens and benefits are shared throughout society. While the importance of inclusive climate policy seems to be widely understood, there are few tried and tested frameworks for the co-creation of climate policy in European communities.

The People's Transition (McCabe, 2020) attempts to address this. It is a participative decision-making model for climate action. It views climate action as an enabler of local development, giving people and communities ownership of the transition to zero-carbon societies. The model, which was developed through extensive consultation with communities and organisations around Ireland, seeks to deliver a bottom-up approach to transition that builds local wealth, enables local ownership of climate action, and empowers local people. It aims to tackle inequality and raise living standards through the delivery of climate solutions, thus proactively building social approval and demand for climate action.

Embedding fairness in climate action requires recognising that different places and communities have different histories of development and face distinctive challenges. Rural communities, in particular, face much more complex transitions due to factors such as limited economic diversity, fewer services and greater reliance on the private car for transportation (Moore-Cherry, Clavin, Krawchenko and Tomaney, 2022).

This report describes the People's Transition process as it was applied in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht, one of two Gaeltacht areas in County Kerry. Situated in South Kerry, the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht lies in the west of the Iveragh Peninsula. It is difficult to overstate the cultural, environmental, linguistic and historical significance of this Irish-speaking area. It is renowned for its outstanding natural landscapes, its rich cultural heritage, and its deep connection to the Irish language. Across Ireland and the world, the wider Iveragh Peninsula is best known for its literary traditions, storytelling, local festivals, the scenic Ring of Kerry route, the Skellig Islands, and, more recently, its designation as an International Dark Sky Reserve.

The Uíbh Ráthach People's Transition began in February 2024, following an invitation from Cumas Ceantar Uíbh Ráthach (Creative Places) to bring the People's Transition model to the South Kerry Gaeltacht. Creative Places/Cumas Ceantar is a recent

initiative from the Irish Arts Council, and was first piloted in Tuam, County Galway, in 2020. This programme, which is rooted in socially engaged arts practices and community development principles, offers places and communities the opportunity to receive sustained investment in local, community-based arts. Creative Places/Cumas Ceantar Uíbh Ráthach began in 2022 as a one-year research programme. In 2024, the Iveragh Peninsula was awarded the complete three-year programme.

Throughout this project, TASC has been fortunate to work in partnership with Cumas Ceantar, benefiting from the dedication, support, and vision of its coordinator, as well as the commitment of its local partners.

This People's Transition project had three phases, leading to the co-creation of three strategic pathways aimed at embedding a just transition perspective into ongoing efforts to address the housing crisis in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht. First, preliminary meetings with local people and community development workers supported an extensive mapping phase, which drew on existing research reports, local development strategies, and census data to create a comprehensive picture of both the challenges and opportunities facing the Gaeltacht, as well as efforts underway in each of the communities that make up the Gaeltacht.

From the outset, it became clear that the project should aim to complement and support, rather than duplicate, existing community initiatives. One issue emerged as particularly urgent: the deficit of affordable housing, which in recent years has become a major barrier to reversing population decline in the area.

These early findings led to the design of a unique community engagement process, whereby three artists' residencies were selected to engage local residents and groups in exploring new approaches to the rural housing crisis through the lens of climate justice. The residency outputs were analysed by TASC, resulting in the identification of seven core themes. These themes directly informed three pathways forward, or 'solutions', which are detailed in Chapter 5: 1) Circularity and developing shared spaces for climate action through community-led housing; 2) A supportive policy environment; and 3) Building and sustaining collective action through a community-led just transition housing network.

This report presents the findings from each phase of the project in a narrative that aims to take the reader through the People's Transition process to illustrate why it is important to consider climate action from a people and community-centred perspective.



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# Mapping: Understanding the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht

## 2. Mapping: Understanding the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht

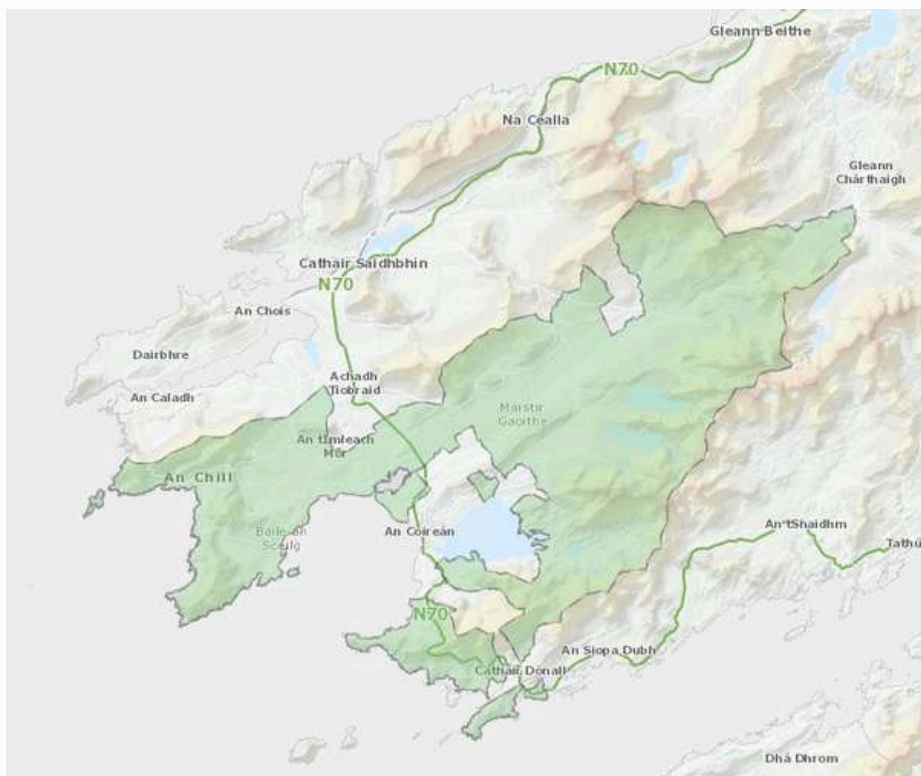
In recent years, the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht has been the subject of several research projects and strategic initiatives. Local civil society organisations, particularly Comhchoiste Ghaeltacht Uíbh Ráthaigh, have long advocated for investment in Iveragh's physical, economic, cultural, and social capital. They have sought to promote an evidence-based approach to the area's development, supporting both academic and applied research.

This section presents an overview of these published texts alongside an analysis of the 2022 Census data.

### Bound by Boundaries?

Like all Gaeltacht areas in Ireland, the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht has defined boundaries, which were last re-drawn in 1956. The current geographic boundary has been described as dispersed and fragmented (Crowley and Sheehan, 2009), as illustrated in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht – Official Boundaries**



However, readers of this report should not consider the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht to be a totally separate entity from its surrounding areas. Due to the fragmented nature of its boundaries, Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht areas in South Kerry are intrinsically linked by access to services, employment, and flows of resources (Tascfhórsa Uíbh Ráthach, 2019). For example, there is no town or secondary school within the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht itself. Instead, nearby towns and villages, such as Cahersiveen and Waterville, provide essential services to the Gaeltacht population and those towns rely on the support of the Gaeltacht population to sustain their commercial and social lives. Employment opportunities for Gaeltacht residents are also often found outside the area. Recognising these realities, Cahersiveen was designated an official Gaeltacht Service Town in 2023, which has seen an increase in Irish language promotion locally. Given this interdependence, community participation in this project took place both within and beyond the official Gaeltacht boundary.

## Gaeltacht Uíbh Ráthach: An Overview

There are 1,874 people living within the Gaeltacht, most of whom live in or close to one of the following four settlements: An Gleann, Baile an Sceilg, An Dromaid, and Cathair Dónall. Each of these settlements hosts local public services and community development groups.

**Figure 2: Settlement nodes in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht**



### Settlements within the Gaeltacht

- **An Gleann:** Overlooking the Skellig Islands, An Gleann and the surrounding area encompass part of the west of the Gaeltacht. The settlement includes a church, school, community hall, café/restaurant, and the Skelligs Chocolate Factory.

- **Baile an Sceilg:** Baile an Sceilg is a scenic coastal settlement south of An Gleann. Baile an Sceilg hosts a community hall, church, pub, post office, shop, petrol station, arts centre, and a small industrial estate where a new Údarás na Gaeltachta-supported digital remote working hub and two manufacturing companies can be found. The area and nearby beaches are popular with tourists in the summer months.
- **An Dromaid:** Located approximately 20 kilometres inland from Baile an Sceilg, An Dromaid is the most inland and upland settlement within the Gaeltacht. The small village of Cillín Liath, which is at the centre of An Dromaid, hosts a GAA club, school, church, pub, small shop, and the An Dromaid community development hub. This hub includes a community-owned hostel, childcare service, cancer care support car, six homes for older community members, a community hall, and a digital/remote working hub. O'Keeffe and O'Sullivan (2017) identified An Dromaid as the community most in need of sustained investment due to severe population decline and a lack of sustainable development over the past sixty years.
- **An Lóthar and An Gleann Mór:** There are also smaller settlements at An Lóthar, a townland overlooking Bá na Scealg, home to a well-preserved 9th-century stone ringfort and at An Gleann Mór, a community on the southern shores of Loch Luíoch (Waterville Lake).

**Figure 3: Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht in relation to Kerry County and Gaeltacht Corca Dhuibhne**



Cathair Dónall, the south of the Iveragh Peninsula straddles the Gaeltacht boundary, with part of the community inside and part outside. This picturesque village has a community hall, hostel, pub/restaurant, church, and playground. Until recently, the village had a shop, bar and restaurant within one building, but this has since closed.

## Community Data

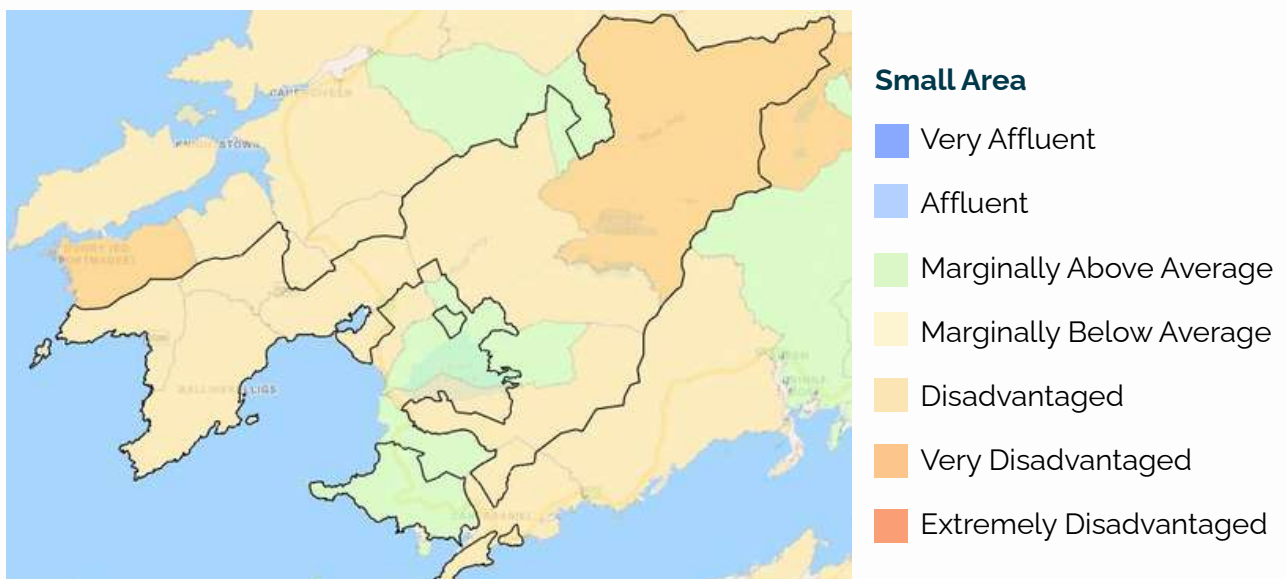
### HP Pobal Deprivation Index

The HP Pobal Deprivation Index is a single indicator of disadvantage which was developed to quantify and map social conditions in Ireland and guide the allocation of resources to the areas where they are most needed.

When the Gaeltacht boundary is overlaid on the 2022 HP Deprivation Index Map, which is based on 2022 Census of Population data, it reveals that most of the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht is classified as 'marginally below average' in terms of socioeconomic status. Exceptions to this include:

- The Derriana/Cloon Electoral Division (ED) in An Dromaid, which is classified as 'disadvantaged'
- Parts of the Doire Fhionáin ED (near Cathair Dónall), which is classified as 'marginally above average'
- And parts of the Loch Luíoch ED located between Waterville and An Dromaid, which is classified as being 'marginally above average'.

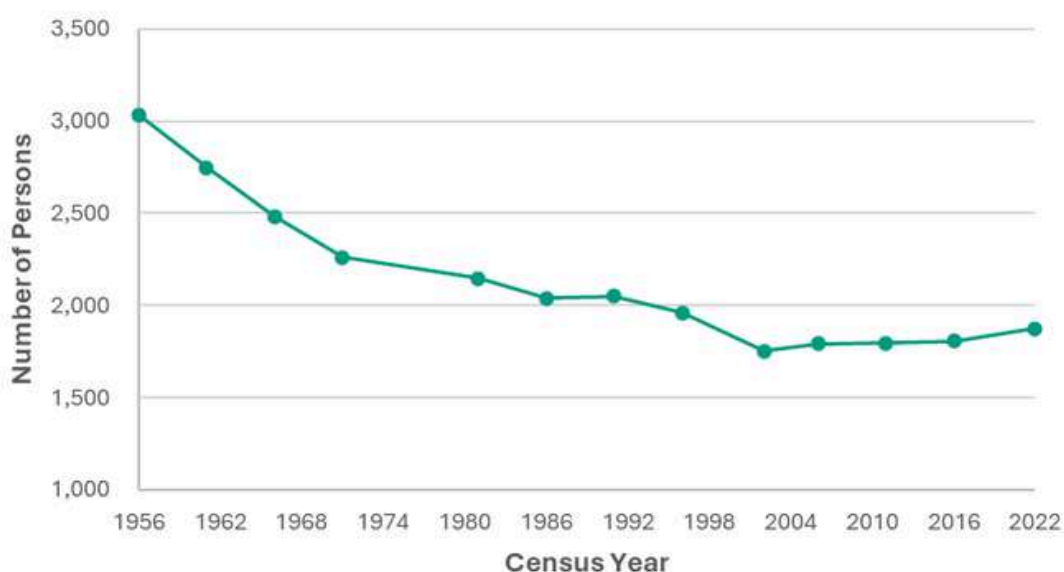
**Figure 4: Pobal HP Deprivation Indices 2022 of the Iveragh Peninsula at ED level**



## Population Decline in Gaeltacht Uíbh Ráthach

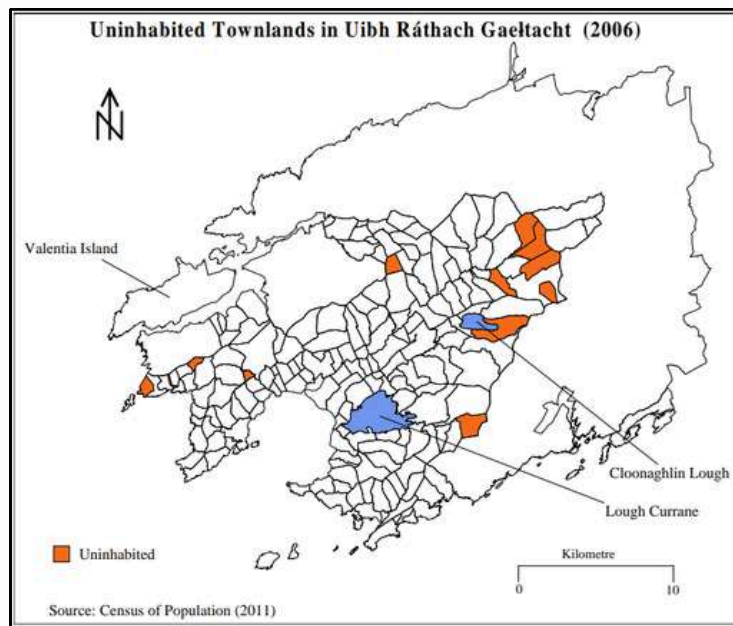
The Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht has been described as 'structurally and demographically weak' and remains vulnerable to further population decline (O'Keeffe and O'Sullivan, 2017, p.2). Over the past seven decades, outward migration has significantly impacted the locality, leading to rural depopulation and economic decline. Between 1956 and 2011, the population nearly halved, shrinking by 41% and resulting in a net loss of 1,241 people (O'Keeffe and O'Sullivan, 2017). Over the same timeframe, the population of the Corca Dhuibhne Gaeltacht in West Kerry increased by 9.5% or 603 people.

**Figure 5. Population changes in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht, 1956 – 2022**

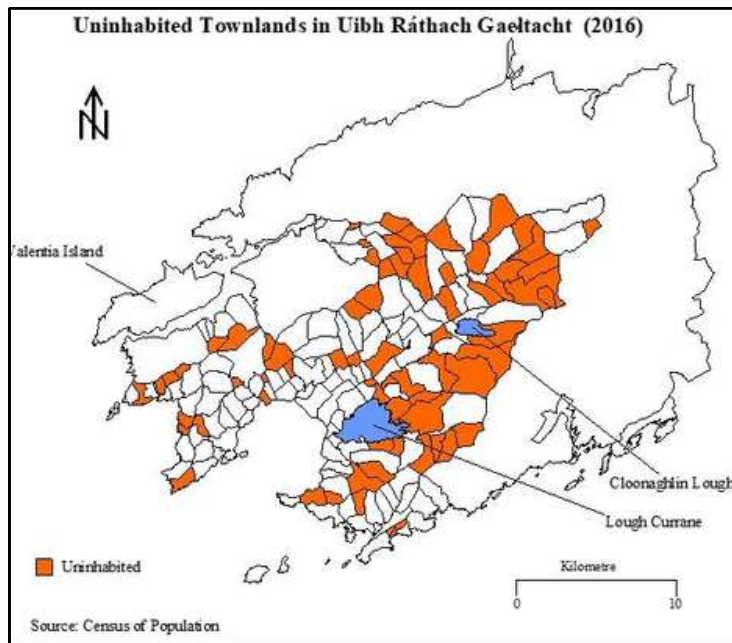


Source: O'Keeffe and O'Sullivan, 2017, updated to include 2016 and 2022 Census figures

Since 2002, population levels have begun to stabilise, but the Gaeltacht remains at risk. Young people continue to leave, and few return to settle or work in the area. Attracting new residents is also challenging, but in recent years, remote working has provided an avenue of opportunity. O'Keeffe and O'Sullivan (2017) observe that a spatially balanced approach to repopulation is essential, particularly for the Gaeltacht's inland and upland communities where the spread of uninhabited townlands is concentrated. The maps below illustrate a significant increase in the number of uninhabited townlands in the Gaeltacht between 2006 and 2016.

**Figure 6. Uninhabited townlands in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht in 2006**

Source: O'Keeffe and O'Sullivan, 2017

**Figure 7. Uninhabited townlands in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht in 2016**

Source: O'Keeffe and O'Sullivan, 2017, updated by O'Keeffe and O'Sullivan to include 2016 Census data

## Age, Ethnicity, and Place of Birth

Between the 2016 and 2022 Censuses, the population of the Gaeltacht increased by 3.5% to 1,874 people. An examination of age distribution data reveals an ageing community: 22% of residents are under 19, 16% are aged 20-39, 34% are between 40-65, and 28% are over 65. The proportion of residents over 65 is notably higher than the national level of 19%.

In terms of ethnicity, 84% of the population identified as 'White Irish', 9% as 'Other White', 0.4% identified as 'Asian or Asian Irish', and 0.2% identified as 'Black or Black Irish'. Additionally, 0.3% identified as members of the Traveller community. The majority of the Gaeltacht population (85%) were born in Ireland, 88% hold Irish citizenship, and 95% were resident at the same address 5 years ago.

Like many parts of Ireland, South Kerry now has a significant Ukrainian population. While most Ukrainian arrivals were not included in the 2022 Census, Central Statistics Office (CSO) data from February 2025 show that Ukrainians (n=2,716) now make up 10% of the population in the Kenmare Local Electoral Area.<sup>1</sup> Notably, this figure has decreased since February 2024, when it was 10.5%. Within the Gaeltacht, by the end of 2023, there were 83 Ukrainian refugees residing in Baile an Sceilg. Close by, there were 374 living in Cahersiveen and 331 living in Waterville and Cathair Dónall.

## Health, Disability, and Carers

Health data from the Census indicates that 84% of Gaeltacht residents describe their health as 'good or very good', slightly above the national figure of 83%. Just 1.6% (30 people) reported their health as 'bad or very bad'. Approximately 17.5% of the population described themselves as having a disability, a lower rate than the national level of 21.5%. Disability is defined by the CSO as a 'long lasting condition or difficulty to any extent'.

Census data related to unpaid care showed that the percentage of the local population in the Gaeltacht providing regular unpaid care to a family member, friend, or neighbour with a health issue or disability was 8% in 2022. This is higher than the national rate of 6%. Among the 146 people providing regular unpaid care, 57% were women, and 43% were men. At both a national level and in Gaeltacht Uíbh Ráthach, a greater share of unpaid care is provided by females compared with males.

## Car Ownership and Commuting

Car ownership in the Gaeltacht is high, with 94% of households owning a vehicle compared to 86% nationally. Given the high level of car dependency in remote and rural areas of Ireland, it is unsurprising that 77% commute to work in a car or private vehicle, exceeding the national rate of 68%. Further available commuting data from the Census showed that only 1% take public transport to work, 5% walk, and fewer than 1% cycle. 18% work 'mainly at or from home' compared to 12% nationally and 11% across Kerry County.

A different pattern emerges in school and college commutes in the Gaeltacht. More than half of students (52%) travel by bus, a significantly higher proportion than the national rate of 17%. This trend is likely influenced by the Department of Education's school transport scheme, which provides subsidised transport for children living beyond designated distances from their nearest schools.

Another factor to note is the impact of school amalgamation, which became more prevalent in Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Commission on School Accommodation, 2001). A community development worker and lifelong Gaeltacht resident reflected on how, during the process of amalgamation, clusters of schools in the Gaeltacht and nearby non-Gaeltacht areas merged into single schools. As a result, students had to travel longer distances to attend school.

Beyond transportation, amalgamation can also have a negative impact on the use of Irish in the community (Commission on School Accommodation, 2001). The same community worker noted that for some families in the Gaeltacht, the nearest school following these changes was an English-medium institution.

## The Irish Language

The number of Irish speakers in the Gaeltacht declined during 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, mirroring the overall population decline at the time. In their socio-economic and demographic analysis of the Gaeltacht published in 2017, O'Keeffe and O'Sullivan note that the percentage of the population that speak Irish in the Gaeltacht has, in recent years, remained consistent, with 60% of the population over 3 years of age reporting being able to speak Irish. Encouragingly, Census 2022 recorded a 10% increase in daily Irish speakers outside the education system since 2016. This news of an increase in the use of Irish outside of school was celebrated by local development organisations, Brí Uíbh Ráthaigh, Tascfhórsa Uíbh Ráthaigh and Irish language promotion groups across the Iveragh Peninsula.

Under the national language planning process, communities devise and implement bespoke plans aimed at strengthening the use of Irish in the community. Two language plans are in place on the Iveragh Peninsula: Plean Teanga Ciarraí Theas, covering the Gaeltacht area, and Plean Teanga Cahir Saidbhín, dedicated to Cahersiveen. A third plan, which is currently under development, will focus on language preservation in western Iveragh — on the communities from Na Cealla to Cuan an Chaisleáin that are outside the official Gaeltacht boundaries. That plan, which was developed by Nascadh Uíbh Ráthaigh (a local voluntary organisation), was

submitted to the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media in September 2023, and is awaiting ministerial approval.

## Education and Employment

Education attainment data, examining the highest level of education completed to date, reveals that, 40% of Gaeltacht residents hold a third-level qualification, while 8% have a technical or vocational qualification, and 17% have completed upper secondary level education.

On Census night 2022, 48% of residents described themselves as 'at work' compared to 53% across County Kerry. The largest employment sectors included professional services (22%), agriculture, forestry and fishing (17%) and commerce and trade (17%). Previous socioeconomic analyses of the Gaeltacht revealed that many people engage in multiple economic activities, particularly in agriculture and tourism, reflecting a tradition of pluri-activity (O'Keeffe & O'Sullivan, 2017).

Regarding agriculture, O'Keeffe and O'Sullivan (2017) describe the land as being mainly marginal, and as a consequence, agricultural activity in the Gaeltacht is reliant on EU payments and agri-environmental schemes. An examination of 1991, 2000, and 2010 farm Census data showed that the predominant system in the locality is sheep and cattle farming.

The Gaeltacht's long-term unemployment rate (1.8%) mirrors the country's 1.9% rate. Census data does not account for those who have left the Gaeltacht in search of work. The lower workforce participation rate in the Gaeltacht may be explained by the relatively high proportion of the population that is retired. 27% of residents over 15 are retired, compared to 19% countywide. The proportion of people unable to work due to illness or disability is marginally lower than the national and county level at 4%, while 8% of the population over the age of 15 are students.

## Housing

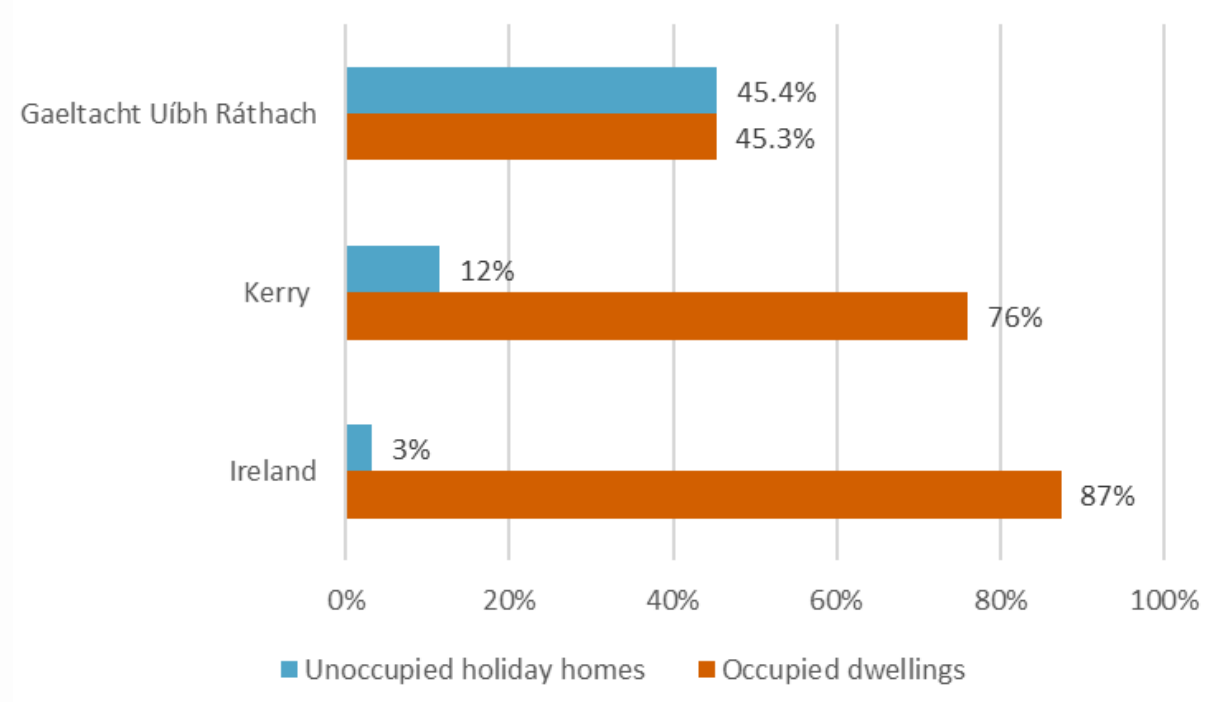
A total of 728 permanent private households were recorded in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht in 2022. Nearly half (47%) were built before 1980, higher than the Kerry rate of 39%. Homeownership is the most common form of tenure, with 65% owning their homes outright and 20% holding mortgages. The percentage of homes owned outright is relatively high in the Gaeltacht when compared with Kerry (49%) or the state (39%). 9% of homes were rented from a private landlord, and just 3% were rented from

the Local Authority.

Fossil fuels are the dominant home heating type, with 53% of homes using oil for central heating and 25% using peat, which is substantially higher than the national figure of 4%. The relatively high use of peat and turf for central heating can be explained by the prevalence of Atlantic Blanket Bog in the Gaeltacht and on the broader Iveragh Peninsula (Hammond, 1979). By contrast, only 4% of homes use electricity for heating compared to 11% across Kerry.

A striking statistic from Census 2022 is the large number of unoccupied homes. Only 45% of dwellings were occupied on Census night, while a further 45% were categorised as unoccupied holiday homes and 9% were recorded as 'other vacant dwellings'.

**Figure 8. Unoccupied holiday homes versus occupied dwellings on Census night, 2022, Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht, Kerry County and the State.**



## Community development support in the Gaeltacht

Community development supports are provided to each settlement in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht through **Comhchoiste Ghaeltacht Uíbh Ráthaigh**, the **South Kerry Development Partnership (SKDP)**, **Údarás na Gaeltachta**, and other local community and voluntary groups.

## Údarás na Gaeltachta

Údarás na Gaeltachta is the state agency responsible for the economic, social, and cultural development of Ireland's Gaeltacht areas. Its primary goal is to preserve Irish as the dominant communal language in the Gaeltacht and ensure it is passed on to future generations. As part of this, Údarás na Gaeltachta funds and supports a wide range of initiatives, including community development, language and cultural programmes, job creation, and enterprise development across all seven Gaeltacht areas.

In Uíbh Ráthach, the agency plays a key role in community development by providing valuable financial support to Comhchoiste Ghaeltacht Uíbh Ráthaigh and Forbairt na Dromoda Teo, a community-led social enterprise based in An Dromaid, to enable them to implement their work programmes. Additionally, Údarás sponsors local employment schemes, such as the Rural Social Scheme and the Community Employment Scheme, which are administered on the ground by the Comhchoiste.

## Comhchoiste Ghaeltacht Uíbh Ráthaigh

Comhchoiste Ghaeltacht Uíbh Ráthach is a longstanding community development organisation located at Ceann Eich between An Dromaid and Baile an Sceilg. It works across the Ghaeltacht to promote the Irish language, support local development, and improve access to services. Acting as a key convener of local community groups, the Comhchoiste plays an instrumental role in advocating for the Gaeltacht and fostering collective action and intercommunity collaboration. In recent years, the Comhchoiste has established itself as a Sustainable Energy Community with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland and, in 2023, commissioned and published an Energy Master Plan (EMP) for the area.

In 2023, with the support of Údarás na Gaeltachta, the Comhchoiste developed a Five-Year Strategic Plan for the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht. To inform and steer the plan, public meetings were held across the Gaeltacht, with 63 community members participating. Participants identified key local strengths, including a renewed focus on strengthening the use of Irish, the natural beauty and landscape of the local area, a strong sense of community spirit, and the availability of local services—particularly the opportunity to pursue education through Irish.

The challenges identified during the development of the plan mirrored many of the priorities that led to the creation of Taskforce Uíbh Ráthach and its action plans. These

included a deficit of accessible and affordable housing, a lack of sustainable career opportunities and the seasonal nature of many current employment opportunities, population decline, and diminishing essential healthcare services, particularly GP access. At the settlement level, the closure of community services and gathering spaces, such as shops and pubs, was also identified as a challenge facing Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht communities.

In addition, in 2023, Údarás na Gaeltachta supported Forbairt na Dromada Teo to develop a specific five-year plan dedicated to the settlement of An Dromaid. Community development priorities over the coming years included improving amenities and facilities for young people and developing the local economy.

### **South Kerry Development Partnership (SKDP)**

The South Kerry Development Partnership is one of 49 community-led local development organisations across Ireland. SKDP works across South Kerry to provide localised and community-based responses to socio-economic challenges.

The organisation implements a broad range of programmes focused just transition and climate justice, including the Rural Social Scheme and Kerry Social Farming. Additionally, SKDP has been involved in several EU-funded projects exploring the feasibility of a community energy cooperative in South Kerry.

As part of this ongoing work, SKDP has been working with local community groups in South Kerry, undertaking feasibility studies, and has secured a site for a community-led solar farm. While this site is located outside the Gaeltacht, its close proximity offers an opportunity for shared learning and potential benefits for community members in Gaeltacht Uíbh Ráthach. The project is expected to develop further over the course of 2025.

### **Revitalising the Gaeltacht and responding to population decline, Tascfhórsa Uíbh Ráthaigh**

Tascfhórsa Uíbh Ráthaigh was established in September 2017 as an interagency task force to address population decline in the Gaeltacht. The scale of the challenge was comprehensively documented for the first time in a socio-economic and demographic profile of the Gaeltacht, commissioned by Comhchoiste Ghaeltacht Uíbh Ráthaigh and published in the spring of 2017. This independent, external research was conducted by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

Chaired by Údarás na Gaeltachta, the task force brings together a broad coalition of national and local state agencies, business and community organisations, and educational bodies.

### Membership of Tascfhórsa Uíbh Ráthach:

- **State Agencies & Local Authorities:** Údarás na Gaeltachta, Kerry County Council, The Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, HSE
- **Education & Research Institutions:** Munster Technological University, Kerry Education and Training Board, University College Cork, Teagasc, Skellig CRI
- **Community Development Organisations and Local Service Providers:** South Kerry Development Partnership, Local Link Kerry, Comhchoiste Ghaeltacht Uíbh Ráthach, Comharchumann Naomh Fhionáin Teo
- **Business and Tourism:** Fáilte Ireland, Skellig Coast Tourism Network, Táirgí Tréad-Lia Teoranta
- **Cultural Groups:** Éigse na Brídeoige
- **Semi-state agencies:** Coillte, Bord Iascaigh Mhara

### Strategic Planning and Achievements:

Since its inception, the task force has focused on developing and implementing two strategic action plans, both of which have an overarching aim of stabilising the local population. The first plan, covering 2019-2022, set a target of increasing the Gaeltacht population by 3%, a goal that was successfully surpassed. This was achieved through diverse and sustained efforts to attract families, individuals with no prior connections to the area, and members of the diaspora. The long-term goal of the task force is to grow the population to 2,100.

Extensive community and stakeholder engagement was undertaken during the development of both the 2019 and 2023 action plans. This included:

- A survey of the diaspora
- One-on-one interviews with a cross-section of all stakeholder types
- Focus groups with the local business sector
- Community workshops held in An Dromaid, Cathair Dónall, An Gleann, Baile an Sceilg, and Waterville

During the review of the 2019-2022 plan and the development of the 2023-2026 plan, interviews were held with 20 stakeholders. A thematic analysis of the collected data

highlighted the effectiveness of the task force's multi-agency approach in terms of its proactive nature, the strategic direction it provides, its influence, and its diverse representation. Additionally, the review noted a growing sense of place in Gaeltacht Uíbh Ráthach, whereby the locality is increasingly recognised as a place with its own unique character, ambitions, and future potential.

### **Persistent Challenges and Emerging Priorities**

Some of the core challenges facing the Gaeltacht both before and following the review of the 2019-2022 plan include:

- Limited sustainable career opportunities
- Dependence on seasonal tourism-related employment
- A lack of transport infrastructure to link the Gaeltacht to larger towns and cities (though this is noted as having improved alongside the expansion of Local Link services in recent years)
- The challenge of access to services in an area of low population density

The review of the 2019-2022 Action Plan also highlighted new priorities that have emerged, including a critical shortage of affordable housing for purchase and long-term rental, which has become a major barrier to population recovery in the Gaeltacht. (Tascfhórsa Uíbh Ráthaigh, 2023). In addition, broader societal and policy changes between 2019 and 2023 have influenced the locality, including:

- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine
- Changes to local and national development policies
- The designation of Cahersiveen as a service town for the Gaeltacht
- An increased focus placed on addressing climate change and the introduction of related policies at local and national levels

The 2023-2026 action plan reflects these shifting dynamics. Notably, it incorporates a new objective to consider the climate impact of each action and examine how climate actions could be incorporated into existing actions.



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# Narrowing the focus: Housing in the Gaeltacht



## 3. Narrowing the focus: Housing in the Gaeltacht

### Identifying Community Priorities

Following an analysis of published texts and preliminary community and stakeholder engagement led by TASC and Cumas Ceantar, including discussions with community members, development workers, researchers, and students at Coláiste na Sceilge, it became clear that this People's Transition project would benefit from an early focus on a specific community priority. Housing emerged as a key focus area due to the scale of the challenge and the significant momentum already underway in the Gaeltacht. A just transition perspective brings a fresh lens to exploring community-led solutions to the housing crisis in the Gaeltacht, and it is hoped that this People's Transition process will actively support existing efforts to ensure that local development in the Gaeltacht, is community-led and climate-smart.

### Housing Challenges and Ongoing Work in the Gaeltacht

Like many picturesque coastal areas of Ireland, the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht faces challenges related to the extent of holiday homes and the rise of Airbnb, including the upward pressure placed on purchase and rental prices as well as a lack of homes available for long-term rent (O'Donnell and McDonnell, 2024). At the same time, there are also localised nuances. Tascfhórsa Uíbh Ráthach has noted that a significant number of holiday and rarely used homes are owned by the South Kerry diaspora, who maintain sentimental ties to the Gaeltacht through these properties (Tascfhórsa Uíbh Ráthaigh, 2023). The plan highlights that this unique scenario can raise challenges in bringing seldom-used or unoccupied homes back into long-term use.

Despite these challenges, the task force has taken proactive steps to stabilise the local population and increase housing availability. Efforts have included an advertising campaign to encourage relocation to the Gaeltacht, stakeholder engagement, and the compilation of a catalogue of 300 derelict, abandoned and/or vacant dwellings—many of which can be found in the uplands of the Gaeltacht, further from the coast. These initiatives have helped 19 families relocate to the South Kerry Gaeltacht between 2020 and 2023 (O' Caoimh, 2024).

However, O' Caoimh (2024) highlights that despite the number of derelict properties, significant barriers to increasing the housing supply remain. These include the affordability of converting a derelict dwelling into a habitable one, the isolated location of many such properties, connectivity challenges, and alignment with the local and national policy landscape.

## Togra Tithíochta Uíbh Ráthaigh: A Community-led Housing Roadmap

Recognising the need for sustainable and community-centered housing solutions, Tascfhórsa Uíbh Ráthach and Údarás na Gaeltachta appointed Self Organised Architecture in 2022 to research housing needs and develop a roadmap for a community-led housing project aimed at addressing supply-related challenges in the area.

The resulting plan, *Togra Tithíochta Uíbh Ráthaigh*, which was launched in An Dromaid on February 14th 2024, aims to support the development of 10-12 permanently affordable homes for purchase and for rent in the Gaeltacht using two key strategies:

1. Bringing existing vacant homes back into use
2. Building new affordable homes

The roadmap takes a Civic Partnership approach, proposing, and setting out a framework for the establishment of a Community Land Trust to oversee the rollout of the two-pronged approach of the plan and manage the homes into the future. Building on case studies and successful models in other jurisdictions, the plan recommends that the Community Land Trust collaborate with a national Approved Housing Body to reduce risk and support the long-term maintenance of the units.

As part of the development of *Togra Tithíochta Uíbh Ráthaigh*, community engagement took place in the spring of 2023 through in-person meetings and online gatherings. These interactive events aimed to share information, raise awareness about the process of developing community-led housing, open up spaces for deliberation and community knowledge sharing, and gather input on local housing preferences. A survey of 21 participants revealed that:

- A majority preferred a home close to the coast and would be content with living in an existing settlement
- All valued proximity to a town or village and most emphasised access to public transport
- A majority considered being able to work from home a priority
- Participants felt that housing should be about building a neighbourhood, and it should foster a sense of community, including green spaces, shared areas, and adaptability for ageing residents
- A majority felt that community participation in the design process is a very important aspect of the development

## Engaging Young People: Insights from Coláiste na Sceilge Students

In the spring of 2024, TASC and Cumas Ceantar held focus groups with approximately thirty 5th-year and 3rd-year students at Coláiste na Sceilge in Cahersiveen. During two 90-minute sessions, students explored:

1. What makes Uíbh Ráthach unique?
2. Whether they would like to live in the area when they are older
3. What they would like there to be more of
4. Visions of the Gaeltacht and surrounding area in twenty years' time - what could your community be like if it worked for both people and the planet?

Students echoed many of the points raised by older community members, particularly regarding the impact of short-term rentals on long-term housing availability. One proposed solution was to increase alternative tourist accommodations, such as hotels and B&Bs. When re-imagining the Gaeltacht in 20 years, almost every group envisioned an increase in housing available for long-term use, and several felt housing should also be available for and adaptable to the needs of elderly community members. Additionally, students expressed a desire for more vibrant communities with a larger population, improved services and amenities, and accessible all-weather outdoor recreational spaces.

## Localised nuances: Baile an Sceilg and An Dromaid

### Baile an Sceilg

In Baile an Sceilg, members of the Ballinskelligs Environmental Action Group (BEAG) emphasised that a lack of investment in local public wastewater management is hindering the development of the village. Members of BEAG stressed that the current treatment plant has come under strain in recent years following the development of holiday home estates and new businesses. During times of high pressure, effluent flows directly into the sea, causing environmental harm. During conversations with Kerry County Council, in 2021, the group was told it would likely be closer to 2030 by the time investment will be available to upgrade the treatment plant.

In response to this challenging context, BEAG has proposed the development of an Integrated Constructed Wetland (ICW) as a future-proofed solution to the problem. An ICW is a nature-based and environmentally friendly method for treating wastewater that looks and operates in the same way as a natural wetland. Shallow ponds are developed and planted with specific plants that remove impurities and discharge treated water while at the same time sequestering carbon (Uisce Éireann, 2023). An ICW has been successfully developed in Lixnaw in North Kerry and could offer a tried and tested blueprint for Baile an Sceilg.

In An Dromaid, the upland and inland Gaeltacht community that has experienced the most severe level of population decline in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht, the community development manager at Forbairt na Dromada Teo, who lives in and grew up in An Dromaid, described how the main challenge facing the survival of the area into the future is the availability of housing; she reflected that 'if we don't get young people to stay or move here, we're goosed'. Thinking about her own experience of housing in An Dromaid, she spoke about how it took four years to get planning permission in an area her family have lived in for more than 250 years.

Broader community engagement was also undertaken in An Dromaid, involving more than 50 community members as part of this People's Transition project. Residents highlighted concerns over planning restrictions and the difficulties of restoring derelict buildings. The outputs from this work highlighted a deep fear among residents that their children would be unable to stay or return due to housing shortages.



Picture 1: Susan Leen. Sketchbook drawing of An Dromaid. January 2025.

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# TOCHAIL Socially: Engaged Arts Residencies

## 4. TOCHAIL Socially-Engaged Arts Residencies

As part of the People's Transition community engagement and solutions phases, TASC and Cumas Ceantar took a unique approach by developing a three-week socially engaged art research residency. Truly valuing the opinions of local people is a central tenet of the People's Transition and socially engaged art aligns with this philosophy by recognising community members as the experts of their own lives and surroundings.

Exploring the theme of housing, each residency was tasked with interrogating new approaches to the rural housing crisis positioned within the wider context of climate justice.

In October 2024, two artists, Siomha Brock and Susan Leen, along with one artist collective comprising Emily Fitzell, Zoë Uí Fhaoláin-Green, and James Rogers, were selected to participate in TOCHAIL. Their research processes, methodologies, findings and recommendations were presented at a community event in An Dromaid on January 30th 2025.

Following the presentation of the TOCHAIL residencies and their research findings, TASC, with support from Cumas Ceantar and locally based social researcher Breandán Ó Caoimh—who has long been working to support the regeneration of Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht—analysed the research process, outputs, and findings from each residency to identify common themes and ideas that emerged within the local community.

## Residency approaches

### *Siomha Brock*

Uíbh Ráthach-based socially engaged artist and musician Siomha Brock explored community-led housing through bilingual, participatory workshops in January 2025 at Bari Café, in Cahersiveen.

Using mixed methods, such as word association, collage, case study discussions, guided meditation, silent clay sculpture, and 'postcards from the future', Siomha created a collaborative space for reimagining housing and climate solutions. Approximately sixteen people participated in each session.

Reflecting on the residency, Siomha highlighted the sense of optimism fostered during the workshops, noting that 'many participants expressed that stepping outside of structured policy discussions into a creative process allowed them to think more freely about possibilities.'

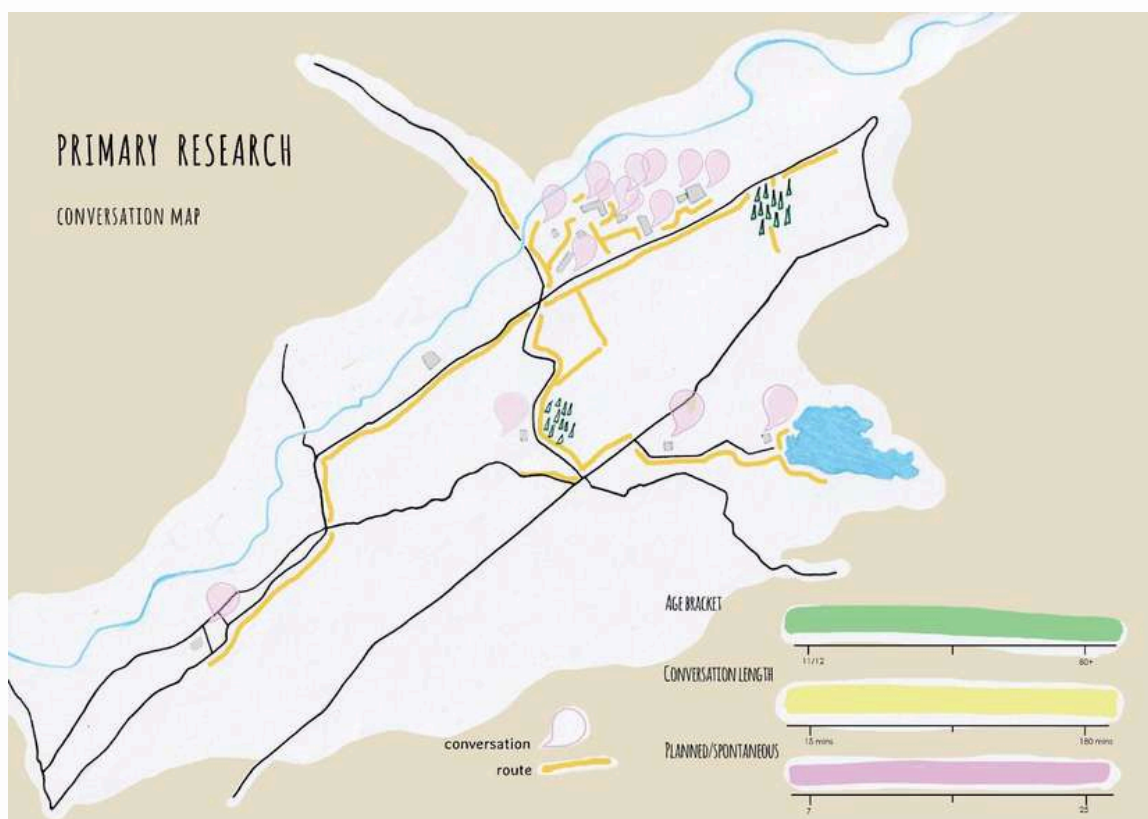


**Picture 2: Photo of graphic harvesting image created by Nina Bloudau during the workshops, led by Siomha Brock. January 2025.**

## Susan Leen

A visual artist from North Kerry, Susan Leen specialises in place-based, socially engaged art. Her residency focused on An Dromaid and its upland surroundings. For three weeks, Susan was based at the An Dromaid Community Centre and engaged with more than 50 people, including Rural Social Scheme workers, local Irish Countrywomen's Association members, other lifelong residents, newer arrivals, primary school students, teachers, hostel staff, and childcare workers.

Using a deep-listening approach, Susan facilitated informal discussions and structured workshops, such as intergenerational dialogues, social cartography, and craft sessions. During this time, Susan kept a journal and visual diary to document her time in An Dromaid.



**Picture 3: Susan Leen. Sketchbook drawing to record the different conversations. January 2025.**

## *Emily Fitzell, Zoë Uí Fhaoláin-Green and James Rogers*

The artist collective combined expertise in education, architecture, and collaborative arts to explore housing through the lens of 'ecologies of dwelling', viewing the home as connected with the local social, environmental, and cultural landscape of the Gaeltacht and the long history of human settlement on the Iveragh Peninsula. Their work connected housing to the Gaeltacht's social, environmental, and cultural fabric, incorporating storytelling, literature reviews, speculative design, and dialogue with historians, community representatives and experts through the lens of 'bioregional design'.

Community members were invited to reflect on their 'sense of place' in the Gaeltacht, contributing to a broader understanding of the relationship between housing, local identity, and the living environment. This culminated in the creation of a community poem titled *The Housing Step*, which wove together the conversations from the residency with the physical and literary landscapes of Uíbh Ráthach.



***Picture 4: Map developed by Emily, Zoë, and James during their residency using handmade earth pigments. January 2025.***

## Emerging themes

### 1. House building as community building

Across all residencies, a central theme emerged: housing should be more than just bricks and mortar and the individual housing unit; it should foster community, integration, collaboration, and sustainability, aligning with the traditional concept of *Meitheal* (community cooperation).

Siomha's findings emphasised a holistic approach to housing, incorporating shared social spaces and community wealth-building opportunities such as local food production and community-owned renewable energy. Emily, James and Zoë reflected on the relationship between private and shared living spaces and suggested 'softening the boundaries between my house/not my house'. As part of this, they referenced the potential of community-growing projects and shared learning spaces. Susan focused on the need for a holistic approach to development more generally, highlighting the importance of access to services, such as healthcare, meeting spaces and employment opportunities.

These depictions of housing offer an alternative vision to the dominant housing model in Ireland, where homes are viewed as financial assets or market commodities and valued for their potential to generate wealth, rental income, and a return on investment, rather than as a fundamental human need, a social good, and a space for living well within a supportive community (Hearne, 2017). Notably, while discussions about housing in remote and rural areas often evoke images of isolation and distance from neighbours and services, the community visions emerging from TOCHAIL emphasise collective well-being over individualism and a strong desire for geographical proximity to both neighbours and services.

### 2. The Irish language as central to the development of housing and community

Each residency reflected on the role of the Irish language and its relationship to housing in the Gaeltacht.

Siomha's research emphasised that participants wanted future housing developments to be deeply connected to the Irish language. They described the Irish language as intertwined with the natural world and the Meitheal tradition and emphasised the need for long-term housing solutions to support language preservation. During the 'postcards from the future' exercise, one participant described an imagined future in which a Gaelchólaiste (an Irish language secondary school) had been developed in An Dromaid and, due to demand, was operating with a waiting list and generating employment opportunities locally. Another imagined the day-to-day experience of living in a community-led housing development in the Gaeltacht and shared:

*'Is anamh anois é a cloisfeá Béarla in Uíbh Ráthach, ach amháin ag cuairteoirí'*  
*(It's rare now that you hear English in Iveragh, except for visitors).*

To ensure that housing developments align with language preservation, Siomha recommended involving Irish language promotion and cultural organisations in the community-led housing planning process.

Emily, James and Zoë explored ways to integrate sustained artistic engagement into ongoing efforts. They proposed an Irish-language festival focused on housing and climate action, bringing together those working at national and local levels. This idea builds on Uíbh Ráthach's rich tradition of cultural productions and festivals, such as Taigh/Tý/Teach, a trilingual play performed in An Dromaid in February 2024 in Irish, Gaelic, and Welsh, and the long-running annual Éigse na Brídeoige festival, which celebrates heritage, folklore, and music.

Susan's research in An Dromaid revealed a diversity of experiences with the Irish language. While several people with whom she spoke reported not using Irish on a daily basis, she also observed a growing emphasis on the language and its increasing popularity in the area. This trend is likely influenced by relatively recent changes to Gaeltacht education policy.

In 2016, the Department of Education and Skills introduced a Policy on Gaeltacht Education, allowing schools in language planning areas to apply for and join a newly established Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme (Department of Education and Skills, 2016). To achieve this status, schools are required to meet specific

language-based criteria to enhance immersion education. Recognised schools are then provided with additional resources and support to strengthen Irish language education.

One community member and local development worker highlighted that three schools in the area have been awarded Gaeltacht recognition status, enabling local children to access Irish-medium education from preschool through primary school and up to the Junior Certificate level. In these settings, Irish is the primary language of communication across all subjects.

Community members have noticed these changes. One adult Susan spoke with remarked that when they attended school in An Dromaid, there was less of an emphasis on Irish than there is now, while another highlighted a significant improvement in Irish-language education compared to the late 20th century. A staff member at the Naíonra—a childcare and preschool service where Irish is the primary language— emphasised how attendance at the preschool has tripled over the past five years.

Reflecting on her time in An Dromaid, Susan underscored the potential for Irish language revival to attract young people who might be interested in relocating to the Gaeltacht long-term and embedding themselves in an Irish-speaking community.

### **3. A supportive policy environment**

Each residency underscored the need for an enabling policy environment to support a just transition for housing in the Gaeltacht.

Siómha's research outputs emphasised a desire for Gaeltacht-specific housing policies that 'prioritise long-term local residency and language preservation, ensuring that housing developments support, rather than displace the community'. Additionally, Siómha's findings highlight the need for policy support for community-led and cooperative housing models and funding for pilot projects to demonstrate feasibility and provide a blueprint for other Gaeltacht communities.

Susan's findings highlighted issues of dereliction and vacancy as well as the consequence of short-term rentals, such as Airbnb, on the surrounding community. Participants with whom she spoke expressed a desire for stronger regulations.

Emily, James, and Zoë, drawing on their discussions with local residents and expert stakeholders, emphasised a need for housing policy to allow for greater freedom at the level of the locality and foster an environment that supports the development of innovative, community-led rural housing solutions. They also drew inspiration from successful models in Wales and Spain. Furthermore, they noted that increased flexibility at the locality or sub-county level could enable place-based solutions to the broader infrastructural needs required when developing new housing or bringing existing homes back into use.

By combining a supportive policy environment with sustainable, community-centered approaches, both Siómha and Emily, James and Zoë stressed that the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht could become a leader and serve as a model for minority language communities facing similar housing challenges. As Siómha noted:

*'A sustainable housing model in Uíbh Ráthach could serve as a blueprint for other Gaeltacht areas, demonstrating how rural communities can balance tradition with innovation. By integrating housing with sustainable economic models, such as community-owned agriculture and renewable energy projects, and the already existing digital work hubs, Uíbh Ráthach could become a leader in climate-smart rural development.'*

#### 4. Skills sharing, skills development and employment opportunities

Siómha's and Susan's research highlighted the potential of community-led housing projects to foster skill-sharing and employment opportunities. Workshop participants envisioned a way of life built around collaboration, participation and hands-on involvement in the construction process, imagining a future where they actively contributed to building their own homes. As part of their 'postcard from the future', one participant imagined:

*'I'm just back from a morning working with some of the other residents on the next cabin to be finished. We have each given time during the different stages of the build.'*

Susan, along with Emily, James, and Zoë, emphasised the cultural importance of preserving traditional skills, such as dry stone walling. Susan recommended identifying local skills and supporting intergenerational skills-sharing. Meanwhile, Emily, James and Zoë posed the question of how existing dry stone walling courses—such as those offered by Kerry College—could be expanded on to enhance skill-sharing locally.

Inspired by initiatives like Common Knowledge in Clare, Emily, James, and Zoë proposed the creation of an educational space or centre in the Gaeltacht. This space would operate through Irish and support up-skilling in ecological building practises and climate-smart development.

Connected to these ideas, both Susan and Síomha's emphasised the potential for a community-led housing pilot to support the creation of local employment opportunities in areas related to sustainable construction and the development of land-based enterprises.

## **5. Sustainable materials and localised supply chains**

Across all three residencies, participants and artists in residency underscored the importance of using local, sustainable materials. Conversations that Susan facilitated in An Dromaid highlighted the significance of stone and the potential for sheep's wool to be used for insulation. Notably, not all available materials were spoken about as being beneficial to the community. For example, Susan observed that 'not one person I met said good things about these [Sitka spruce] plantations'. These monoculture, non-native plantations, mainly comprising Sitka spruce and Norway spruce, can be found across the Gaeltacht and are particularly associated with the uplands and uninhabited townlands.

Participants at Síomha's workshops emphasised using natural and locally sourced materials, ecologically friendly construction practices, and passive house principles, while Emily, James, and Zoë encouraged shorter supply chains and framed local material use as a way to strengthen community resilience, reducing dependence on imported resources and keeping wealth within the locality.

## 6. Leveraging the existing strength of the community

Each residency acknowledged the existing strength of the communities that make up the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht and the expertise held locally.

In An Dromaid, Susan was struck by the strong sense of community in the village and the impressive turnout at community events relative to the small population living in the area. The hostel in An Dromaid is community-owned and sets a precedent for ambitious community-led projects and developments. Further exemplifying what's possible when communities take the lead, receive support, and develop expertise over time, Forbairt na Dromada Teo—the community social enterprise that manages the hostel—is in the process of purchasing what is hoped to be Kerry's first community-owned pub, the Inny Tavern Bar and Foodstore. The pub has been at the centre of the community for 35 years and has been on the market for two years. Forbairt na Dromada Teo has raised the necessary funds for the purchase deposit and has secured a bank loan. In February 2025, to cover the remaining financial gap, the community organisation launched a fundraiser and, in the space of a month, exceeded its goal of raising €100,000.

Exploring similar themes, Síomha recommended leveraging existing community networks to maintain local control over new housing developments. Emily, James, and Zoë highlighted the importance of supporting community leaders who drive these projects forward for the benefit of the broader Iveragh Peninsula.

## 7. Local participation in planning and design

A recurring theme emerging from all three TOCHAIL residencies was the importance of local participation in the planning and design processes of a community-led housing project.

Susan's research findings advocated for early and inclusive community participation. Similarly, Emily, James, and Zoë emphasised the value and potential of bottom-up design approaches, where community members and potential residents work alongside designers and artists to shape their future homes so that housing can strengthen a community's sense of place and its connection to the surrounding environment.

## Reflecting on TOCHAIL

The TOCHAIL socially engaged arts residencies underscored the importance of integrating language preservation, ecological principles, and participatory planning into house development in the Gaeltacht. The findings present a compelling vision for housing that goes beyond individual units, creating spaces that sustain language, support local employment, and in which community life can flourish within planetary boundaries.

Participants expressed that with the right policy support, a community-led housing pilot in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht could serve as a blueprint for rural and minority-language communities worldwide, demonstrating that housing can be both a social good and a vehicle for resilience and regeneration.



**Picture 5: Susan Leen. Illustration of the social fibre of an ideal community. January 2025.**

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# Community-led local development for climate justice: pathways forward

## 5. Community-led local development for climate justice: pathways forward

### Housing and a just transition

Access to secure, affordable, and culturally appropriate housing is a fundamental human right. Despite this, Ireland is experiencing a housing crisis that is undermining the quality of life across the country (The Housing Commission, 2024). The consequences of failing to meet housing needs in recent years have been particularly harsh on young adults and lower-income groups in society.

At the same time, how Ireland chooses to address this crisis will play a significant role in the country's ability to meet its national climate targets. According to research commissioned by the Irish Green Building Council (IGBC), the built environment and construction sectors accounted for 37% of Ireland's total emissions as of 2018. This includes the energy we use in our buildings and homes, as well as the carbon footprint associated with the construction of new homes and buildings (IGBC, 2022).

A just transition will require the response to Ireland's housing crisis to be grounded in the fulfilment of human rights and in alignment with our ambitious climate targets. Housing solutions must, therefore, deliver both social justice and environmental benefits.

The community-led housing roadmap for the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht, published in 2024, *Togra Tithíochta Uíbh Ráthaigh*, offers a community-driven response to this challenging context. It recommends the establishment of a Community Land Trust (CLT) to pilot a community-led housing project in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht. CLTs are non-profit, democratic, and community-led organisations that acquire, develop, and steward land for long-term community benefit. In doing so, they deliver permanently affordable housing and other essential resources—including community gardens, civic spaces, shops, and energy projects—while ensuring that any increase in value remains within the community (Community Land Trust Network, no date).

*Togra Tithíochta Uíbh Ráthaigh* positions CLTs as a viable solution to key challenges involved in creating a fairer, more ecologically sustainable future, including housing affordability, sustainable development, and the central participation of marginalised and low-income communities. CLTs also offer an alternative model of land ownership

that combines permanently affordable housing and the provision of community space with the restoration of our natural environment and climate action (Parker-Tong and Bergouhnioux, 2024).

Additionally, CLTs can be used as a mechanism to deliver community wealth building (CWB). CWB is a people-centred and site-specific economic model built on plurality of ownership. By giving people and communities a stronger say in, and ownership over, local development, it aims to address the root causes of inequality and create a more equitable and democratic economy.

Under the community wealth-building model, anchor institutions play an essential role in local economic development and can be understood as large organisations that are rooted in place and have a significant influence over the local economy through procurement, employment, and the ownership of assets and land (CLES, no date). Údaras na Gaeltachta, for example, is an important anchor institution for Ireland's Gaeltacht areas.

The Centre for Local Economic Strategies, which is pioneering the community wealth building movement across the United Kingdom, describes community wealth building as having five core principles:

1. Enhancing plural ownership of the local economy by developing and nurturing community-led organisations, cooperatives and public ownership models.
2. Making financial power work for local places by harnessing local wealth and enhancing investment into and not out of local communities.
3. Creating fair employment and just labour markets by focusing on recruitment from low-income areas and ensuring work is decent and pays the living wage.
4. The progressive procurement of goods and services using the power of anchor institutions to retain wealth locally.
5. The socially productive use of land and property by expanding democratic access to community and public sector land.

TASC's People's Transition model combines community wealth building with community-led local development and participatory democracy approaches to create community-owned responses to the climate crisis and ultimately build support for a fast and fair transition.

## 1. Circularity and developing shared spaces for climate action through community-led housing

Drawing on case studies from Ireland and Scotland, this section explores how a community-led housing pilot in the Gaeltacht can embed just transition principles through the creation of shared spaces, the use of sustainable energy systems and local and low-impact materials, as well as an emphasis on circularity, skills development and education.

Togra Tithíochta Uíbh Ráthaigh proposes the development of 10-12 permanently affordable homes for rent and purchase. Strand 1 focuses on new-build affordable rental units, while Strand 2 involves the renovation of vacant properties for affordable purchase. Both strands offer opportunities for the creation of spaces that support climate action and community wealth building.

### Introduction to the case studies

#### ***Cloughjordan Ecovillage, Cloughjordan (Ireland)***

Cloughjordan Ecovillage in County Tipperary is Ireland's first ecovillage. From the beginning, the Cloughjordan Ecovillage project aimed to play a role in addressing the climate crisis at a local level and foster sustainable economic development to support rural regeneration (Kirby, 2020). The ecovillage includes more than 50 low-carbon homes and units, a green enterprise centre, an eco-hostel, and 50 acres of land dedicated to food production, biodiversity restoration, and woodland regeneration.

#### ***Achtercairn, Gairloch (Scotland)***

Achtercairn is a community-led housing development located in the North-West Highlands of Scotland. Developed by a Community Housing Trust, the project comprises 25 affordable, energy-efficient homes designed and built with a focus on sustainability (Communities Housing Trust, 2023a). The site also incorporates a community hub which doubles as Scotland's first passive house certified public building, a learning centre, a farm shop, a café, and a vet clinic.

### ***Ardgael, Kincaig (Scotland)***

Located in the Cairngorms National Park near the village of Kincaig, the Ardgael development comprises 10 sustainable and affordable homes built on land previously owned by Forestry Commission Scotland (Communities Housing Trust, 2023b). Initiated in response to the need to keep the local primary school open and provide housing for local families, the land was acquired by a Community Housing Trust through the National Forest Land Scheme, bringing it into long-term community ownership.

#### **Use of sustainable local materials in construction**

Across all three TOCHAIL residencies, participants emphasised the importance of incorporating local and sustainable materials into housing construction and renovation in the Gaeltacht. This approach aligns with efforts to realise a just transition by reducing carbon emissions and incorporating community wealth building.

Cloughjordan Ecovillage is a prominent example of such a model in Ireland. The ecovillage hosts more than 50 low-carbon homes and units built using ecological construction practices and sustainable materials. To ensure that each building is built sustainably, the Ecovillage developed and adopted an Ecological Charter that sets out guidelines for maximising energy efficiency and encourages the use of sustainable and regionally sourced materials for construction (Kirby, 2020). The Charter also allows for flexibility, which has enabled the use of a variety of building methods, including cob building, hemp and lime insulation, and passive timber-frame systems.

Similarly, during the construction of the Ardgael development, efforts were made to minimise the environmental impacts of the project by using timber felled directly from the former Forestry Commission site on which the homes were built. The Community Housing Trust also intentionally worked with multiple local contractors and suppliers within a 30-mile radius to further localise the supply chain.

As part of the implementation of *Togra Tithíochta Uíbh Ráthaigh*, there are several opportunities to embed the use of sustainable, locally or regionally sourced materials into both strands of the project.

- **Strand 1 (New Build Affordable Rental):** During the preliminary phase, the Gaeltacht Uíbh Ráthaigh Community Land Trust (URCLT) and residents will undertake a competitive selection process to choose project designers for the build. At this stage, preference for the use of local, sustainable, reclaimed and/or low embodied carbon materials could be explicitly included in the tender. This preference can also be reinforced, and the availability of local materials could be examined and explored during Step 8 of the Design Development phase, which will see URCLT, residents and designers work together to co-design the homes and shared spaces.
- **Strand 2 (Renovation of Vacant Properties):** As part of the construction phase of the roadmap, embedding a co-design process between the appointed designers and the future residents offers a further opportunity to prioritise locally sourced materials that align with the character of the existing buildings.

### Renewable energy and sustainable heating systems

Newly built homes in Ireland are required to meet Nearly Zero Energy Building (NZEB) standards, and in doing so, incorporate renewable energy sources. A community-led housing pilot presents an opportunity to explore collective approaches to renewable energy generation as part of the development. For instance, Cloughjordan Ecovillage operates a shared district heating system that supplies heat and hot water to all homes. The system is fuelled by biomass and supported by a 500m<sup>2</sup> solar panel array, offering a replicable model for low-carbon heating in rural housing developments.

In the Gaeltacht, URCLT could assess the viability and sustainability of sourcing biomass from local farmers, particularly as Sitka spruce plantations approach maturity in the coming years. Depending on site suitability and the land available, the Community Land Trust (CLT) structure could be used to develop a larger renewable energy project. Such an initiative could generate economic benefits for the wider community and act as a local demonstration of energy democracy.

### Food production and growing

Community-growing projects, highlighted during the TOCHAIL residencies, offer a practical route for integrating climate action into a community-led housing pilot. Shared growing spaces can enhance food security, foster intergenerational skills sharing, and provide meaningful shared spaces in a community.

A growing space incorporated into Togra Tithíochta Uíbh Ráthaigh would provide a shared space for residents but could also be opened up to the broader community to support wider community development and cohesion efforts. Depending on the space available, smaller allotments may be suited to the development of a small-scale community garden, while a larger space opens up the potential for the development of a community farm. A popular mechanism for achieving this is the community-supported agriculture (CSA) model.

Established in 2008, Cloughjordan Community Farm is a member-owned farm that uses organic growing practices and follows the CSA model. CSA represents a direct partnership between farmers and consumers where the benefits and risks of food production are shared (Community Supported Agriculture, 2018). Cloughjordan Community Farm currently has more than 90 members who pay a monthly fee to cover growing costs, running costs and wages in return for a regular supply of organic vegetables (Cloughjordan Community Farm, no date). The community farm employs two full-time farmers, but as Kirby (2020) notes, the work is labour-intensive and depends on the support of long-term volunteers. Beyond food production, the eco-farm further contributes to community-building through educational events, shared meals, and farm walks.

A community growing space could be incorporated into Togra Tithíochta Uíbh Ráthach in the following ways:

- **Strand 1 (New Build Affordable Rental):** The inclusion of a collective growing space could be considered during the preliminary and design development phases of Strand 1. The specific form this space takes will depend on the characteristics and the suitability of the site acquired, as well as URCLT's overarching vision for the development of shared spaces.
- **Strand 2 (Renovation of Vacant Properties):** Community growing could also be incorporated into Strand 2. Unlike urban settings, vacant or derelict dwellings in remote and rural areas are often sold with adjoining land. Where this is the case, part of the holding could be repurposed for a community growing initiative.

## Skills development and an educational hub

### Skills development

Each TOCHAIL residency underscored the importance of embedding skills sharing and skills development into a housing project in the Gaeltacht. At the same time, skills development, with the aim of creating decent work, represents a key pillar of a just and inclusive transition (International Labour Organisation, 2015), ensuring that individuals and communities are equipped to actively participate in and benefit from the move to a low-carbon society.

At Ardgael, for example, a training scheme was launched to boost rural trades and promote green skills and land-based livelihoods (Communities Housing Trust, 2023b). As part of the initiative, a local contractor hired seven locally based apprentices to support the building of the homes in 2012. By 2022, three of the apprentices were still working with the same employer, while the remaining four were working with other local contractors. This intentional and localised approach to skills development demonstrates the long-term impact of the scheme on rural employment.

There are several ways in which skills development could be embedded within a community-led housing pilot in the Gaeltacht:

- **Skills mapping:** During the preliminary or design development phase of both strands of the roadmap, a skills mapping exercise could be undertaken to identify the existing expertise, knowledge, and traditional skills present within the wider community. This could create opportunities for skills sharing and support the preservation of traditional skills in the Gaeltacht. The outputs from this exercise could inform the co-design process in Strand 1, which will see URCLT, residents, and designers collaboratively design the new build homes and shared spaces.
- **Local skills development:** UCLT could also collaborate with Kerry ETB, SOLAS, and Údarás na Gaeltachta to leverage the Glasoilíúint training support scheme and make a concerted effort to promote green skill opportunities in the locality from the outset and well in advance of the construction phase. The Glasoilíúint training support scheme provides grants of up to €2,000 to support

tradespeople, such as electricians, plumbers, and builders, in the Gaeltacht to develop new green skills in areas such as solar panel installation, heat pump installation, and energy efficiency analysis (Údarás na Gaeltachta, 2025).

## **Educational hubs**

A living lab is a physical or virtual space designed to address societal challenges by fostering collaboration and collective ideation among diverse stakeholders (Hossain, Leminen and Westerlund, 2019). These environments typically integrate research, innovation, and education in real-world settings.

Cloughjordan Ecovillage serves as a prominent example of this model in practice. Describing itself as a 'living laboratory of sustainability' the Ecovillage functions as a hub for education and community learning. Its educational arm, Village Education, Research and Training (VERT), aims to establish the ecovillage as a leading site for sustainability, rural regeneration and imagining the future of society (Kirby, 2020). The Ecovillage hosts regular events, festivals, workshops, and conferences on issues such as housing, community energy, and sustainable agriculture.

A community-led housing development in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht could similarly function as a living lab situated within the official Gaeltacht boundary. Shared spaces developed as part of the project could be used to host hands-on workshops, visits, and gatherings on themes such as community-led housing, community-led local development, and just transition. Importantly, a living lab of this type would be designed to complement, rather than replicate, existing educational hubs across the Gaeltacht area and across Kerry.

There is also potential to engage young people and students in hands-on learning opportunities. Research from the National Working Group for the Promotion of Careers in the Construction Sector highlights a lack of exposure to careers in construction during second-level education, particularly in all-girls schools (DFHERIS, 2023). During the construction and completion phases of Strands 1 and 2 of the housing roadmap, second-level students from Coláiste na Sceilge and other Gaeltacht areas could visit the site and learn about sustainable construction practices in an Irish-speaking environment.

Building on the relationships established and cultivated through Tascfhórsa Uíbh Ráthaigh since 2017, the URCLT could develop informal and formal partnerships with nearby institutions, such as Kerry College, the Kerry Education and Training Board, the Skellig CRI Centre, Munster Technological University, and community development organisations like Comhchoiste Ghaeltacht Uíbh Ráthaigh and South Kerry Development Partnership to develop opportunities for Irish language place-based learning.

The recently launched Soilcrates Ireland Living Lab illustrates the potential for shared spaces, such as a community garden or farm, to support local knowledge exchange and collaboration. Soilcrates is a cross-county initiative that aims to support knowledge transfer and build a community of practice focused on soil preservation and regeneration. Participants in the project will co-develop and test sustainable soil management practices (Soilcrates Ireland, 2025). A similar approach could be adopted in Uíbh Ráthach, using collective growing spaces as practical, community-led educational environments that support ecological restoration and food security.

### **Beyond A-rated: a holistic approach to sustainability**

By moving beyond a narrow focus on tech-driven solutions and the sole pursuit of achieving A-rated homes, this section of the report aimed to demonstrate that a community-led housing pilot can instead adopt a holistic approach to climate action. In line with TASC's People's Transition model, such an approach can deliver broader benefits for both people and nature, particularly through an emphasis on circularity, skills development, education, and sustainable food production.

To embed this ethos into the Gaeltacht Uíbh Ráthaigh Community Land Trust (URCLT) from the outset, a Just Transition Charter could be incorporated into milestone one of the Togra Tithíochta governance roadmap. This Charter would be developed by the URCLT Steering Group when the pilot's mission and vision are also being drafted. Comparable examples include Cloughjordan Ecovillage, where members collaborated to create an Ecological Charter outlining a set of principles underpinning the development of the village, and Cornwall Community Land Trust, which put in place a Charter establishing environmental and energy-efficiency standards that go beyond national standards (Cornwall Community Land Trust, 2019).

## 2. A supportive policy environment

This section explores the policy landscape related to Gaeltacht-specific housing and Community-Led Housing (CLH) in Ireland.

 *Report of the Housing Commission*

Established in 2021, the Housing Commission was tasked with identifying the policies and actions needed to ensure a well-functioning housing system in Ireland over the long term. The Commission's main report, *Report of the Housing Commission*, published in 2024, includes more than 80 recommendations and 500 associated actions and sub-actions. The Commission emphasised that housing should be treated as a distinct national priority that supports social cohesion and economic development. It also stressed that 'only a radical strategic reset of housing policy will work' to address the current crisis.

Section 9 of the report, Rural Housing, outlines several recommendations and actions which would support rural and Gaeltacht areas of Ireland specifically, including:

### Section 9.3 Building Sustainable Rural Communities

- Action 1: Implement high-quality designs of towns and villages
  - 1e: 1e. Provide appropriate training and support to the construction ecosystem to develop low-carbon housing and aid population retention in rural towns and villages.
- Action 4: Embed community engagement in housing planning and development in rural areas
  - 4b. Empower communities to co-create housing and public spaces with increased access to nature, that combine active travel and age-friendly multigenerational places, with a focus on providing high quality, climate-resilient neighbourhoods.
  - 4e. Support community-led design approaches such as co-housing, co-operative housing, community land trusts and AHBs.

### Section 9.5: Second Homes and Holiday Homes

- Recommendation 62: Monitor accurately the prevalence and use of second homes and holiday homes in rural Ireland.

## 9.7 Supporting Island and Gaeltacht Communities

Recommendation 64: Provide dedicated supports to island and Gaeltacht communities to ensure their long-term viability through implementing the Our Living Islands policy.

- Action 2: Support and resource the renovation of vacant dwellings on islands and in Gaeltacht regions
- Action 3: Increase housing supports to promote development and retrofitting on islands and in Gaeltacht regions.
- Action 4: Address housing stock issues due to second homes and holiday homes.
- Action 5: Broaden the choice of tenure options available to include private rental, private ownership, social housing and cost-rental.
- Action 6: Promote the development of social and affordable housing options for island and Gaeltacht communities through local authorities and AHBs.
- Action 7: Develop a National Policy for Housing Planning in the Gaeltacht.

### Enabling a community-led housing pilot in the Gaeltacht

#### *Togra Tithíochta Uíbh Ráthaigh*

Chapter 7 of *Togra Tithíochta Uíbh Ráthaigh* outlines four key recommendations to enable the development of a community-led housing pilot as per the roadmap set out in the report:

1. The Department of Housing and the Housing Agency agree to a Cost Rental Designation to enable the development of the Pilot.
2. Derogation from Cost Rental Eligibility Criteria and Scheme Priorities, to allow for a smaller development in a rural settlement primarily for Irish speakers, those wishing to learn Irish, and households wishing to live or relocate full-time.
3. Approval of Housing Finance Agency (HFA) and Cost Rental Equity Loan (CREL) Finance or Cost Rental STAR investment for the Pilot. Alternatively, a (repayable) Fund could be established to finance the Pilot.
4. That Croí Cónaithe or similar grants be made available for the Pilot, to support community-led and perpetually affordable housing renovation, where multiple units are renovated by a single body for affordable purchase.

## *Roadmapping a viable community-led housing sector for Ireland*

In 2021, Self Organised Architecture (SOA) published a series of handbooks following a year-long research project on Community-Led Housing (CLH) in Ireland. The second handbook focuses exclusively on policy responses and initiatives that could support the establishment of the sector in Ireland (Flynn and O'Donnell, 2021). Seven recommendations are put forward in the handbook, all of which would directly or indirectly support the development of a community-led housing pilot in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht:

### **Recognition of the model:**

1. Cross-stakeholder agreement as to what constitutes Community-Led Housing in the Irish context.
2. Insertion of a statutory definition of the Community Land Trust in the Housing (Regulation of Approved Housing Bodies) Act 2019.

### **A pilot project(s) to demonstrate the approach:**

3. That stakeholders, including the Departments of Housing & Finance, the Housing Agency, the Land Development Agency and relevant Local Authorities, collaborate with one or more Irish CLH groups, to create a pilot project, demonstrating the model.

### **Capacity building:**

4. A Community-Led Housing Fund to build capacity in this nascent sector.
5. The creation of a support 'Hub' for Community-Led Housing in Ireland.

### **Public land management:**

6. Empowerment of public agencies by government to adopt policies for sale or allocation by lease of public land for development on the basis of a competitive procedure, according to social value criteria and financial viability.

### **Accessible low-interest finance:**

7. Targeted low-interest loan products for construction and long-term financing, which can support sustainable development and independent cooperatives.

## Specific supports for Ireland's Gaeltacht areas



### *A National Policy for Housing Planning in the Gaeltacht*

Gaeltacht areas of Ireland face unique housing challenges that require targeted policy responses. The Report of the Housing Commission (2024) highlights the difficulties that young people face in securing planning permission and the general shortage of housing across Gaeltacht areas. In response, the report calls for a dedicated National Policy for Housing Planning in the Gaeltacht.

The Programme for Government 2025 commits to working with Údarás na Gaeltachta to support housing provision in Gaeltacht areas. It also promises to introduce Gaeltacht-specific planning guidelines, special development plans, and dedicated housing targets for Gaeltacht areas (Government of Ireland, 2025). Work to develop the Gaeltacht Planning Guidelines is currently being led by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Department of Rural, Community Development and the Gaeltacht, and Údarás na Gaeltachta. A public consultation process is expected before the final adoption of these guidelines (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2024).

In 2020, Conradh na Gaeilge, an organisation dedicated to promoting the use of Irish both domestically and internationally, published eleven housing planning recommendations for the Gaeltacht. These proposals included:

- Delegating planning powers to Údarás na Gaeltachta
- Conducting independent language impact assessments
- Restricting the resale of homes
- Introducing language exemptions for individuals native to Gaeltacht electoral divisions
- Prioritising Irish speakers
- Capping the proportion of holiday homes within an electoral division
- Expanding the provision of social housing in Gaeltacht areas

In recent years, in response to the shortage of affordable housing and the difficulties Gaeltacht communities face in securing planning permission, two grassroots housing campaigns have emerged, Bánú and TINTEÁN. Bánú focuses primarily on addressing housing issues in Gaeltacht areas of Connemara and the Aran Islands, while TINTEÁN is a national initiative aimed at tackling the housing crisis across all Gaeltacht regions.

Activists from both groups have held demonstrations in spring 2025 to coincide with the Committee Stage debate of the *Údarás na Gaeltachta (Amendment) Bill 2024* in *Dáil Éireann (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2025)*. They are advocating for *Údarás na Gaeltachta* to be granted the statutory powers and resources necessary to establish a dedicated Housing Section and to take a leading role in addressing housing needs in the Gaeltacht (*Conradh na Gaeilge, 2025*). Additionally, the campaign calls for an amendment to the Bill that would require *Údarás na Gaeltachta* to develop and publish a Gaeltacht Population and Housing Strategy for each Language Planning Area.



### *Second homes and holiday homes*

The Report of the Housing Commission (2024) highlights the need to address the growing impact of second homes and holiday homes on rural and coastal communities in Ireland. It recommends prioritising the identification of areas under strain that are experiencing negative impacts, and supports enabling localised policy responses. The report emphasises the importance of striking a balance between the benefits and drawbacks of holiday homes and acknowledges that a high or disproportionate concentration of second homes can lead to significant local challenges, including:

- Local residents being priced out by more affluent buyers,
- An overreliance on seasonal employment,
- And more broadly, community decline driven by increased outward migration.

The impact of holiday homes on local communities is not unique to Ireland. Efforts to reduce second and holiday home demand in countries like Wales, France, and Spain provide useful insights for policy development here (Young, 2022).

In Wales, since 2017, local authorities have been granted discretionary powers to charge higher council tax rates on homes that are either periodically occupied or long-term vacant (Welsh Government, 2022). Originally capped at 100% of the standard rate, the threshold was raised in 2023, enabling local authorities to charge up to 300%. Similarly, in France, local councils in specific areas experiencing housing shortages have been given the powers to increase local property taxes on second homes by up to 60%. In 2023, the number of areas eligible to apply the tax was significantly expanded (Reddan, 2023).

In Spain, the government is currently considering a proposal to impose a tax of up to 100% on residential property purchases by non-EU residents, aiming to curb speculative buying and improve affordability (Kassam, 2025).

### **What could a supportive policy environment look like for the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht?**

Each of the recommendations put forward by the Housing Commission and Self-Organised Architecture outlined in this section would contribute to creating an enabling environment for a community-led housing pilot in the Gaeltacht, while also laying the groundwork for a more supportive national policy environment. Together, they emphasise the need for a joined-up, place-based approach that actively contributes to social cohesion, environmental sustainability, and cultural resilience.

As the state agency responsible for the economic, social and cultural development of the Gaeltacht, Údarás na Gaeltachta is well-positioned to take a leading role in tackling the Gaeltacht housing crisis. Providing the agency with the powers and resources required to establish a housing section will enhance its capacity to respond proactively and effectively.

At the same time, it is important that any new Gaeltacht-specific housing policy allows for localisation and flexibility. Each Gaeltacht area faces different challenges. While obtaining planning permission might be the single biggest obstacle in one Gaeltacht community, in another area, it could be a lack of social housing or the prevalence of holiday homes.

Future responses should also be guided by local knowledge and carefully designed to avoid unintended consequences. For example, while it is clear that action is needed to address the high proportion of holiday homes in the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht, flexibility in how the issue is overcome is required. This flexibility will help protect the local economy and ensure that, in line with sustainable tourism principles, sufficient hotel and guesthouse accommodation remains available. Without this, there is a risk that visitors will only make day trips to Uíbh Ráthach, rather than staying and contributing more fully to the local Gaeltacht community.

### 3. Building and advancing collective action through a community-led housing network

Networks play an important role in facilitating collective action by enabling people to exchange ideas, gather resources, work together, and maintain momentum. According to Gilchrist (2019), networks or forums are central to community development because they offer robust, decentralised communication channels; facilitate collective action and alliance-building; underpin multi-agency partnerships; foster citizen engagement; promote social cohesion and integration; and provide spaces for reflection and learning.

As vehicles for starting and sustaining collective action, networks and forums are key means for enabling people to participate in decision-making and action at a local level. They bring people together to collaboratively address shared issues and respond to local needs.

In the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht, a well-supported, community-led, just transition housing network could knit together and push forward several of the ideas and themes outlined in this report. Alongside embedding community-led climate action into the housing pilot, a housing network would also lay the groundwork for broader initiatives raised during the TOCHAIL residencies, such as the proposal for an Irish-language festival centred on housing and climate action. Importantly, the network would also serve as a crucial vehicle for alliance-building and policy engagement. By establishing a dedicated space for action, the network could build connections with campaign groups, community-focused organisations, and others working to tackle the housing crisis in Gaeltacht areas or exploring community-led housing solutions. This would support the exchange of experiences, promote mutual learning, and strengthen advocacy efforts, ultimately focused on shaping both local and national policymaking.

#### Getting up and running

While the shape of a community-led housing network would evolve over time as the work progresses, as a starting point, the scope of work and Terms of Reference underpinning the network could be developed based on the themes that emerged from the TOCHAIL residencies:

- House building as community building
- The Irish language as central to the development of housing and community
- A supportive policy environment
- Skills sharing, skills development and employment opportunities
- Sustainable materials and localised supply chains
- Leveraging the existing strength of the community
- Local participation in planning and design

These themes offer a strong foundation from which to begin, anchoring the network's development in both the lived experience and aspirations of the community.

While networks are often driven by informal participation and voluntary efforts, the distinction between volunteering and unpaid labour can become blurred (Overgaard, 2019). A network of this nature should be adequately resourced and will likely require the support of a paid coordinator. The work involved in sustaining a network and fulfilling its aims will encompass a wide range of activities, ranging from informal and leisure-based activities to tasks that would more than likely constitute unpaid work. This is especially true when the purpose of the work is to address gaps left by the state, such as the current shortage of available housing in the Gaeltacht.

As outlined in this section, the community-led housing network would have a broader mandate than advancing and embedding climate action into the community-led housing pilot. As such, it would operate as a separate structure from the Community Land Trust (CLT), which will be established specifically to coordinate and manage the community-led housing pilot. However, since the URCLT is also likely to require a paid coordinator, there may be an opportunity, particularly if both roles are part-time and resources are limited, to seek funding for the coordinator roles simultaneously.

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# Conclusion

## 6. Conclusion

The model described in *The People's Transition: Community-led Development for Climate Justice* aims to systematically include people and communities in the design, implementation and ownership of climate action such that communities would begin to see the benefits of sustainable development in their lives and thus would support a rapid, deep decarbonisation push towards zero-emission societies. It also recognises that public investment in climate action, if directed towards community-led initiatives, could provide a boost for local development across Ireland and could address issues of inequality that exist on the island.

But theory is one thing, and practice is another. Thanks to the support of AIB, TASC has been able to work with Cumas Centar Uíbh Ráthach, its partners, and the communities that make up the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht for more than a year to bring this People's Transition project to life. The Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht and its surrounding area are home to many engaged and dedicated actors who are already spearheading community-led local development efforts and addressing issues of inequality to support the revitalisation of the Gaeltacht. Their support and guidance have helped this People's Transition project find roots.

As a consequence of the dedication of local actors and the coordinated efforts of Tascfhórsa Uíbh Ráthach, the population of the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht has begun to stabilise in recent years. However, the long-term regeneration and revitalisation of the area remains under threat due to continued out-migration. Among the various challenges facing the area, the most pressing has become a shortage of affordable housing, both for purchase and long-term rental. This issue has become a significant obstacle to population recovery and poses serious risks to the future of the Gaeltacht. The housing crisis in the Gaeltacht is complex and multifaceted, involving difficulties in obtaining planning permission, barriers to renovating derelict or vacant homes, and the large quantity of housing in the area used for short-term rentals and as holiday homes.

To address this, a roadmap for a community-led housing pilot was developed by Self Organised Architecture and published in 2024. This blueprint outlines strategies for bringing vacant homes back into use and constructing new, affordable housing within the Gaeltacht. This People's Transition project builds on that work and explores how a community-led housing pilot grounded in the principles of community wealth building can place the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht at the heart of a just transition.

Chapter 5 of this report is grounded in the findings of the TOCHAIL artist residencies and presents three interconnected pathways for advancing community-led solutions to the housing crisis in tandem with a just transition. The first explores how core aspects of just transition can be integrated into the development of a community-led housing pilot. These include the creation of shared community spaces, food-growing projects, the adoption of sustainable energy systems and local materials, as well as a strong emphasis on skills development and education.

While the People's Transition model emphasises the importance of community ownership and agency in the transition process, it also recognises that an enabling environment is required. Recognising this, the second pathway considers what kind of policy environment is needed to support both the delivery of a community-led housing pilot and broader efforts to ensure long-term access to affordable housing for the Irish-speaking community. Bringing these first two pathways together, the third pathway proposes the establishment of a resourced, community-led, just transition housing network in the Gaeltacht. This network would serve as a platform for sustained collective action, promote inclusive community engagement, and foster connections with other Gaeltacht regions and minority language communities, working collectively to advocate for progressive and supportive housing policies.

While the three phases of the People's Transition have been completed, it is not the end of TASC's connection with the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht. TASC researchers will continue to engage with community members, Cumas Ceantar Uíbh Ráthach, Tascfhórsa Uíbh Ráthaigh and the Gaeltacht's local community development organisations to support the development of the pathways forward proposed in this report.

We hope that the experience of engaging with the project will have been a valuable one for participants. Implementing a participative process in a community that has undergone several community engagement initiatives in recent years can be challenging, and creates a risk of engagement fatigue. Nevertheless, TASC was met with a very warm welcome and a willingness in all quarters to participate. It is hoped that the learnings from the process will inform and support local climate action in Gaeltacht Uíbh Ráthaigh, bringing with it social, cultural, and economic benefits.

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