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Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar

Policy Briefing Paper: Sustainable Rural and Gaeltacht
Housing (draft) National Planning Statement (2026)

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Executive Summary

This policy briefing paper responds to the Gaeltacht-specific provisions of the draft Sustainable Rural and Gaeltacht Housing, National Planning Statement (NPS, 2026). It draws on emerging themes from the *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* study, an exploratory mixed methods qualitative analysis of how residents of the West Kerry Gaeltacht experience the housing crisis, its implications for community and Irish-language sustainability, and the policy and regulatory interventions they consider necessary to preserve the Gaeltacht for future generations. The qualitative findings are considered alongside Census data, a scoping of the academic and grey literature, national policy and relevant international evidence to inform the finalisation of the Sustainable Rural and Gaeltacht Housing, National Planning Statement (NPS, 2026). The briefing does not constitute a comprehensive analysis of the study findings; a full analysis of the dataset will be undertaken for subsequent academic publication.

This paper situates the contemporary housing crisis within a longer history of Gaeltacht policy. While the draft NPS (2026) represents an important recognition of the relationship between housing and the sustainability of Irish as a community language, the central conclusion of this paper is that several of its proposed measures demonstrate a paucity of engagement with realities on the ground. Without direct Government intervention in the housing market, the draft NPS (2026) is unlikely to achieve its stated objective of enabling “Irish speakers with strong local connections to either remain in, return to, or move between any Gaeltacht area”¹. We further contend that housing is a binding constraint preventing the *20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language* from achieving its target to increase the number of people who speak Irish every day in the Gaeltachtaí.

While Budget 2027 provides €1 million to enable more people in Gaeltacht communities to develop and maintain their Irish-language skills,² language-specific interventions alone are unlikely to reverse the decline in the number of people speaking Irish daily spoken in Gaeltacht communities unless they are accompanied by measures addressing the structural conditions necessary for intergenerational language transmission.

Ó Bhéal an Phobail means "from the mouth of the community" and five of the six focus groups were held in Irish. These recordings were transcribed with ABAIR-ÉIST, the Irish speech recognition system developed at Trinity College Dublin, and corrected by hand by the ABAIR research group. An accurate Irish transcript is what made the work possible: a discussion held in Irish could be analysed and reported in Irish, in English or in both. With participants' consent, the recordings are also being used to improve speech recognition for the Irish of Corca Dhuibhne. The study shows how Irish speech and language technologies support bilingual research and policy work with Gaeltacht communities.

PRINCIPAL FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

1 A primary policy objective of the draft NPS (2026) is unlikely to be achievable

The evidence identifies a substantial mismatch between local incomes, house prices, mortgage capacity, state affordable-homeownership thresholds, construction costs and the availability of long-term rental accommodation. The illustrative hypothetical case of Sinéad and Fionn generated from the study data demonstrates that Irish speakers with strong Gaeltacht connections can meet the demographic and linguistic profile that the draft NPS (2026) seeks to facilitate, and secure local employment, but still remain priced out of the housing market. Housing should therefore be understood as part of the structural conditions necessary to sustain everyday Irish-language use and intergenerational transmission.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.1** Integrate Gaeltacht housing and language-planning policy more closely, while considering the legal basis for proportionate regulation of residential property use in pursuit of housing and community-sustainability objectives.
- 1.2** Review the affordability thresholds currently applied to state-supported homeownership schemes in high-cost Gaeltacht areas.
- 1.3** Ring-fence a proportion of Budget 2027's commitment to increase the supply of social and affordable housing specifically for Gaeltacht areas.

- 1.4** Support adoption of the European Commission's *Affordable Housing Act* in Council and prepare now to designate Gaeltacht areas as housing-stress areas, so that the powers over short-term rentals, second homes and vacant dwellings can be applied once the *Affordable Housing Act* is adopted by Parliament and Council.
- 1.5** The introduction of a Derelict Property Tax at 7% announced in Budget 2027 may help to strengthen measures to return vacant and derelict properties to permanent residential use, which *Ó Bhéal an Phobail* study participants propose be allocated to Community Land Trusts and co-operative housing bodies in Gaeltacht communities.

2 Constrained economic need criteria in the draft NPS (2026)

We argue that the proposed definition of economic need does not sufficiently reflect the contemporary employment structure or future sustainability requirements of Gaeltacht communities. Its emphasis on occupations intrinsically tied to a rural location sits uneasily with national policies promoting remote work, digital employment and regional development and may exclude people whose skills and employment could contribute to the social, economic and linguistic sustainability of Gaeltacht communities. The concentration of explicitly identified occupations in traditionally male-dominated sectors also raises a potential gender-equality concern.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1** Broaden the economic-need criteria to recognise contemporary employment patterns, including remote work, digital entrepreneurship and professional employment.
- 2.2** Align the NPS (2026) with national rural-development, remote-working and Gaeltacht digitisation policies, including those announced in Budget 2027.
- 2.3** Gender-proof the final Statement.

3 Holiday homes and short-term rentals.

Although the draft NPS (2026) recognises pressure from holiday homes and short-term rentals (STR), its principal restrictions concern new development and do not adequately address the existing concentration of housing already removed from permanent residential use. This is particularly significant in small Gaeltacht

communities where holiday homes and STRs can represent a disproportionately high level of the housing supply despite relatively small populations. The West Kerry evidence indicates high concentrations of holiday/STR accommodation alongside an extremely constrained private rental market.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1** Develop targeted regulation of second, and holiday homes and STRs informed by an emerging international evidence base.
- 3.2** Reconsider population thresholds for STR regulation in the *Short-Term Letting and Tourism Bill*³ published on 6th October 2026 from the perspective of small Gaeltacht communities with populations below the 20,000 threshold where the proportion of housing devoted to tourism may be exceptionally high. Providing hosts in locations with under 20,000 population with a further two years to regularise their planning will disproportionately affect small areas like the West Kerry Gaeltacht, where the proliferation of holiday homes and STRs is contributing to housing stress.
- 3.3** While the *Short-Term Letting and Tourism Bill*⁴ introduces a range of enforcement measures aligned with the international evidence on reducing non-compliance in the STR sector, *Ó Bhéal an Phobail* study participants emphasised the need for close monitoring and enforcement of both primary-residence/enurement clauses, and STR restrictions in the West Kerry Gaeltacht.

4 Housing for Irish speakers in multi-unit developments.

The draft NPS (2026) proposed methodology for calculating the proportion of units reserved for Irish speakers would substantially reduce existing provision in West Kerry and other Gaeltacht areas. Using declining daily Irish use as the basis for calculating future provision risks producing progressively weaker housing protection precisely where evidence of language shift may indicate a need for stronger intervention.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1** Base the proportion reserved on the broader Census measure of Irish speakers aged three years and over in the relevant Language Planning Area, plus the proposed additional 10%;

- 4.2** Allocate a proportion of Budget 2027's increased national supports for affordable home ownership to housing in Gaeltacht areas experiencing acute affordability pressures.

5 Enurement clauses and enforcement.

Reducing the existing 15-year permanent-residence/enurement requirement to ten years without a clearly stated rationale potentially weakens an established mechanism intended to support Irish as a community language. The evidence also indicates that the effectiveness of occupancy and STR restrictions depends fundamentally on monitoring and enforcement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1** Retain the 15-year permanent and primary residence requirement, subject to an appropriate force-majeure provision;
- 5.2** Adequately resource local authorities to implement, monitor and enforce primary occupancy/enurement clause conditions.

6 Linguistic Impact Statements.

Ó Bhéal an Phobail participants strongly supported the principle of Linguistic Impact Statements, but argued that there is substantial methodological and institutional ambiguity surrounding this requirement, which is not resolved by the draft NPS (2026). A consistent approach requires a national methodology, clearly defined professional expertise and an institutional structure capable of applying the system consistently across Gaeltacht areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 6.1** Establish a single statutory methodology for Linguistic Impact Statements (LIS), supported by appropriately qualified language-planning expertise.
- 6.2** Place responsibility for the development, implementation and oversight of (LIS) with an appropriately qualified specialist body or bodies.

- 6.3** Place the protection and promotion of Irish as a community language at the heart of planning policy and decision-making in Gaeltacht areas.

7 Development in highly sensitive scenic areas.

A substantial proportion of West Kerry, and many other Gaeltacht communities, lie within landscapes potentially affected by high-amenity and scenic protections. Participants identified a perceived conflict between protection of views and landscapes and the housing requirements of the linguistic community. The NPS must explain more clearly how environmental protection is to be reconciled with sustaining permanent populations in Gaeltacht areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 7.1** Provide clearer and more detailed guidance governing development in high-amenity and highly sensitive scenic areas, recognising the concentration of Gaeltacht communities in scenic, coastal and environmentally protected landscapes.

Together these recommendations point to a need for closer alignment between housing affordability, housing supply and use, planning regulation, contemporary economic activity and language planning.

Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted for policy impact and its scope was therefore determined by the timetable supporting the *draft Sustainable Rural and Gaeltacht Housing, National Planning Statement* (2026). The findings are not intended to be statistically representative of either the population of West Kerry or other Gaeltacht communities. The study provides a cross-sectional, moment-in-time account of participants' experiences and perceptions of a rapidly changing housing and policy environment. The qualitative data identifies perceived relationships between housing conditions, demographic change, community sustainability and language use, but cannot independently establish causal relationships between them. For this reason, this study has adopted a mixed methods qualitative approach in which

participants' accounts have been interpreted alongside Census data, a scoping of international academic and grey literature sources, and a range of national and international policy instruments. As such, claims have been cautiously made.

Five of the six focus groups were conducted in Irish and subsequently translated into English for analysis and reporting. While every effort has been made to preserve participants' intended meaning, translation is inherently interpretive, and some linguistic and cultural nuance may have been altered or lost, particularly where dialectal expressions, idioms or culturally specific formulations have no precise English equivalent. This should be borne in mind when interpreting translated quotations.

For the purposes of this policy briefing, selected data and emerging themes from *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* have been used to inform an evidence-based response to relevant Gaeltacht-specific provisions of the draft *Sustainable Rural and Gaeltacht Housing, National Planning Statement* (30th June 2026). Therefore, this briefing does not constitute a comprehensive presentation or analysis of the study findings. A full analysis of the dataset will be undertaken for subsequent academic publication.

NOTES

- 1 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (30th June 2026). Draft Sustainable Rural and Gaeltacht Housing, National Planning Statement. https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/5b384fc2/Sustainable_Rural_and_Gaeltacht_Housing_DRAFT_NPS_Proposed_Policy_Direction.pdf [accessed 30th June 2026], p.12
- 2 Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 6th October 2027. Statement by Minister Chambers on Budget 2027, by: Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation ; Jack Chambers [Online]. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-public-expenditure-infrastructure-public-service-reform-and-digitalisation/speeches/statement-by-minister-chambers-on-budget-2027/#a-budget-for-our-people> [accessed 6th October 2026]
- 3 Department of Tourism, Enterprise and Employment, 6th October 2026. Government publishes Short Term Letting and Tourism Bill. <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/news-and-events/department-news/2026/october/20261006.html> [accessed 7th October 2026]
- 4 Ibid

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ChatGPT (OpenAI) was used minimally during the development of this policy briefing paper and in accordance with Trinity College Dublin's, 'Statement on Artificial Intelligence and GenerativeAI in Teaching, Learning, Assessment & Research'. The tool provided research-support in this otherwise resource limited study, including locating hard-to-discover documents referred to in secondary sources; double-checking statistical calculations, translating sections of Irish language policy documents in the public domain, and providing suggestions on the clarity of expression in some paragraph drafts. Claude (Anthropic) was also requested to provide a critical review of the authors' final working draft. AI-generated suggestions were critically evaluated and revised, accepted or rejected as deemed appropriate by the Principal Investigator. Design and development of the research study, interpretation and analysis of the research data, selection and verification of sources, the development of substantive arguments, the structure and presentation of the paper and the final written content is the sole work of the authors. ABAIR-ÉIST produced first-pass transcripts of the Irish-language focus groups; every transcript was corrected by hand.

Introduction

This policy briefing paper has been developed in response to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage *Draft Sustainable Rural and Gaeltacht Housing, National Planning Statement* (henceforth “draft NPS (2026)”). It responds to provisions relating to planning in Gaeltacht areas only.

This paper presents the initial findings of an ongoing study, *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar*, an exploratory mixed methods qualitative analysis of how residents of the West Kerry Gaeltacht experience the housing crisis; its impact on community and Irish-language sustainability, and the policy and regulatory interventions they recommend in order to preserve the Gaeltacht for future generations. Led by Trinity College Dublin researchers, Drs Ann Nolan (Principal Investigator), School of Social Work and Social Policy, and Neasa Ní Chiaráin (Co-Investigator), School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences, this research, which is informed by both primary and secondary data sources, has been undertaken in partnership with Tobar Dhuibhne, Plean Teanga Chiarraí Thiar, the West Kerry Language Plan, to contribute community-based perspectives to the development of the Sustainable Rural and Gaeltacht Housing, National Planning Statement.

As the study was conducted for policy impact, its scope was determined by the timeline underscoring the development and finalisation of the *Sustainable Rural and Gaeltacht Housing, National Planning Statement* (2026). The primary qualitative data informing this paper provides a context-specific, moment-in-time account of how residents of one Language Planning Area experience the housing crisis and its implications for community and language sustainability. The findings are not intended to be statistically representative of either the population of West Kerry or other Gaeltacht communities. The primary data are interpreted alongside Census data, a scoping of international academic and grey literature sources, and a range of national and international policy instruments, which combined have been used to inform an evidence-based response to relevant Gaeltacht-specific provisions of the

draft NPS, published on 30th June 2026. The briefing does not constitute a comprehensive presentation or analysis of the study findings. A full analysis of the dataset will be undertaken for subsequent academic publication.

Budget 2027 announced €161 million to the Gaeltacht, Irish language and island communities - €2 million more than the €159 million allocated in 2026 - alongside an additional €1 million to support people in Gaeltacht communities to develop and maintain their Irish-language skills.⁵ Increased national investment in social and affordable housing was also announced but, at time of writing, there was no specific allocation ring-fenced for Gaeltacht communities. While these measures are welcome, this paper will argue that a combination of targeted social and affordable housing investment in Gaeltacht areas, alongside stronger regulation of second homes and short-term rentals, working in tandem with investment in language planning, is required to reverse to decline in the number of people speaking Irish every day and enable Irish-speakers to remain in, return to, and raise families in Gaeltacht communities.

Embedded under *National Policy Objective (NPO) 39: Support the implementation of language plans in Gaeltacht Language Planning Areas, Gaeltacht Service Towns and Irish Language Networks*, the draft NPS (2026) is underscored by four guiding principles, with ‘Cultural and Linguistic Heritage of Gaeltacht Areas’ (2026:7) responding directly to housing in Gaeltacht areas. The draft Statement (2026) emphasises that the overall policy approach under principle four,

“...is to facilitate Irish speakers with strong local connections to either remain resident within, return to, or move between any Gaeltacht area designated under the 2012 Gaeltacht Act⁶.”

While this commitment is both timely and welcome, we contend that several aspects of the draft NPS (2026) require clarification or revision to achieve NPO 39, and to secure the future of the Irish language as a living community language in the Gaeltacht.

Selected data, themes and recommendations from *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* are presented in direct response to a number of key provisions of the draft NPS (2026) as they relate to Gaeltacht areas under the following headings:

1. The primary policy objective of the draft NPS (2026) is unlikely to be achievable.
2. Constrained economic need criteria in the draft NPS (2026)
3. Second and holiday homes, and short-term rentals (STR).
4. Housing provision for Irish speakers in multi-unit developments.
5. Reduction in the terms of the Enurement Clause.
6. Linguistic Impact Statements.
7. Development constraints in highly sensitive scenic areas.

NOTES

- 5 Department of Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation, 6th October 2027. Statement by Minister Chambers on Budget 2027, by: Minister for Public Expenditure, Infrastructure, Public Service Reform and Digitalisation ; Jack Chambers [Online]. <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-public-expenditure-infrastructure-public-service-reform-and-digitalisation/speeches/statement-by-minister-chambers-on-budget-2027/#a-budget-for-our-people> [accessed 6th October 2026]
- 6 Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (30th June 2026). Draft Sustainable Rural and Gaeltacht Housing, National Planning Statement.
https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/5b384fc2/Sustainable_Rural_and_Gaeltacht_Housing_DRAFT_NPS_Proposed_Policy_Direction.pdf [accessed 30th June 2026], p.12

Background and Policy Context

This section of the paper will demonstrate that the Irish State has linked housing and language since the 1920s, with the Gaeltacht Housing Grant Scheme a precedent for housing supports tied to language. It then sets out the policy background to the decline in daily speakers of Irish, and the absence of an integrated approach to housing and language protection.

1.1 The Gaeltacht and Irish as a community language since the foundation of the State

The Constitution of the Irish Free State declared Irish the national language, while both Irish and English were recognised as official languages⁷, a designation that was renewed by the Constitution of Ireland in 1937 but which provided even stronger recognition to the Irish language in declaring it both the national language and first official language of the Irish state.⁸

The relationship between the socioeconomic sustainability of Gaeltacht communities and the survival of Irish as a community language has been equally recognised since the foundation of the State. Although 18% of the population was recorded as able to speak Irish in the 1926 Census, Ó Riagáin estimates that only approximately 3% lived in communities where Irish remained the dominant language⁹. The geographically remote concentration of these communities in economically disadvantaged areas meant that the Gaeltachtaí were characterised by a persistent pattern of outward migration, depopulation and deprivation, conditions which Ó Riagáin identified as a continuing impediment to language maintenance (Ó Riagáin, 1997). Recent Central Statistics Office (CSO) analyses confirms the underlying demographic vulnerability of these areas in 1926: although the national number of people recorded as Irish speakers increased between 1911 and 1926, the number in Gaeltacht areas fell by 66,697, or 21%¹⁰.

With the establishment of Coimisiún na Gaeltachta in 1925, which reported in 1926, the future of the Gaeltacht was considered in the context of both linguistic decline and co-occurring economic stagnation resulting in 82 recommendations covering education, administration and socioeconomic development. These included improved housing, land redistribution and resettlement, development of fishing and local industries, and measures intended to strengthen the position of Irish in schools and public administration¹¹. A 1928 Dáil debate records that only 14 of the Commission's 82 recommendations had been adopted by Government, although ministers disputed the precise extent of implementation.¹² John Walsh, Senior Lecturer in the School of Languages, Literatures, & Cultures at the University of Galway has written that the prevailing conservative economic policy of Cumann na nGaedheal led to many recommendations being discarded but approximately “40% were adopted, including housing grants, free school meals, pay bonuses for teachers and the development of Irish at University College Galway, which otherwise would have closed”¹³.

Ó Tuathaigh (1990: 5) subsequently argued that the early state response lacked a coherent programme of economic investment and social planning capable of supporting overall community development¹⁴.

This tension between ambitious linguistic objectives and the absence of socioeconomic and structural investment has remained a recurring feature of Gaeltacht policy in the intervening years¹⁵.

Against a background of severe unemployment and emigration, the Department of the Gaeltacht was established in 1956, with a remit to promote the “cultural, social and economic welfare of the Gaeltacht”¹⁶. Economic development subsequently became increasingly central to Gaeltacht policy in 1957 with the enactment of the Gaeltacht Industries Act 1957, aiming to develop rural industries, attract foreign direct investment and create productive employment in Gaeltacht areas. However, Gaeltarra Éireann (Gaelic Products of Ireland) was based in Dublin and became more associated with private development than home industries¹⁷.

The wider transformation of Irish economic policy associated with Seán Lemass and T. K. Whitaker's *Economic Development* brought industrialisation and socioeconomic change to Gaeltacht areas¹⁸ which resulted in a decline in outward migration for a period of time. However, scholars including Ó Riagáin (1997) and Ó Tuathaigh (1990)

identified the subsequent period as one in which the English language was further consolidated¹⁹ into the national economy with greater integration into predominantly English-speaking social, commercial and cultural networks.

1.2 The Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the use of Irish in the Gaeltacht²⁰

On foot of a recommendation from Coimisiún na Gaeltachta, the then Government commissioned a sociolinguistic study of the Gaeltacht in 2004. The Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht²¹ was published in 2007 and recommended that the Gaeltacht should be divided into three categories based on the frequency and use of Irish in daily life in order to target language protections more effectively. In relation to the proposed Category A districts, being those with 67% or more daily Irish speakers, the authors concluded:

“ The unambiguous conclusion of the survey on young people is that, without a major change to language-use patterns, Irish is unlikely to remain the predominant community and family language in those areas with the most widespread and inclusive Irish-speaking networks (i.e. Category A Gaeltacht Districts) for more than another fifteen to twenty years. By the time the young people surveyed for this study become parents, the network of active speakers will not be widespread enough to reproduce another generation of Irish speakers unless a supportive sociolinguistic environment can be established in the interim.”²²

The Irish language planning process has since been shaped in large part by Ó Giollagáin et al's 2007 report²³ with provision in The Gaeltacht Act, 2012 for Gaeltacht Service Towns, Language Networks, and Language Planning Areas (Limistéir Pleanála Teanga) supported by a process for each to develop its own language plan in seven year cycles. This has recently been extended to nine years.²⁴ There has been ongoing criticism of the LPA structure²⁵ with Ó Giollagáin arguing that the approach “overestimates the capacity of local Gaeltacht communities to influence social trends through local plans.”²⁶ This is particularly significant where the determinants of community sustainability – including housing supply, affordability, employment, infrastructure, tourism and property markets – are substantially beyond the control of local language-planning organisations.

The 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010–2030 is described by Government as having emerged from a research and consultation process incorporating the 2007 Comprehensive Linguistic Study and the 2002 Gaeltacht Commission.²⁷ Published in the midst of the fiscal crisis, the policy established a national framework over nine thematic areas, including the Gaeltacht, family language transmission, education, public services, media, economic life and legislation²⁸. Its stated policy objective is to increase the use and knowledge of Irish as a community language, with particular attention to the viability of Irish as a household and community language in the Gaeltacht.

Progress towards the objectives of the 20-Year Strategy have been limited up to 2022, the last year for which data is available. The number of people reporting an ability to speak Irish increased from the Strategy's baseline of 1.66 million to almost 1.874 million by 2022.²⁹ However, this expansion of the number of people reporting an ability to speak Irish has not translated into increased daily use. The number speaking Irish daily outside the education system was recorded as 71,968 in 2022³⁰, below the 83,000 baseline from which the Strategy aimed to reach 250,000 by 2030. Nor has the Strategy's objective of increasing daily Irish use in the Gaeltacht by 25% been realised: Census 2022 recorded 20,261 daily speakers in Gaeltacht areas, 325 fewer than in 2016. While the number of people in all Gaeltacht areas who reported being able to speak Irish increased from 63,664 in 2016 to 65,156 in 2022, the Gaeltacht population grew faster than people who could speak Irish, so the overall proportion of people who speak Irish continued to decline from 69% in 2011 to 67% in 2016 and to 66% in 2022³¹.

While, Budget 2027 has announced €1 million to enable more people in Gaeltacht communities to develop and maintain their Irish-language skills,³² language-specific interventions alone are unlikely to reverse the decline in the number of people speaking Irish daily spoken in Gaeltacht communities unless they are accompanied by measures addressing the structural conditions necessary for intergenerational language transmission.

1.3 Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes

The 2009 *Report of the Special Group on Public Service Numbers and Expenditure Programmes* (An Bord Snip Nua) queried the justification for some differential schemes directed at Gaeltacht areas and proposed significant reductions in expenditure and institutional restructuring³³ including that the department should be closed and its portfolio distributed to other Government departments due to its having “a relatively lower priority in terms of the existing pressures on the public finances.”³⁴

Ó Giollagáin (2014)³⁵ subsequently argued that austerity compounded a longer-term mismatch between the State's stated language objectives and the resources devoted to their implementation, while more recent analysis by Ó Ceallaigh (2022) argued that McCarthy et al. proposed such a drastic programme of cuts that, “amounted to a rapid intensification of the state’s steady process of withdrawal from supporting the Gaeltacht, which was disproportionately affected by the cuts.”³⁶

The recommendations of An Bord Snip Nua were not implemented in full, but the fiscal crisis nevertheless resulted in substantial reductions in expenditure on Gaeltacht development and Irish-language supports. Some of the institutional retrenchment proposed by the Special Group—notably the transfer of Údarás na Gaeltachta's enterprise functions—did not proceed. Although funding for the Gaeltacht and the Irish language has increased substantially in more recent years, this funding appears to be directed towards the restructuring of Gaeltacht areas under the provisions of the Gaeltacht Act, 2012 rather than a restoration of the programmes and expenditure removed during the financial crisis. Of importance to this policy briefing paper, is that the Gaeltacht Housing Grant Scheme, which was suspended in April 2009, has never been restored (see sub-section 1.5 below).

The seriousness of the underlying linguistic challenge was reinforced by the Update to the Comprehensive Linguistic Study, published by Údarás na Gaeltachta in 2015. Using comparable methodology to the 2007 study, the authors found that erosion of Irish as a community language had continued and was occurring faster than had been predicted in the original study, leading them to call for urgent intervention³⁷. The Chairperson of Údarás na Gaeltachta, Anna Ní Ghallachair said at the time that, “The report details how the Irish language has contracted as a community language in the Gaeltacht, especially in the strongest Gaeltacht areas.”³⁸

The economic development of the Gaeltacht in the last thirty years reveals a fundamental paradox: Economic liberalisation created employment and helped stem outward migration, thereby sustaining Gaeltacht communities; yet their greater integration into the national and international economy simultaneously expanded the domains in which English became dominant through increasing exposure to the socioeconomic forces driving language shift.

From a social policy perspective, the trajectory of Irish language policy may be understood as a movement from relatively incremental expansion of state language measures during the first decades of independence towards greater reliance on economic integration and less direct state intervention in the reproduction of Irish as a community language.³⁹

1.4 Housing and the planning process in Gaeltacht areas

Housing and the planning process in Gaeltacht areas was foregrounded during the Celtic Tiger years from 1997 to 2008 as the value of land, construction and housing costs rose sharply, which Walsh (2022) associates with a decline in competence in Irish in some Gaeltacht areas between 1996 and 2002.⁴⁰

As outlined above, the first Gaeltacht Commission of 1926 regarded housing conditions, land, employment, and migration as interconnected with essential aspects of language planning and protection measures. The Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht⁴¹ also recommended that language plans take an integrated and cohesive approach,

“...with respect to the other main domains of Gaeltacht life, including language planning, local and physical planning, educational planning, structural planning, social planning and planning for community development.”⁴²

Policy interventions to protect minority languages require an integrated, "all-of-government" response. If language planning is not integrated with essential services like education, housing, health and employment sectors, speakers cannot use the language in their daily economic, civic, and social lives.

The Planning and Development Act, 2000⁴³ had represented an important development in Gaeltacht policy by incorporating language protection explicitly into the statutory planning system. Section 10(2)(m) required local authority

development plans encompassing Gaeltacht areas to include objectives for the protection of their linguistic and cultural heritage, including the promotion of Irish as the community language. However, while establishing a statutory obligation to protect Irish as a community language, the Act did not prescribe how this should be achieved through housing or development policy, leaving considerable discretion to individual planning authorities. Ó Giollagáin et al. (2007) observed that the provisions of the Act were implemented unevenly and called for a co-ordinated national approach to Gaeltacht planning policy.⁴⁴ While no regulatory provision has been made for this recommendation, many of the county development plans⁴⁵ now include Language Enurement Clauses⁴⁶ in single or multi-unit developments in Gaeltacht areas with the level of fluency of Irish generally required to meet a B2 level of language competency as accredited by Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge.

The Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for Planning Authorities (2005)⁴⁷ built on the Planning and Development Act 2000 and provided a national framework for managing housing development in rural Ireland. The guidelines did not, however, establish a national Gaeltacht-specific housing policy or prescribe standard language criteria for residential development. Instead, responsibility for translating the statutory requirement to protect the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Gaeltacht remained at the discretion of individual planning authorities. The updated draft NPS (2026) proposes to strengthen guidance to planning authorities but we contend that the Statement, in its current form, does not go far enough to achieve this.

1.5 Gaeltacht Housing Grant Scheme

The Gaeltacht Housing Grant Scheme, which was suspended in April 2009 and not reinstated, deserves a mention here. The scheme had operated under the Housing (Gaeltacht) Acts 1929–2001, providing grants of up to €15,000 to households with competence in Irish to either build a new house or improve an existing house in a Gaeltacht area. The scheme was not means-tested because its primary purpose was not housing assistance, but rather as McCarthy et al. (2009) observed, “The main aim of the scheme is to promote the Irish language.⁴⁸” noting that it had been already been suspended and recommending that it should not be resumed.

While other issues arise in the context of a universally available housing assistance measure in a Gaeltacht or any area, it is particularly noteworthy that prior to the suspension of this scheme, Government policy was using a housing assistance measure as one means of protecting Gaeltacht communities and promoting the Irish language.

The Draft NPS (30th June 2026) is therefore representative of a return to the policy question of whether the sustainability of Irish as a community language requires housing interventions tailored specifically to Gaeltacht communities.

1.6 Conclusion

Since the first Gaeltacht Commission, the Irish State has repeatedly recognised that the protection of Irish as a community language cannot be separated from the material conditions required to sustain a community. The policy instruments have changed — from interventions to improve the housing supply, land redistribution and employment creation in the early twentieth century, through economic industrialisation and regional development in the mid-twentieth century, to contemporary community language planning — but the underlying problem remains the same if a consequence of very different forces. The survival of a minority language as a community language depends not simply on the number of people who possess knowledge of it, but on its intergenerational transmission and routine use within a sufficiently viable community of speakers. UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage Section acknowledges that, “Where, with whom, and the range of topics for which a language is used directly affects whether or not it will be transmitted to the next generation.”⁴⁹ However, if young Irish speakers cannot afford to remain in or return to a Gaeltacht community because the permanent housing stock is displaced by holiday and STR accommodation, and private rental housing is scarce, or where the cost of building or buying a home far exceeds incomes available from the local economy, then the conditions required to transmit the language to the next generation are not met. The consequences then extend beyond housing affordability to become a question of whether or not the current structural and demographic conditions in Gaeltacht communities can support intergenerational language transmission and everyday community use of the Irish language, and protect the Gaeltacht for future generations?

NOTES

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Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar

The *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* study was conducted for policy impact, with its scope determined by the timeline underscoring the development and finalisation of the *Sustainable Rural and Gaeltacht Housing, National Planning Statement* (2026). The primary qualitative data informing this paper provides a context-specific, moment-in-time account of how residents of one Language Planning Area experience the housing crisis and its implications for community and language sustainability. The primary data are interpreted alongside Census data, a scoping of international academic and grey literature sources, and a range of national and international policy instruments, which combined have been used to inform an evidence-based response to relevant Gaeltacht-specific provisions of the draft NPS, published on 30th June 2026.

The *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* study's original primary objective was to contribute community-based perspectives to the development of the National Planning Statement on Housing in Gaeltacht Areas, which, it was announced in early 2026, would be published in early 2027⁵⁰ with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, James Browne, T.D., confirming on 19th March 2026 that,

“ Specifically with regard to planning guidelines, the Action Plan sets out the intention to publish a National Planning Statement in respect of rural housing in H2 2026, and a National Planning Statement in respect of Gaeltacht planning in order to protect linguistic integrity in H1 2027.”⁵¹

The publication of the draft NPS on 30th June 2026 combined rural and Gaeltacht housing in one policy statement, and was approved by the government for environmental assessment and public consultation, with final publication expected in late 2026 rather than 2027.⁵² As such, the primary objective of *Ó Bhéal an Phobail*:

Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar was displaced by the advanced publication of the draft Statement but remains well-placed to inform the public consultation process that will open in October/November 2026.⁵³

Irish speech and language technology in this study: five of the six focus group discussions took place through the medium of Irish, at participants' request. To work with them faithfully, the study drew on ABAIR, the Irish speech and language technology initiative based in Trinity College Dublin. The recordings were first transcribed using ABAIR-ÉIST, ABAIR's speech recognition system for Irish. The ABAIR research group then corrected each transcript by hand against the audio and, as the present analysis was conducted in English, translated it into English. In practice, this meant that people could speak about their own community in their own language, and that what they said could be analysed and reported in Irish, in English or in both. This part of the study was led by the Co-Investigator, Dr Neasa Ní Chiaráin, who reviewed all transcripts and translations.

The study had a second aim, approved by the Research Ethics Committee and set out in the information leaflet: to help speech technology serve the Irish of Corca Dhuibhne better. Each participant in this study was asked, as a separate item on the consent form, whether their recordings could be used to improve the recognition of Corca Dhuibhne Irish. All 44 participants agreed. The recordings are now being used for that purpose.

The effect of this study's recordings on the recognition of Corca Dhuibhne speech has not yet been measured, and will be reported in a separate academic paper. It is an aim of this work to make it practical for researchers, planning authorities and public bodies to consult Gaeltacht communities through spoken Irish as a matter of course.

Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar was reviewed and received full ethical approval from the School of Social Work and Social Policy, Research Ethics Committee, Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin, Reference: ID No 1270 REAMS 5706 on 30th March 2026. The approval covered audio recording, transcription and translation with ABAIR, the use of the speech data to improve the recognition of Corca Dhuibhne Irish, and the retention of de-identified recordings.

1.1 Methodology

The primary data for the present study were collected from focus groups discussions (FGD) with residents of the West Kerry Gaeltacht, an area demarcated and provided for by the Gaeltacht Act, 2012. As the primary objective of the study was to inform the development of a new policy instrument guiding housing in Gaeltacht areas, focus groups were selected as the most suitable tool for data collection to facilitate the emergence of a wide range of themes of importance to a community, compared to individual interviews, for example. Focus groups are by their nature interactive and conversational, allowing for contrasting views and issues which participants may feel more inclined to raise given the less-moderated structure of the discussion.⁵⁴ Focus groups also facilitate a stronger emphasis on what the community rather than what individual's might value in terms of housing in Gaeltacht areas. Importantly for this study, each focus-group discussion was initially informed by deductive prompts drawn from the literature, using examples of regulatory and policy responses adopted in other jurisdictions, including Wales, Scotland and Catalonia, to address housing pressures in areas of linguistic significance. Examples included measures relating to Linguistic Impact Statements; the regulation of holiday homes and short-term rentals (STRs); vacant properties; and social and co-operative housing. These prompts were used to initiate discussion rather than prescribe its direction; discussion subsequently developed inductively as participants drew on their own experiences and knowledge to consider the local housing context and its impact, from their perspectives, on the Irish language.

The requirements for inclusion in the study were,

1. People whose 'usual residence' is situated within the Language Planning Area of the West Kerry Gaeltacht as defined by the 2012 Act, with 'usual residence' understood to mean a person who has lived at their address, i.e. in a permanent or temporary dwelling (caravans, mobile homes, pods etc) for at least 12 continuous months before the commencement of the study;
2. People who meet all the requirements of 1 and speak either Irish, English or both.
3. People who are over the age of 18 years up to no age limit.

The study excluded,

1. People whose usual or primary residence was situated outside the Language Planning Area of West Kerry Gaeltacht for at least 12 continuous months before the commencement of the study, which is a limitation of the study – see 1.4 below.
2. People who did not speak Irish, English or both.
3. People who were under the age of 18 years.

This was a time and resource-limited policy study that sought a moment-in-time capture of resident's perspectives on housing in the context of increasing language shift in light of the forthcoming Sustainable Rural and Gaeltacht Housing, National Planning Statement. The West Kerry Gaeltacht was selected because it combines a historically strong Irish-speaking community with substantial contemporary pressures on housing and demographic sustainability. It includes communities in which Irish continues to function as an everyday community language, while simultaneously experiencing high housing costs, limited private rental availability, significant levels of holiday and second-home ownership, strong tourism-related demand for accommodation, and like almost all other Gaeltacht areas, it has experienced a decline in the number of people who speak Irish daily.

A scoping study was undertaken to provide the wider demographic, historical, policy and research context within which the primary focus group data were analysed and interpreted. This incorporated extensive analysis of CSO Census data from 2011, 2016 and 2022, alongside structured searches of Web of Science, PsycINFO, Google Scholar, JSTOR and BASE (Bielefeld Academic Search Engine). The literature scoping searched for an evidence base examining the relationship between housing, community sustainability and minority-language sustainability but a particularly small body of peer-reviewed research, concerning housing and the sustainability of Irish as a community language was identified. A broad search of grey literature was also conducted, supported by language planning officers in the West Kerry Gaeltacht and relevant State agencies, who assisted in identifying local and other hard-to-retrieve studies, reports and policy documents. The review extended to international comparator regions where minority or minoritised languages face similar demographic and housing pressures, examining policy interventions at the intersection of housing, planning and language sustainability. Finally, the analysis

drew on key historical texts, books and in-depth studies of the Gaeltacht to situate contemporary housing pressures and language change within their longer-term social, cultural and economic context.

1.2 Data and Sampling Methods

Six focus group discussions were conducted between 7th and 9th May 2026 in Áras Bhréanainn, Baile an Fheirtéaraigh, Trá Lí. Forty-eight residents of Limistéar Pleanála Teanga Gaeltachta Ciarraí Thiar, volunteered to participate in the study of which 44 (92%) presented and participated in one of the scheduled groups. Five of the focus groups were conducted in Irish, at participants' request, and one in English. Each discussion lasted one hour and was audio-recorded with participants' written consent. The Irish-language recordings were transcribed using ABAIR-ÉIST, and each transcript was then corrected by hand against the audio. The ABAIR research group prepared the corrected transcripts and the English translations.

The “Information power” model⁵⁵, a framework for determining sample size in qualitative research, was adopted by this study, because it operates on the premise that participants with a high level of knowledge about a particular situation reduces the need for a larger sample.

Using purposive-sampling methods as the most appropriate means of gaining insights into specific phenomena, recruitment of participants was carried out by Tobar Dhuibhne following training of language planning officers by the study PI, and with the assistance of local residents of the West Kerry Gaeltacht who supported a snowball sampling method. Invitations-to-participate posters were prepared in both Munster Irish and English and placed in local shops, pubs, churches, community centres, post offices and other places where people congregate in the West Kerry Gaeltacht. Invitations-to-participate were also circulated during the Féile na Bealtaine festival (1-4 May 2026) and through local social media platforms including Tobar Dhuibhne's WhatsApp-based Ciorcal Comhrá groups; Instagram and email networks, activity-based networks, and youth groups. People who were interested in participating contacted either the language planning officer in Tobar Dhuibhne, or the study PI, and were subsequently sent a Project Information Leaflet (PIL) and Consent Form, in Irish and/or English according to their preference, and invited to contact the study PI if they had any queries. All who had expressed an interest were

contacted again as part of a follow-up process to confirm their willingness to participate; the implications of participating in the study; how their personal data would be managed and protected by the research team, and to remind participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

The study appointed a highly regarded local moderator, with extensive community-level experience, who was well known and trusted by participants. A moderator who is well known and trusted in a small community helps participation and trust, but can also discourage dissent. Although this was not easily observable, it cannot be ruled out as a limitation of the study. The moderator was trained by the study PI in focus group facilitation methods, but she was already both highly skilled and experienced in group dynamics and put participants at their ease, while ensuring that all members of each group had an opportunity to contribute.

1.3 Method of analysis

The anonymised data was coded in NVivo 15 using a combination of semi-deductive and inductive thematic approaches.⁵⁶ Names, locations and other identifying details were removed from the recordings, the transcripts and the translations, and the analysis was carried out on the de-identified transcripts. Study data are stored in a password-protected Trinity OneDrive folder, accessible only to the research team, and will be deleted seven years after the study ends. The de-identified recordings are held separately on a secure server. As approved by the Research Ethics Committee, they will be kept indefinitely, to improve speech recognition for Corca Dhuibhne Irish and as a record of that variety for future research on the language. They will not be shared with third parties.

The focus-group transcripts were imported into NVivo 15 and analysed through a three-stage thematic coding process as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). First-round coding was predominantly inductive, generating initial codes directly from participants' accounts of their experiences, perceptions and proposed responses to the housing crisis. Deductive codes reflected focus group prompts drawn from the literature, using examples of regulatory and policy responses adopted in other jurisdictions to address housing pressures in areas of linguistic significance. In the second stage, these initial codes were reviewed, compared and consolidated to generate a number of key themes recurring across the six focus groups. A further

review of the second stage themes was undertaken in the context of the scoping review and were combined, divided, or discarded as appropriate. The final stage involved the refinement of the thematic structure in the context of an overarching analysis organised into three categories: (1) perceived causes and drivers of the housing crisis in the West Kerry Gaeltacht; (2) impacts and consequences for community sustainability and the Irish language; and (3) proposed solutions and policy interventions.

1.4 Limitations of the study

The findings of this study are not intended to be statistically representative of either the population of West Kerry or other Gaeltacht communities. Sampling was guided by the principle of ‘information power’, and the qualitative findings were considered alongside a wide range of academic and grey literature sources. As such, the recruitment strategy introduces potential selection effects. Recruitment through the language-planning office, Ciorcal Comhrá groups and snowball sampling may have resulted in an over-representation of committed Irish speakers and people with a pre-existing concern about housing or the future of the Gaeltacht. Participation was also voluntary, creating the possibility of self-selection by people for whom the issues under investigation were particularly salient. While the inclusion of information-rich participants was consistent with the exploratory purpose and sampling strategy of the study, the perspectives of residents who have less engagement with the Irish language or about housing and language sustainability, may consequently be less well represented in the data.

The study was undertaken within significant time and resource constraints and in the context of the consultation timetable for the draft NPS (2026). A larger and more extensively resourced study would have enabled purposive recruitment of particular population groups whose experiences warrant more detailed examination. Of particular importance are younger people who wish to remain in or return to a Gaeltacht area, given the explicit objective of the draft NPS (2026) to facilitate people with strong local connections to remain in or return to these communities. Young people with such aspirations participated voluntarily in the present study, but comprised a relatively small proportion of the sample. Their experiences and perspectives cannot therefore be examined in sufficient depth as a distinct cohort.

Future research should specifically recruit this population, including those currently living outside the Gaeltacht who would like to return, to examine the barriers they may encounter and the conditions that might enable them to return.

A highly regarded local moderator, fluent in the local dialect of Irish and well known within the community, facilitated the focus groups. This brought important advantages in terms of linguistic competence, cultural understanding, rapport and trust in the study. However, familiarity between moderator and participants in a small and closely connected community may also have influenced what participants felt comfortable expressing. Similarly, participants' familiarity with one another may have inhibited dissenting or personally sensitive accounts, while the interactive nature of focus groups can allow some perspectives to become more prominent than others. Although no systematic suppression of dissent was apparent during the discussions, these effects cannot be excluded.

The study provides a cross-sectional, moment-in-time account of participants' experiences and perceptions of a rapidly changing housing and policy environment. The qualitative data can identify perceived relationships between housing conditions, demographic change, community sustainability and language use, but cannot independently establish causal relationships between them. For this reason, participants' accounts have been interpreted alongside Census data and other secondary evidence, and claims have been cautiously made.

Finally, five of the six focus groups were conducted in Irish and subsequently translated into English for analysis and reporting. Every effort was made during transcription and translation to preserve participants' intended meaning, including attention to the local dialect and review of translations where meaning was ambiguous. Nevertheless, translation is inherently interpretive, and some linguistic and cultural nuance may have been altered or lost, particularly where dialectal expressions, idioms or culturally specific formulations have no precise English equivalent. This should be borne in mind when interpreting translated quotations.

For the purposes of this policy briefing, selected data and emerging themes from *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* have been used to inform an evidence-based response to relevant Gaeltacht-specific provisions of the draft *Sustainable Rural and Gaeltacht Housing, National Planning Statement* (30th June 2026).

Therefore, this briefing does not constitute a comprehensive presentation or analysis of the study findings. A full analysis of the dataset will be undertaken for subsequent academic publication.

NOTES

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Findings of the *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* study supporting an evidence-informed response to the draft NPS (2026)

This section of the policy briefing paper will present selected findings and recommendations arising from *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar*, particularly discussion points and recommendations arising from the focus groups with residents of the West Kerry Gaeltacht. These findings are further interpreted using secondary data sources, particularly Census data from 2011, 2016 and 2022, and the extant grey and academic literature, with policy analyses undertaken by the study team.

Each section is presented in direct response to key provisions contained in the draft NPS (2026) as they relate to Gaeltacht areas, under the following headings:

1. The primary policy objective of the draft NPS (2026) is unlikely to be achievable.
2. Constrained economic need criteria in the draft NPS (2026)
3. Second and holiday homes, and short-term rentals (STR).
4. Housing provision for Irish speakers in multi-unit developments.
5. Reduction in the terms of the Enurement Clause.
6. Linguistic Impact Statements.
7. Development constraints in highly sensitive scenic areas.

The primary policy objective is unlikely to be achievable

1.1 House prices are determined by purchasing power that exceeds local incomes.

The most significant barrier identified by participants to young people either remaining or returning to the West Kerry Gaeltacht in the *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* study was the disconnect between local incomes and the cost of housing. One parent described the case of her daughter, who would “...love to come back here in a couple of years and...to have children and...to raise them here”, as needing to win “the lotto” [National Lottery] to be able to do so (FGD B).

The authors developed an illustrative composite case from themes and experiences identified across the *Ó Bhéal an Phobail* focus-group data, supplemented by secondary housing and income data, to examine the structural affordability problem in the West Kerry Gaeltacht and how it may act as a barrier to the full realisation of guiding principle D (draft NPS (2026), and the overall policy approach of facilitating Irish speakers with strong local connections to either remain resident in or return to this Gaeltacht area. The hypothetical case is responsive to Budget 2027 announcements on 6th June 2026.

ILLUSTRATIVE CASE

The hypothetical case of Sinéad and Fionn from Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar data

Consider Sinéad, a 32-year-old woman who was born and raised in the West Kerry Gaeltacht and is a fluent Irish speaker, and her partner Fionn, a fluent Irish speaker from the Connemara Gaeltacht. They currently live and work in Dublin but would like to return to West Kerry to start a family and raise their children through Irish. Both have secured employment locally and need to find somewhere to live.

To illustrate their likely earning capacity, Sinéad is assigned the CSO average weekly earnings across all economic sectors in Q1 2026, while Fionn is assigned average earnings in the Accommodation and Food Service industry, reflecting employment in a sector of particular importance to the tourism-dependent West Kerry economy. Their annualised earnings based on Sinéad's gross earnings of approximately €55,359 and Fionn €24,348, produces a combined gross household income of approximately €79,707 per annum.⁵⁷

The median house price in Dingle is €400,000⁵⁸, approximately 36% higher than the County Kerry median. Property Price Register data examined for this study indicate that properties sold in the West Kerry Gaeltacht in 2026 ranged from approximately €180,000 for a derelict property to €725,000 for a house, while newer or modern homes advertised closer to Dingle town were priced at approximately €470,000–€550,000, with some reaching €750,000⁵⁹.

The gap between earnings and house prices is compounded by mortgage lending limits. Under the Central Bank of Ireland's mortgage measures, first-time buyers can generally borrow a maximum of four times their combined gross income, subject to individual lender affordability assessments and a limited proportion of lending above the standard limit⁶⁰. On a combined income of €79,706.64, Sinéad and Fionn would therefore have a standard maximum mortgage of approximately €318,827.

Even the €400,000 median-priced house would consequently require them to contribute approximately €81,173 from their own resources, in addition to meeting transaction and associated purchasing costs. A €470,000 house would require approximately €151,173, while a €550,000 property would require approximately €231,173. Their borrowing capacity therefore remains substantially below the price of much of the housing available locally. The income-tax changes introduced in Budget 2027⁶¹ will leave Sinéad and Fionn approximately €1,016 better off annually, or about €85 per month, potentially allowing them to save a little more towards a deposit. However, any additional saving capacity must be considered in the context of continuing cost-of-living pressures, including rising household energy costs, which will absorb at least some of the gain in disposable income.

Sinéad and Fionn: standard maximum mortgage compared with local house prices

Maximum mortgage (4 × €79,707)		€318,827
Median house price, Dingle		€400,000
Newer home, lower range		€470,000
Newer home, upper range		€550,000

Figures from the case text above. Shortfall at the median price: approximately €81,173.

As first-time buyers, Sinéad and Fionn may also qualify for the Help to Buy (HTB) Scheme if they purchase a qualifying newly built home or construct a new home themselves. The enhanced scheme provides a refund of Income Tax and DIRT paid during the preceding four tax years, up to the lesser of €30,000, 10% of the purchase price or approved valuation, or the amount of qualifying tax paid. The property must have a purchase price or, in the case of a self-build, an approved valuation of no more than €500,000, and the mortgage must generally represent at least 70% of that value⁶².

As first-time buyers, Sinéad and Fionn may qualify for the Help to Buy (HTB) Scheme if they purchase a qualifying newly built home or construct a new home themselves. Budget 2027 increases the maximum relief available under the scheme from €30,000 to €35,000.⁶³ The €500,000 maximum qualifying property value remains unchanged. The increase therefore provides Sinéad and Fionn with up to €5,000 in additional assistance, but only where the property or self-build qualifies for HTB.⁶⁴ Budget 2027 therefore improves their position by €5,000, but does not by itself bridge the financing gap. Sinéad and Fionn's standard mortgage capacity of approximately €318,827 would still leave a substantial self-financing requirement even if they qualified for the maximum HTB refund. A new home costing in excess of €500,000 remains outside the HTB scheme altogether because it exceeds the unchanged €500,000 property-value ceiling.

Sinéad and Fionn may also be eligible for the First Home Scheme (FHS), which can provide an equity contribution towards a qualifying newly built home or self-build. The property-price ceiling applying in County Kerry was increased during 2026 to €425,000⁶⁵. Where Help to Buy is also used, the maximum FHS equity contribution is 20% of the purchase price or build cost and Budget 2027's increase in HTB from €30,000 to €35,000 would reduce the amount that would

need to be provided through their own resources or shared equity by a further €5,000. However, the more significant constraint in the West Kerry Gaeltacht is the availability of qualifying new housing within the scheme thresholds. Newer or modern homes identified in the local market at approximately €470,000–€550,000 are above the €425,000 FHS ceiling.

The Local Authority Home Loan provides another potential route to homeownership. The County Kerry property-value ceiling under this scheme is €310,000⁶⁶, with a maximum loan of approximately €279,000 based on the scheme's 90% loan-to-value limit. However, the €310,000 property ceiling remains approximately €90,000 below the €400,000 median Dingle house price, €160,000 below a €470,000 home and €240,000 below a €550,000 home.

Budget 2027 announced more than €1 billion for a new Starter Homes Programme⁶⁷, intended to deliver thousands of starter homes through a range of affordability supports alongside the Help to Buy scheme. However, the Budget announcement does not yet establish how many homes will be delivered through the different affordability mechanisms or whether additional affordable homes will be delivered in the Gaeltacht. The practical benefit to Sinéad and Fionn will therefore depend on whether the increased investment translates into qualifying homes in their local housing market and at prices within the relevant scheme thresholds.

Sinéad and Fionn: key figures before and after Budget 2027

Comparison of household income, mortgage capacity, local house prices and main housing supports

	2026 (original baseline)	2027 (after 2026 changes + Budget 2027)
 Combined gross household income (annual)	€79,707	€79,707 (unchanged)
 Maximum mortgage (4 × income)	€318,827	€318,827 (unchanged)
 Median house price, Dingle	€400,000	€400,000 (unchanged)
 Newer home – lower range	€470,000	€470,000 (unchanged)
 Newer home – higher range	€550,000	€550,000 (unchanged)
 Help to Buy (HTB) maximum	€30,000	€35,000 (+€5,000)
 First Home Scheme (FHS) property price ceiling – Kerry	€425,000 (increased during 2026)	€425,000 (unchanged)
 Local Authority Home Loan property price ceiling – Kerry (maximum loan €279,000 based on 90% LTV)	€310,000 (increased during 2026)	€310,000 (unchanged)



Starter Homes Programme (Budget 2027)

Budget 2027 provides over €1 billion for a new Starter Homes Programme, intended to deliver thousands of starter homes through a range of affordability supports alongside Help to Buy. This has the potential to improve access to homeownership for households such as Sinéad and Fionn, but the practical benefit will depend on the number and location of qualifying homes delivered in the West Kerry Gaeltacht and whether they are available at prices within the relevant scheme thresholds.

Building a home provides no straightforward alternative. A modest three-bedroom detached house of approximately 110–120 square metres on a 0.25-acre site in West Kerry was estimated for this briefing to cost approximately €320,000–€430,000 to construct, before the cost of purchasing a site⁶⁸. Zoned land identified in the study was estimated at approximately €100,000–€375,000 or more in the West Kerry Gaeltacht⁶⁹. On these estimates, a self-build involving the purchase of a site could therefore cost approximately €420,000 at the lower end, and considerably more depending on site and construction costs. A self-build becomes substantially more feasible only where a household already owns, inherits or is gifted a suitable site.

Furthermore, *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* study participants raised concerns about the costs involved in the planning process itself, with every revision to an application or resubmission costing more. Participants complained of extremely protracted and bureaucratic processes, and “...the cost involved” (FGD, D) and “every time you go back, it costs more” (FGD, D). The high quality standards that the local authority requires of new builds was described as prohibitive for most people on local incomes: “people want to pay something, but they simply do not have the money to build the houses that now have to be built - A-Rated. So, if you build the houses over there, guess what they will cost? Over half a million... if I were building a house now, there is no way, no way I could make the repayments.” (FGD, A).

Purchasing and refurbishing an existing vacant or derelict property may appear to offer another route into homeownership for Fionn and Sinéad. However, the Vacant Property Refurbishment Grant provides up to €50,000 for a qualifying vacant property and up to €70,000 where the property is derelict⁷⁰. The grant does not remove the need to finance the purchase price and any refurbishment expenditure above the grant ceiling. Budget 2027's measures intended to increase the cost of retaining derelict property may potentially encourage some properties back into productive use, but their effect on the availability or price of housing in West Kerry cannot yet be established.

Private rental accommodation while saving for a deposit or larger equity contribution is also unavailable to Sinéad and Fionn. Repeated searches undertaken for this study found no private long-term rental properties available in Corca Dhuibhne/the Dingle Peninsula despite more than 1,000 short-term rental properties being returned in corresponding Airbnb searches⁷¹. The

absence of long-term rental accommodation therefore constrains what would ordinarily provide a transitional housing option for a household returning to an area before purchasing or building a permanent home.

While budget 2027 improves the financial supports available to Sinéad and Fionn, they ultimately fail to resolve the disconnect between locally obtainable incomes and the cost of buying or building a house in the West Kerry Gaeltacht. Their case illustrates the cumulative nature of the affordability problem. They are two employed adults on a combined household income that exceeds Dingle's median gross household income of €39,714, one of the lowest median incomes reported in Census 2022.⁷² However, their standard mortgage capacity is approximately €81,000 below the median Dingle house price.

This hypothetical case illustrates a distorted price-to-income ratio (PIR) in the West Kerry Gaeltacht, where the cost of purchasing or constructing a home substantially exceeds the purchasing power available from local incomes. This structural mismatch between local earning capacity, access to mortgage finance, the price ceilings of affordable-homeownership schemes, prevailing house and construction costs, and the absence of alternative housing options, including private rented accommodation, raises a fundamental question about the achievability of the draft NPS (2026) objective: how can Irish speakers with strong local connections remain in, return to, or move between Gaeltacht areas if locally obtainable incomes do not provide sufficient purchasing power to secure a permanent home?

1.2 Impact on the Irish language

The West Kerry Gaeltacht has experienced an overall decline in the number of people who speak Irish every day outside the education system between Census 2011 and 2022, the last year for which data is available. The number of people aged 3 years and over who spoke Irish every day outside the education system in the West Kerry Gaeltacht declined substantially between 2011 and 2016 from 35.4% to 28.7%, before remaining at 28.7% in 2022.⁷³ The decline in daily Irish use between 2011 and 2016 was widespread across the Gaeltachtaí, with the number of people speaking Irish daily outside the education system falling in 24 of the 26 Language Planning Areas. The decline in Ciarraí Thiar was particularly substantial: the number of daily

speakers fell from 2,380 to 1,928, a reduction of 452 people (19%), while the population aged three years and over remained virtually unchanged resulting in the second-largest absolute decline recorded across the 26 Language Planning Areas⁷⁴.

One possible explanation for the apparent stabilisation in the number of daily Irish speakers between 2016 and 2022 is the period of COVID-19-related return migration and expansion of remote working preceding the April 2022 Census. This possibility requires further investigation and the stabilisation should not be interpreted as evidence that the longer-term pressures on Irish as a community language have abated.

Against this background, the disruption to the day-to-day practice and intergenerational transmission of a community language associated with the absence of affordable and sustainable housing, warrants particular policy attention. In West Kerry, these pressures occur alongside an extremely constrained private rental market, a substantial short-term rental sector and a high concentration of holiday homes, all of which may reduce the stock of housing available for permanent occupation and contribute to pressures on affordability.

1.3 Regulation of the housing market?

The Affordable Housing Act.

UNESCO emphasises that the survival of a minority language depends on the number of people who can speak it, but also on its intergenerational transmission and continued use across the domains of everyday community life⁷⁵. In a Gaeltacht context, this requires the social and material infrastructure that enables a minority language community to reproduce itself: secure affordable housing with access to employment, schools, and services in places where people live, raise families and speak Irish daily. The *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* focus-group evidence suggests that residents understand housing as an essential condition intrinsically linked to the future of the Irish language as a community language in the West Kerry Gaeltacht.

However, if the social and material infrastructure that enables a Gaeltacht community to reproduce itself is insecure or absent, an important social policy question is raised as to whether or not there is a legitimate basis for considering

proportionate regulation of the use of residential property in pursuit of housing and community-sustainability objectives?

The Affordable Housing Act is the European Commission's proposal to provide Member States with a common framework to justify proportionate intervention in the housing market, including on short-term rentals or restrictions on non-primary residences and vacant dwellings, while ensuring compatibility with EU single-market laws.⁷⁶ The European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages also proposes,

“...adoption of special measures in favour of regional or minority languages aimed at promoting equality between the users of these languages and the rest of the population or which take due account of their specific conditions is not considered to be an act of discrimination against the users of more widely-used languages.”⁷⁷

Both instruments treat targeted, proportionate intervention as legitimate providing an important policy context with which to consider the current provisions of draft NPS (2026) and opportunities for the progressive integration of language and housing in the Statement.

While private property enjoys constitutional protection under Articles 40.3 and 43 of the Constitution, those rights are not absolute: Article 43 expressly provides that their exercise may be regulated according to the principles of social justice and delimited by law in order to achieve the common good. Any such restrictions would, however, require an appropriate legal basis and would need to satisfy applicable constitutional requirements, including proportionality.

1.4 Changes announced in Budget 2027

The housing measures announced in Budget 2027⁷⁸ have the potential to increase the supply of social and affordable housing, with overall housing expenditure rising to approximately €11.9 billion in 2027, compared with €11.4 billion in 2026. Five point six billion euro in capital funding was announced in relation to a range of housing measures including three billion euro to social housing delivery, and over one billion euro to the Starter Homes Programme, ‘alongside the Help to Buy initiative.’⁷⁹

However, Budget 2027's programme of supports do not appear to ring-fence any of the increased social or affordable housing investment specifically for Gaeltacht areas. Although €161 million has been allocated to support Gaeltacht communities, strengthen the Irish language and improve island services and transport, the announced measures do not identify a dedicated allocation for the construction or provision of social or affordable housing in the Gaeltacht. Consequently, the potential benefits of the increased funding for areas experiencing acute and distinctive housing pressures, such as the West Kerry Gaeltacht, will depend on how these resources are subsequently allocated and implemented at local level.

Budget 2027 also announced an additional €1 million to help people in Gaeltacht communities develop and maintain their Irish-language skills, while the wider €161 million allocation for Gaeltacht, Irish-language and island communities represents only a modest increase on 2026.⁸⁰ While additional, albeit modest, investment in spoken Irish is a positive measure, language proficiency alone cannot arrest declining daily and intergenerational use of Irish where the housing conditions necessary to sustain Irish-speaking communities are deteriorating.

1.5 Recommendations

The current draft NPS (2026) may not achieve its overall policy objective to support Irish speakers with strong local connections to either remain resident within, return to, or move between Gaeltacht areas designated under the 2012 Gaeltacht Act, (draft NPS : p.12) without a range of direct interventions by government in the local housing market.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1.1: Consider the legal basis for proportionate regulation of the use of residential property in pursuit of housing and community-sustainability objectives, up to and including direct intervention in the housing market in order to address the price-to-income ratio differential, and the risk it poses to the future sustainability of the Irish language as a community language.

Recommendation 1.2: Prepare for the European Commission's proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and the Council establishing a framework for measures in Member States to safeguard housing affordability and availability (Affordable Housing Act). Government should support its adoption in Council and prepare now to designate

Gaeltacht areas as housing-stress areas, so that the powers over short-term rentals, second homes and vacant dwellings can be applied once adopted by Parliament and Council.

Recommendation 1.3: Establish closer alignment between housing and language planning policy in order to ensure that the social and structural conditions required to sustain the Irish speaking community in the Gaeltachtaí are in place to transfer the language to the next generation.

Recommendation 1.4: Ring-fence a proportion of Budget 2027's commitment to increase the supply of social and affordable housing specifically for Gaeltacht areas.

Recommendation 1.5: *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* focus group participants recommended a range of policy and regulatory interventions that should be considered by NPS (2026) decision makers.

1.5.1 Revisit the ceiling caps on the Local Authority Home Loan scheme and the First Home Scheme in West Kerry and other Gaeltachtaí as while Irish speakers may be eligible to apply for these schemes in principle, they are effectively disqualified by a distorted price-to-income ratio in Gaeltacht areas. This may be undertaken in view of increased funding to the Starter Homes Programme announced in Budget 2027.

1.5.2 *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* focus group participants proposed a range of measures to bring vacant and derelict properties back into use to relieve housing pressures including an **extension of the powers available to local authorities** to purchase vacant or derelict dwellings, and **increasing the Vacant and Derelict Property grants in Gaeltacht areas** to more adequately reflect the building costs involved in renovating these properties, with a proportion of the grant released prior to the commencement of works. There was a significant level of support among participants to **transfer vacant and derelict properties to a Community Land Trust for the purposes of developing a co-operative housing** similar to the Uíbh Ráthach Gaeltacht initiative.⁸¹

Alignment of local and economic needs with National Policy Priorities

The draft policy's overall objective to support Irish speakers with strong local connections to either remain resident within, return to, or move between any Gaeltacht areas designated under the 2012 Gaeltacht Act, (draft NPS : p.12) is welcome, and responsive to a key concern long raised by Gaeltacht communities not least in the Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar study.

However, the draft NPS (2026) does not establish local, social and economic need as three separate grounds for accessing single rural housing in the Gaeltacht. Rather, “local need” operates as the overarching requirement and may be demonstrated through either a *local social need* or a *local economic need*. Social need is principally concerned with an applicant's established connection to a rural area, including people returning to an area in which they grew up. In Gaeltacht areas, additional flexibility is available to Irish speakers who meet the specified language-proficiency requirements: the normal duration and geographical criteria associated with social need may be relaxed in certain circumstances, including to facilitate movement between designated Gaeltacht areas. Importantly, however, proficiency in Irish does not constitute a separate basis for establishing local housing need; the applicant must still satisfy the applicable social- or economic-need criteria.

Economic need operates differently. It is concerned with whether an applicant's principal occupation is intrinsically connected to the particular rural location and requires them to live permanently at or close proximity to their place of work. The draft NPS (2026) expressly identifies agriculture, horticulture, equine, waterway, marine and forestry activities and other primarily rural enterprises, while also allowing for occupations intrinsically linked to a rural area, bona fide rural-related businesses, and other locally specific economic needs identified through statutory plans. Remote working does not, in itself, establish an economic need. Consequently, the critical policy question is whether this definition of economic need adequately reflects the contemporary economy of Gaeltacht communities and the much wider range of occupations and skills required to sustain them as socially, economically and linguistically viable places to live and work.

It is in this respect that the proposed economic-needs criteria appear particularly limiting.

The changing nature of work in the West Kerry Gaeltacht was raised frequently by Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar focus group participants who described the decline of traditional occupations such as farming and fishing and the emergence of alternative forms of employment, including remote and digital working:

“ Farming and fishing are not the normal thing they were years ago; people are making livelihoods in other ways, like many people are working from home with the computer.” (FGD F)

Some participants welcomed these changing patterns of work as a way of enabling young people to return to the area, bringing higher salaries from urban centres and increasing their ability to purchase a home locally.

The tourism and hospitality sector was identified as the dominant source of employment in the West Kerry Gaeltacht area:

“ ...the other problem is that the only industry here is tourism. Fishing is gone, farming is really gone.” (FGD E)

Participants also described significant difficulties in recruiting and accommodating workers during the tourist season (FGDs A, C, E, F). One accommodation arrangement was described as a “shanty town”, with hospitality workers living on farmland in conditions characterised as “shocking” (FGD E). These accounts illustrate an important contradiction within the local housing economy: the area’s dominant employment sector depends substantially on relatively low-paid workers, while those workers may be unable to secure affordable accommodation within the community in which they work.

This also exposes a potential limitation in the draft NPS (2026) definition of economic need. Employment in tourism and hospitality, notwithstanding its importance to the local economy, does not appear to fall readily within the occupations explicitly identified as intrinsically linked to a rural location. An Irish-speaking hospitality or tourism worker from outside the area who wished to settle permanently in the Gaeltacht would not, by virtue of that employment alone, necessarily satisfy the proposed economic-need criteria for a single rural dwelling. Unless that person

could establish a qualifying social need or otherwise demonstrate that their employment met the location-specific economic-need test, their contribution to an industry central to the functioning of the local economy would not itself provide a basis for single rural housing eligibility. This suggests a potential disconnect between the draft NPS (2026)’s (2026) conceptualisation of economic need and the contemporary employment structure of the West Kerry and other Gaeltachtaí.

Participants also identified a shortage of skilled construction workers, including builders and carpenters, as contributing to delays in obtaining planning permission and completing construction, as well as increasing building costs (FGDs A, D, E).

2.1 Policy Misalignment

The ‘economic need’ criteria as outlined in the draft NPS (2026) is largely at odds with wider Government policy including the seventeen million euro package announced in Budget 2027 ⁸² for Digitalisation and AI in the Public Service, “...alongside ongoing investment of nine million euro in Government digital infrastructure.”⁸³

Additionally, Government of Ireland’s rural development policy 2021-2025⁸⁴ dedicates a chapter to “optimising digital connectivity” and investing in “remote working infrastructure to provide an opportunity for more people to live in rural communities while following their career ambitions.” (2021:30), while working through IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland and Údarás na Gaeltachta to “promote awareness and use of the remote working hubs and enterprise centres available across the country to support remote working and encourage local enterprise start-ups.” (2021:40).

Making Remote Work, Ireland’s National Remote Work Strategy (2021) is similarly focused on the development of remote work infrastructure to “facilitate increased remote work adoption” and “maximising the benefits of remote work to achieve public policy goals.” (2021:4)

The Western Development Commission’s, *Unlocking Potential, Driving Change*, A Strategy for Regional Growth and Collaboration 2025-2029 prioritises a Connected Hubs initiative ‘along the Atlantic Economic Corridor, from Kerry to Donegal’ through which these “...hubs now act as entry points for AI upskilling, climate education, remote working, and community-led innovation” (2025:7). Pillar 3,

Building Sustainable Communities, states a particular commitment to “Build Capacity for Remote and Hybrid Work Expand digital and remote work infrastructure to attract talent and retain economic activity in rural areas in particular.” (2025: 30)

Údarás na Gaeltachta's Plean Straitéiseach (Strategic Plan) 2021–2025 Cumasú, Neartú, Inbhuanaitheacht (Enable, Strengthen, Sustain) foregrounds remote working as “a normal part of life in the future” (2021: 33) and “To make the Gaeltacht an attractive place for people to live”, Údarás commits to the development of a gteic network, a collection of state-of-the-art digital, innovation, and enterprise hubs located across Ireland's Gaeltacht areas, “...as a resource to support remote working and enterprise promotion” (2021:25)

The draft NPS (2026) claims “while it may be possible to work remotely from a rural area in a job that is based elsewhere, this type of employment is not in itself intrinsic to a rural area and does not meet the definition of ‘economic need’ for the purposes of this NPS.” (draft NPS (2026):27), which is misaligned with the Government of Ireland’s Rural Development Policy 2021-2025; Ireland’s National Remote Work Strategy (2021); the Western Development Commission’s, Strategy for Regional Growth and Collaboration 2025-2029, and Údarás na Gaeltachta's Plean Straitéiseach, 2021-2025 affecting Irish speakers without prior residence in a Gaeltacht (new speakers, and Irish speakers moving between Gaeltachtaí).

The economic needs criteria is also not aligned with ongoing changes in labour markets, including digital entrepreneurship and emerging AI-enabled occupations. While “primarily rural-based enterprises” (draft NPS (2026), 2026:25) will continue to be important in rural areas, there is a risk that confining the concept of ‘economic need’ too narrowly may preclude knowledge-transfer, and the social and economic capital contribution of Irish speakers with advanced national and international experience in a range of professions, with the potential to bring new skills and opportunities to Gaeltacht areas, and the Irish language in a digital age.

2.2 Potential gender bias in the restriction of economic needs criteria (draft NPS (2026), 2026:25)

While the social need route is gender neutral, the roles that are defined as highly valued forms of work to satisfy the economic needs criteria are potentially underscored by a gender bias that may discriminate against women. Agriculture,

horticulture, equine, waterway, marine, forestry and other “primarily rural-based enterprises” (p.25) are spheres that have been largely dominated by men. The Demographic Profile of Farm Holders from census 2022 data shows that there were 115,655 (86.8%) male farm holders and 17,519 (13.2%) female farm holders in Ireland⁸⁵. The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) claims that fishing and fish processing are maledominated activities throughout the EU, and while women play a key role in many fishing communities in the region, they “...remain largely invisible and their roles unacknowledged” (2016:3).⁸⁶ Teagasc reports an increase in the number of female students enrolling in equine science and management courses, commercial stud management, but also notes that high-earning roles remain predominantly male in Ireland.⁸⁷ Women are significantly underrepresented in the global forestry sector, making up approximately 10-20% of the workforce,⁸⁸ but there is a global and local increase in the number of women both working and leading horticulture bodies.⁸⁹

2.3 Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 2.1: Revisit ‘economic need’ criteria in the context of the primary employment sectors in Gaeltacht areas and recognise contemporary employment patterns, including remote work, digital entrepreneurship and professional occupations that may contribute to the economic and social sustainability of Gaeltacht communities into the future.

Recommendation 2.2: Realign the Statement with National Policy Priorities for remote working reflected in the Government of Ireland’s Rural Development Policy 2021-2025; Ireland’s National Remote Work Strategy (2021); the Western Development Commission’s, Strategy for Regional Growth and Collaboration 2025-2029, Budget 2027’s investment in digitalisation and AI in the public service, and Údarás na Gaeltachta’s Plean Straitéiseach, 2021-2025, specifically gteic digitisation expansion policies.

Recommendation 2.3: Gender-proof the Statement to ensure that it promotes equality, avoids unconscious bias, and is fully inclusive of all genders.

The absence of clear mechanisms to address holiday homes and short-term rentals (STRs)

The draft NPS (2026) refers to the need to “manage second and holiday home pressures.” (p.11, 12, 13, 15, 17, 21, 24, 28) in Gaeltacht areas and provides that a new rural house for holiday, second-home or short-term rental use will not meet the local need criteria (p.24), and all new builds will come with a 10-year occupancy clause excluding short-term letting (pp.27, 35, 36); The Statement also provides that planning authorities may apply local-needs criteria in areas experiencing holiday-home pressure (p.12).

While these are important restrictions in light of second and holiday home pressures in Gaeltacht areas, they are insufficient because they will only impact on new builds, while the success of such measures are highly dependent on enforcement (see section 5 below). The Statement does not respond to the proliferation of holiday homes in Gaeltacht areas, which Dr Séin Ó Muineacháin for Údarás na Gaeltachta showed to be 5 times the share of the overall housing stock in the country as a whole. He located the largest share of holiday homes in the Kerry Gaeltacht and the Donegal Gaeltacht with more than 40% of the houses in the Language Planning Areas of South Kerry, Tory Island and North Donegal.⁹⁰

3.1 The impact of holiday homes and STRs on the West Kerry Gaeltacht

The proliferation of holiday homes and associated STRs advertised on platforms like Airbnb and Booking.com was the issue of greatest concern to *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* focus group participants.

A concern was raised in all six focus groups and no participant defended the current situation on the basis that the perceived proliferation of them in the West Kerry Gaeltacht is causing, “...damage to the community as well as the language.” (FGD, C). The ESRI’s profile of Airbnb’s across Ireland reported that the largest numbers of Airbnb listings are found in coastal areas, in or close to key tourist hotspots along the west coast with the highest number in Kenmare, Kerry (888) followed by Conamara

North in Galway (667), Glenties, Donegal (642), Ennistymon, Clare (612), Bantry-West Cork (545) and Corca Dhuibhne, Kerry (534) outnumbering other areas in the country.⁹¹ This data may be conservative as searches on the Airbnb platform for holiday accommodation in Corca Dhuibhne across eight dates between July and August 2026 repeatedly returned in excess of 1,000 properties available for short-term stays in the area.⁹²

Some participants supported a complete ban on Airbnb and STRs favouring the approach of Barcelona's Mayor who is overseeing the gradual elimination of whole apartment STR stays under 31 days in the city by November 2028. New York, Los Angeles, Paris and Berlin are among other cities implementing extremely restricted licenses to holiday home owners.⁹³

- “ Certainly, if someone is selling a house, there should be a complete ban on Airbnb, and it should be a living house for a family. That's the most important thing, to ban Airbnb. If a house is for sale - a total ban...” (FGD, F)
- “ My first recommendation here is to introduce a moratorium on holiday homes and Airbnb. I think that problem is getting worse - “yeah” [full participant agreement expressed vocally or in non-verbal cues – author's observation notes] (FGD, B)”

There was broader agreement supporting, at a minimum, tighter restrictions on holiday homes and STRs, with disincentive measures including direct taxation and penalties on unoccupied holiday homes and other vacant properties. Measures proposed included “...extra stamp duty on the price [of a second and/or holiday home – author's note]” (FGD, F), and there was strong alignment with the deductive prompt shared with participant's from *The Council Tax (Long-term Empty Dwellings and Dwellings Occupied Periodically) (Wales) Regulations 2022*, which provides for up to a 300% increase on property tax, and the *Non-Domestic Rating (Amendment of Definition of Domestic Property) (Wales) Order 2022*, which decides whether a self-catering property pays business rates (available 252 days, actually let 182) or premium council tax. No dissenting views were expressed by participants about the need to urgently address the proliferation of holiday homes and STRs in the West Kerry Gaeltacht up to and including an increase in property tax, “...do it now, don't hesitate to do that 300% tax now, immediately!” (FGD, E)

While levels of taxation similar to those imposed in Wales in areas of linguistic significance met with broad agreement, there were some who feared that such measures would not go far enough to disincentivise wealthy people from buying holiday homes in the area. This is reflected in the following statements proposing an even higher level of taxation on wealthy buyers: “...many people with holiday homes here are full of money. Three hundred percent is nothing [to them]... impose an extra tax... a high tax.” (FGD, A)

“ *For holiday homes and short-term lets - if you have a holiday home, the tax, rates and other costs should be raised as high as needed.*” (FGD, C)

The difference between local people operating a STR and business ownership or large-scale portfolio management of STRs was a distinction raised by some participants: “...I think there also has to be like a distinction between [sic] because there's different types of Airbnb. There's like someone who is from here, who lives here, who has another property in the Airbnb.” (FGD, E). There was a degree of acceptance of local people renting out houses for STRs - “I agree that if a local person has a second or third house and wants to earn money from it, that makes sense; you do not want to leave the houses empty.” (FGD, A), while others pointed out that local people are giving their properties to the large management companies or selling them to holiday home buyers at inflated rates.

Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar focus group participants generally welcomed tourists to the area, but most people believed that failure to regulate the holiday home and STR market has reduced long-term rental supply while driving up the cost of housing resulting in displacement of people on lower local incomes. As one participant put it,

“ *Airbnb does get business out to remote areas, which is great and allows people to have a living. But the problem here now is it's endemic... it's completely unregulated.*” (FGD, E).

It has been reported that there may be almost as many holiday homes as private residential properties in some parts of the West Kerry Gaeltacht.⁹⁴ While some caution must be exercised in reporting the exact number of holiday homes relative to primary residences in electoral divisions, Census 2022 data largely supports this finding. In Dún Chaoin, there were 96 holiday homes compared with 82 dwellings

occupied by usual residents, meaning that holiday homes outnumbered residential dwellings by 17% on census night in 2022. In Dún Urlann, which includes the area from Baile an Fheirtéaraigh village to Árd na Caithne and Gráigal, there were 222 holiday or visitor dwellings compared with 210 dwellings occupied by usual residents or whose usual residents were temporarily absent, meaning that holiday/visitor accommodation outnumbered residential dwellings by approximately 6%. In Daingean Uí Chúis, there were 289 holiday or visitor dwellings compared with 603 residential dwellings, equivalent to approximately 48 holiday/visitor dwellings for every 100 residential dwellings. ⁹⁵

This level of imbalance between residential properties and holiday homes, many of which are unoccupied for much of the year, has led to the perception by local people that the West Kerry Gaeltacht is in decline. Responses to this perceived threat ranged from the imposition of significant taxes and fines on holiday home owners, to those who advocated for a campaign targeting holiday homes owners to make them aware of the impact of their second home on the local community and the Irish language, in particular. This proposal from focus group discussion B was similarly put forward in focus group E and sums up the kind of local campaign participants believe is now necessary in the area:

- “...you just drill home to people that 'look, we have a géarchéim tithíochta [housing crisis]' and...you know, this repetitive kind of advertising thing ...'Think if you have a second home] - if you have a 'tithe samhraidh' [holiday home], that you would consider selling it to a local person?'... just drill home the message that...you don't need the second house if you're not spending two hundred and fifty-odd days a year here...don't sell it to an American for seven hundred thousand - consider selling it locally.” (FGD, B)
- “Yeah, there should probably be an awareness campaign that's...promoting or telling the story about the kind of adverse effects that this is having on communities, because...it's not like second home owners are bad people, they're not bad people, they're good people...I know it's probably confronting and difficult to hear...but they're having a big impact on the community.” (FGD, E)

The ghost-town effect of the STR sector was described as depressing during the winter months with no lights on in many houses as described by this participant:

“ You can see in the winter there's only a handful of lights on in houses. I drive around in the evenings and I just see empty house, empty house, empty house, and it's so disheartening, you know?” (FGD, E)

There was a strong sense across each of the focus group discussions that the West Kerry Gaeltacht is in crisis and there was a belief that radical measures are warranted to reduce the number of holiday homes and STRs in the area, to free up housing stock and bring down the cost of housing in the area. This quotation from focus group discussion E captures that sense of a pending emergency that many participants spoke of:

“ ...we're at a point now where it's, like, incredibly extreme and acute [and] some of this makes for radical proposals. I think we're living in a time of emergency.” (FGD, E)

One focus group went further than calling for ‘radical measures’ to describing them as a protest using tractors to block the Slea Head drive and other scenic areas popular with tourists in the hope that if tourists complain and “they will be listened to” (FGD, A). This narrative is perhaps an indication of the level of people’s frustration with the current situation:

“ Wouldn't it be good...if the route around Slea Head were blocked, traffic stopped, and the tourists knew why local people had done it? Then the county council would listen and hear that there is a problem here.” (FGD, A)

The overall policy objective of the draft NPS (2026) that aims to facilitate Irish speakers with strong local connections to either remain resident within, return to, or move between any Gaeltacht areas, is potentially undermined by the proliferation of second and holiday homes and STRs in Gaeltacht areas.

3.2 The impact of holiday homes and STRs on the private rented sector

The draft NPS stipulates that the ‘substantial duration’ or period of time an applicant has spent living or working in the local rural area in question and has close social ties or connections to the local rural community (this includes returning emigrants and people moving back to a rural area where they grew up) is “...generally a minimum of 10 years living in a Gaeltacht area, but in the case of an Irish speaker,

the planning authority can apply the lower threshold of 5 years duration (continuously or cumulatively)'if they consider the proposal would have a positive linguistic impact on the area" (draft NPS: p.34)

The 'substantial duration' requirement is undermined by the chronic shortage of private-rental accommodation (PR) in many Gaeltacht areas. If a person or family is returning to a community in which they have strong family ties but cannot, for whatever reason, stay with family members, the chronic shortage of private-rental/temporary accommodation required until such time as an application for planning is approved and their home completed, will prevent people who meet the 'substantial duration' requirement from returning to the Gaeltachtaí.

Similarly, Irish speaker/s who may not have family ties in an area but who wish to live, work and raise a family in a Gaeltacht area would, in the current housing climate, experience challenges in finding temporary accommodation until such time as they meet the 'substantial duration' requirement and/or may apply for planning permission.

Despite more than 1,000 short-term rentals being advertised on Airbnb on a typical day, repeated searches found no private rental properties available in Corca Dhuibhne/the Dingle Peninsula⁹⁶.

3.3 Examples of regulatory measures in other jurisdictions

An emerging international evidence base suggests that targeted regulation and taxation of second homes and short-term rentals can constrain the transfer of permanent housing into tourist accommodation and generate additional public revenue, although evidence that such measures alone reduce house prices remains mixed. In Barcelona, a recent evaluation found that regulation and enforcement significantly constrained the growth of the short-term rental market, estimating that Airbnb listings would have been almost twice as numerous in the absence of regulation⁹⁷. In Gwynedd, administrative data indicate substantial changes in the composition of second-home and holiday accommodation following successive regulatory and taxation interventions, although the local authority cautions against attributing these changes to any single measure⁹⁸. Evidence from France similarly

demonstrates that increased taxation of second homes generated additional revenue but did not produce a measurable reduction in house prices, illustrating both the potential and the limitations of fiscal measures when used in isolation⁹⁹.

International evidence also suggests that rigorous implementation, monitoring and enforcement of primary-residence requirements, and/or restrictions on STRs are essential if regulatory measures are to achieve their intended objectives.¹⁰⁰

Wales provided an extensive planning-based approach to managing the conversion of permanent housing to non-primary residential use. The *Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) (Amendment) (Wales) Order 2022 (S.I. 2022/994)* created separate planning use classes for main residences, second homes, and short-term lets. Cyngor Gwynedd subsequently introduced an Article 4 Direction, effective from September 2024, requiring planning permission for specified changes between these uses, including the conversion of a main residence to either a second home or short-term holiday let. However, the High Court quashed Gwynedd's Article 4 Direction in November 2025; in February 2026 the court refused the Council permission to appeal, which ended the proceedings. The direction is no longer in effect, and the Council may bring a replacement.¹⁰¹

Scotland also provides an increasingly relevant comparator for Gaeltacht housing policy. Under s.26B of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997, local planning authorities may designate Short-Term Let Control Areas (STLCAs) where concentrations of STRs affect the availability of residential housing or the character of local communities. Within a control area, the future conversion of a dwelling to a secondary STR is treated as a material change of use and requires planning permission. The Highland Council, which already operates an STLCA in Badenoch and Strathspey, has proposed a substantially larger Highland Rural control area encompassing Skye and Raasay, Wester Ross and Lochalsh, Lochaber and Sutherland. The Council reports that STRs account for more than 20% of housing in some communities and that 13.6% of homes sold in Skye and Lochalsh between 2019/20 and 2023/24 subsequently became STRs. Significantly, its assessment also recognises that housing unavailability and unaffordability may have “disproportionate impacts on specific Gaelic-speaking communities”, explicitly connecting the management of STRs with the sustainability of minority-language communities¹⁰².

Early evidence from Scotland suggests that targeted planning regulation can constrain the transfer of permanent residential housing into the STR sector. Two years after the introduction of the Badenoch and Strathspey Short-Term Let Control Area, the Highland Council reported fewer newly built and recently sold homes being converted to STRs than elsewhere in the Highlands, while the stock of residential dwellings registered as STRs went into decline¹⁰³. The Council cautions that these findings remain preliminary, and there is not yet sufficient evidence to demonstrate a corresponding improvement in housing affordability or house prices. Nevertheless, the emerging evidence suggests that requiring planning permission for the conversion of permanent residential properties to secondary short-term letting may reduce the rate at which housing is transferred out of permanent residential use.

Emerging evidence from Wales, Scotland, Barcelona, and France supports the conclusion that well-targeted regulation can alter the flow of residential property into STR/holiday use; whether that subsequently improves affordability depends on the particular intervention and wider housing market.

3.4 Ireland's regulatory framework

Ireland has been moving towards strengthening the regulations of STRs in line with other countries. The *Residential Tenancies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2026*¹⁰⁴ provides that the use of a house, part of a house or unit for STR constitutes a material change of use for planning purposes and defines short-term letting as letting for a period not exceeding 21 consecutive nights.

The publication of the *Short Term Letting and Tourism Bill 2026*¹⁰⁵ is a step towards greater transparency and regulation of the STR sector, particularly through mandatory registration with Fáilte Ireland and resourcing for stronger enforcement of measures. However, its provisions provide limited relief to Gaeltacht communities and other small areas experiencing exceptionally high concentrations of STR and holiday accommodation. The two-year period for planning compliance in areas below 20,000 population is more permissive than in areas exceeding this threshold. Providing hosts in locations with under 20,000 population with a further two years to

regularise their planning will disproportionately affect small areas like the West Kerry Gaeltacht, where the proliferation of holiday homes and STRs is one of the key drivers of housing stress.

The question for policy is then whether a population threshold designed primarily around settlement size adequately captures small Gaeltacht communities where the absolute population may be low but the proportion of housing diverted to tourism use can be exceptionally high?

3.5 Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 3.1: Review the emerging evidence from Wales, Scotland, Barcelona, and France, in addition to the proposals put forward by Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar participants, to implement well-targeted regulation that may alter the flow of residential property into STR/holiday use in Gaeltacht areas.

Recommendation 3.2: Reconsider the current population threshold provisions of the *Short-Term Letting and Tourism Bill, 2026* from the particular position of small Gaeltacht communities where the absolute population may be low but the proportion of housing diverted to tourism is exceptionally high.

Recommendation 3.3: While the *Short-Term Letting and Tourism Bill* introduces a range of enforcement measures aligned with the international evidence on reducing non-compliance in the STR sector, Ó Bhéal an Phobail study participants emphasised the need for close monitoring and enforcement of both primary-residence/enurement clauses, and STR restrictions in the West Kerry Gaeltacht.

Reduction of housing provision for Irish speakers in multi-unit developments

The draft NPS (2026) proposes a sizable decrease in the number of units that will be ringfenced for Irish speakers in Gaeltacht areas. The Statement provides a contradictory example of a Local Planning Area where 66% of the people speak Irish on a daily basis and “in order to not alone maintain but to enhance the use of the language on a daily basis” that 76% of units should be reserved for Irish speakers.¹⁰⁶

The Statement then proposes a different measure to establish the number of units that will be ringfenced for Irish speakers in Gaeltacht areas: “the number of daily speakers outside the education system as a percentage of the population aged 3 years or over in the Gaeltacht Language Planning Area in which the development is to be situated - as defined in the relevant, most recent Census.”¹⁰⁷ If this measure is applied, it will result in a significant decline in the number of units available to Irish speakers in Gaeltacht areas.

4.1 An illustration of the application of the revised definition in the West Kerry Gaeltacht

Kerry County Council’s Development Plan 2022–2028, objectives KCDP 8-7 and 8-8, currently stipulate that a minimum of 66% of housing developments in Gaeltacht areas are reserved for Irish speakers, as assessed to 1 Meánleibhéal 2 in the Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge (TEG) exam levels.¹⁰⁸

Using census of the population data 2011, 2016 and 2022 to demonstrate the impact of changing the definition to allocate the number of units that developers would be required to retain for Irish speakers in the West Kerry Gaeltacht, *Table 4.1: Number of daily speakers outside the education system as a percentage of the population aged 3 years and over in the West Kerry Gaeltacht, 2011, 2016 and 2022* demonstrates the sizable decrease in the allocation of units to Irish speakers that the draft NPS (2026:36) proposes in real terms. The number of people aged 3 years and over who speak Irish

every day outside the education system in the West Kerry Gaeltacht declined substantially between 2011 and 2016 from 35.4% to 28.7%, before remaining at 28.7% in census 2022.

In numerical terms, the number of daily speakers fell from 2,380 in 2011 to 1,928 in 2016, before increasing slightly to 1,998 in 2022. Despite the modest increase between 2016 and 2022, there were 382 fewer daily Irish speakers outside the education system in 2022 than in 2011, representing a decline of approximately 16% over the eleven-year period.

Table 4.1: Number of daily speakers outside the education system as a percentage of the population aged 3 years or over in the West Kerry Gaeltacht, 2011, 2016 and 2022.

Census	Population aged 3+	Daily Irish speakers outside education	% of population aged 3+
2011	6,714	2,380	35.4%
2016	6,708	1,928	28.7%
2022	6,973	1,998	28.7%

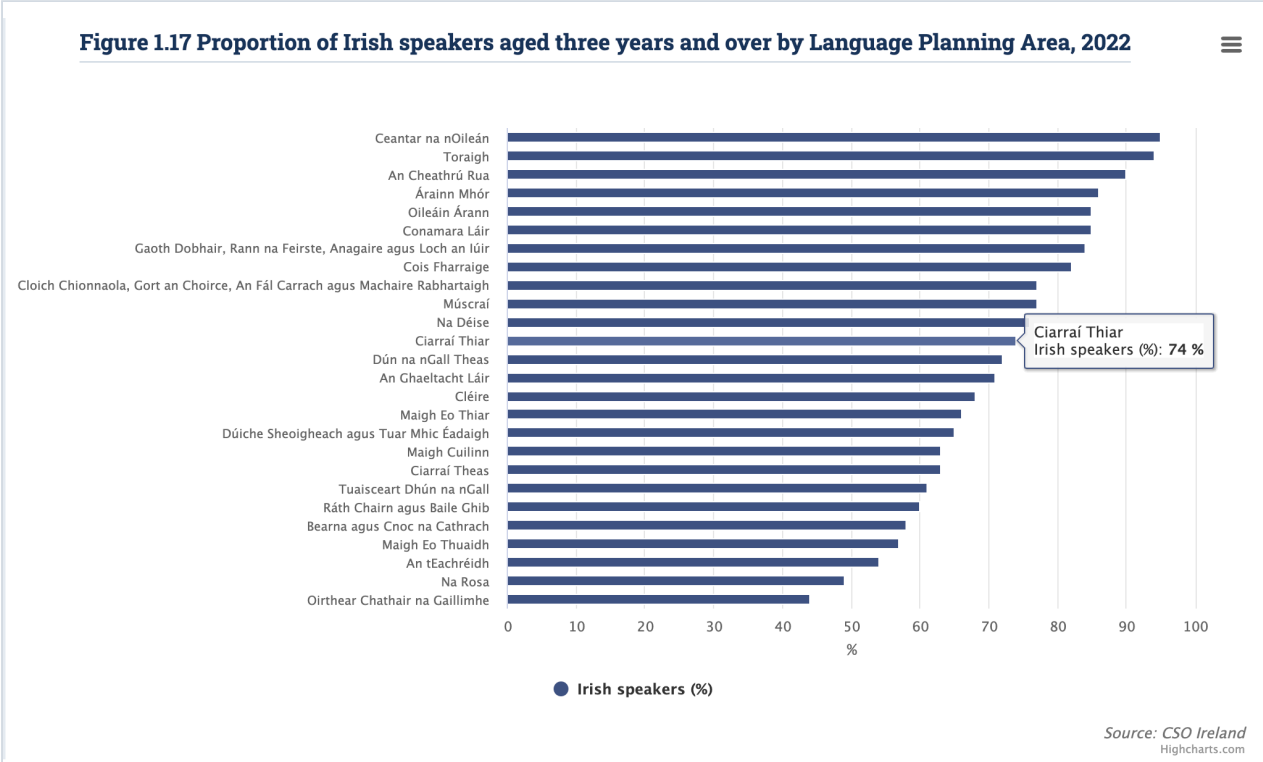
Adapted from Central Statistics Office (2017 and 2023)¹⁰⁹

Applying the new draft NPS (2026) 2026 definition to the percentage of multi-unit developments, rounding upwards and adding 10%, to the West Kerry Gaeltacht using data from the last available census, 2022, will mean that only 40% (28.7% rounded up to 30% + 10% = 40%) of multi-unit developments will be ringfenced for Irish speakers compared to 66% currently. The new policy is effectively decreasing the number of units available by 26%, a policy measure which will further undermine the future sustainability of the West Kerry Gaeltacht.

If Government is serious about protecting and promoting Irish as a community language in Gaeltacht areas, a more appropriate benchmark for determining the proportion of homes reserved for Irish speakers in multi-unit developments is to adopt the proportion of Irish speakers in the relevant Language Planning Area. Using Census 2022 Profile 8, which measures the proportion of the population aged three years and over who can speak Irish, 74% of the population of the West Kerry Gaeltacht are Irish speakers. If the proportion of homes reserved for Irish speakers in multi-unit developments were aligned with the proportion of the population aged three years and over who reported being able to speak Irish in Census 2022, the

corresponding figure for the West Kerry (Ciarraí Thiar) Language Planning Area would be 74%. Please see Figure 4.2: Census of Population 2022 Profile 8 – The Irish Language and Education: Proportion of Irish speakers aged three years and over by Language Planning Area, highlighting Gaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar, 2022.

Figure 4.2: Census of Population 2022 Profile 8 - The Irish Language and Education, Proportion of Irish speakers aged three years and over by Language Planning Area – highlighting Gaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar, 2022¹¹⁰.



Adding 10% as proposed by the draft NPS (2026:36), we therefore propose that 85% of homes in multi-unit developments in the West Kerry Gaeltacht be reserved for Irish speakers.

Budget 2027 strengthens national supports for affordable home ownership, but there is no identified mechanism ensuring that this increased investment will translate into affordable multi-unit housing in Gaeltacht communities experiencing acute affordability pressures.

4.2 Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 4.1: Reverse the reduction in housing provision ringfenced for Irish speakers arising from the revised definition applied to multi-unit developments in Gaeltacht areas. We recommend that the proportion reserved should be based on the broader Census measure used by the majority of County Councils: the proportion of Irish speakers aged three years and over in the relevant Language Planning Area and add 10%.

Recommendation 4.2: Allocate a proportion of Budget 2027's increased national supports for affordable home ownership for housing in Gaeltacht areas experiencing acute affordability pressures. This may also be considered in the context of closer policy alignment with the proposed increase, to up to 30%, in the allocation of sustainable and affordable housing in multi-unit developments under "Delivering Homes, Building Communities: An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness, 2025-2030."

Reduction in the terms of the Enurement Clause

The occupancy clause attached to a grant of planning permission is intended to ensure that a dwelling remains in use as the applicant's permanent and primary residence. The draft NPS (2026) sets 10 years, below the 15-year language enurement clause in current county development plans such as Kerry's¹¹¹, without providing a clear rationale for the five-year reduction. In effect, this appears to weaken an established planning provision intended to support the protection of Irish as a community language in Gaeltacht areas.

A related issue requiring consideration is compliance with, and enforcement of, these occupancy requirements. Participants in the *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* focus groups welcomed the inclusion of an enurement clause requiring a dwelling granted planning permission, or a dwelling within a multi-unit development reserved for Irish speakers, to be occupied as a permanent and primary residence for a minimum period. Provisions also prohibit short-term letting where the planning authority considers this necessary to protect the linguistic character of a Gaeltacht area.

However, *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* participants raised concerns about non-compliance with existing provisions intended to protect Irish as a community language and, in particular, the apparent lack of monitoring and enforcement. Referring specifically to STRs, one participant described them as "...completely unregulated..." (FGD, E). During a discussion of compliance with planning and occupancy conditions, participants in another group similarly observed:

“...there are many rules, but nobody monitors them... you could start by enforcing the rules that already exist.” (FGD, C)

Participants also questioned whether people who accept an enurement clause as a condition of planning permission—or who purchase a dwelling reserved for Irish speakers subject to a permanent and primary residence requirement—necessarily comply with those conditions over the required period. The following quotation

illustrates participants' perception that, in the absence of effective monitoring and enforcement, commitments made at the point of planning or purchase may subsequently be disregarded:

“...they say ‘oh, we’ll speak Irish’ and ‘we’ll do this’ and ‘we’ll participate’ and the next thing they’re gone off out the road two years later and the house sold!”
(FGD, F)

Existing international evidence lends support to concerns raised Ó Bhéal an Phobail participants about the effectiveness of occupancy and short-term letting restrictions where implementation and monitoring are weak. Evidence from France and Spain indicates that the existence of an occupancy requirement alone is insufficient to ensure that a dwelling remains in use as a permanent and primary residence or to prevent its subsequent use, legally or illegally, as short-term rental accommodation. International experience therefore points to the importance of rigorous implementation, monitoring and enforcement if primary-residence requirements and restrictions on STRs are to achieve their intended objectives.¹¹²

5.1 Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 5.1: Restore the 15-year requirement that a new single dwelling, or a housing unit ringfenced for Irish speakers, must remain the applicant’s or purchaser’s permanent and primary residence in a Gaeltacht area, while providing for a *force majeure* clause to protect parties where circumstances beyond their control make continued occupancy impossible.

Recommendation 5.2: Support and resource County Councils to rigorously implement, monitor and enforce permanent and primary residence requirements in Gaeltacht areas, in relation to both single dwellings and multi-unit developments, consistent with the international evidence on effective implementation, while avoiding non-compliance.

Linguistic Impact Statement (LIS)

Appendix B of the draft NPS (2026) provides examples of the information that developers should submit in a Linguistic Impact Statement (LIS) accompanying applications for multi-unit residential developments in Gaeltacht areas. Developers are asked to: *“Please indicate the basis on which such a proposal is being put forward and how it will contribute in an appropriate way to the maintenance of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the area?”* and *“Please outline any other proposals which you may have to contribute to the protection of the linguistic heritage of the Gaeltacht including the promotion of Irish as the community language?”*

While, importantly, these questions establish an expectation that developers consider the linguistic consequences of proposed developments, it is not reasonable to expect developers themselves to have expertise in language planning or sociolinguistics. The draft guidance would therefore benefit from greater specificity about what constitutes a Linguistic Impact Statement, the methodology to be followed, the expertise required to undertake an assessment, and how assessments should be evaluated. Greater standardisation would help ensure consistency of interpretation and implementation across both applicants and planning authorities. One approach would be to require assessments to be undertaken independently of developers by appropriately qualified language-planning or sociolinguistic professionals.

6.1 Policy ambiguity

Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar focus group participants broadly supported the introduction of language impact assessments or statements as an important measure for protecting Gaeltacht communities. They noted that, in previous decades, many people had received planning permission in the West Kerry Gaeltacht irrespective of whether they could speak Irish (FGDs A, C, D, E). However, there was also broad agreement suggesting that the local authority is not currently providing sufficient guidance about what a language impact assessment entails, who

is qualified to undertake one, and how it should be completed by applicants for both individual and multi-unit developments. This uncertainty was described in Focus Group A:

“ There are two things I want to say about that, about language impact assessment. I agree that there should be such a thing, but something has happened here in the county council and we were talking about this recently. Em, people are...were trying to build houses... in [REDACTED - Placename], and the County Council came looking for more information...and one of the things they asked this developer for was a language impact assessment from an 'expert' in language planning...I went to the Language Commissioner about this, to the county council and the Department of Housing, asking who counts as a language-impact expert? I was told to contact the Údarás [Údarás na Gaeltachta]; the Údarás had not heard about it yet. Then I was told to contact the Language Commissioner to find out what an expert in language planning is...They are asking for these language impact assessments, and I agree there should be such assessments, but there is still no discussion about who these language experts are or who will prepare the assessments.” (FGD, A)

Kerry County Council recognises its obligations under Section 10(2)(m) of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) to include objectives for the protection of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Gaeltacht, including the promotion of Irish as the community language¹¹³. However, similarly, a number of participants queried exactly what that means in practice given the marked decline in the number of people speaking Irish in the West Kerry Gaeltacht since 2011:

“ What does it mean to take care of the Gaeltacht? What does that mean?... Nothing!” (FGD, A)

“ ...where is it written that special care has to be taken of the Gaeltacht? Is that in Kerry County Council's development plan? ...proper care must be taken of the Gaeltacht. But in reality, what does that mean?” (FGD, C)

Participants also perceived the linguistic dimension of planning as an additional responsibility that local authorities may lack the specialist expertise and resources to manage effectively. Focus Group D engaged in a detailed discussion of local authorities' understanding of the Gaeltacht and their obligations towards Gaeltacht areas:

“ The county councils hate dealing with the language issue and they do not understand it. Their attitude is that things have to be bilingual in the Gaeltacht because it is the Gaeltacht but they think it is fine for everything else to be in English outside the Gaeltacht, and I was forever telling them that it is the other way around: things have to be bilingual outside the Gaeltacht under the Act and they should be in Irish only in the Gaeltacht...Their understanding is to maybe use the cúpla focal here and there and "we're grand now, that we'll do everything in English" - that's the attitude they have.” (FGD, D)

6.2 A standardised national approach

Against this backdrop, participants proposed transferring responsibility for language assessments to a specialist body. This included both assessments of individual purchasers of homes subject to language requirements, and Linguistic Impact Statements associated with applications for individual or multi-unit developments. Údarás na Gaeltachta, potentially working with Maynooth University or Gaelchultúr, was suggested as possible institutional arrangements:

“ I think if that responsibility lay with Údarás na Gaeltachta, because they deal with language planning. They would issue a certificate, based on the European Language Framework — for example, level B2 in Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge, or an equivalent FETAC level....I think it would give the county councils some relief, because they do not understand how to deal with the issue. If that responsibility lay with Údarás na Gaeltachta.. It's like Maynooth University deals with Teastas Eorpach na Gaeilge, Gaelchultúr deals with FETAC levels, so all those things already exist.” (FGD, D)

Participants described a range of experiences of language planning requirements and of purchasing properties subject to language conditions. Despite these different experiences, the need for greater consistency emerged as a common concern:

“ I think that responsibility has to be taken away from the local authorities, because you will get consistency if one organisation is dealing with it...there should be a language assessment question and...it should be clear exactly how that would be done.” (FGD, F)

These findings aligned strongly with the deductive prompt presented to participants from the Commission for Welsh-speaking Communities: Report on Town and Country Planning (2025). The Welsh Commission recommended the development of a single statutory assessment methodology covering the planning process in linguistically significant areas. Participants similarly emphasised the importance of establishing a consistent approach across Gaeltacht areas:

- “ We are talking about provisions that would be in legislation and would be the same north and south, and in every Gaeltacht, so that there would be the same approach. Because that is not the case at present, and it is a major difficulty.” (FGD, D)
- “ ...a certificate of language competence that it would be run by Údarás na Gaeltachta. I think we all agreed on that. That, and that it would be inserted into planning legislation in the Gaeltacht.” (Moderator’s summation, FGD, D)
- “ I would strongly recommend that people should be some sort of list that says these people can [do] language impact [assessments].” (FGD, A)

The *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* study revealed a high level of support for a standardised Linguistic Impact Statement methodology, supported by professional expertise, and an institutional structure capable of applying the methodology consistently across Gaeltacht areas.

6.3 Placing Irish at the centre of planning in Gaeltacht areas

Some participants went further, arguing that the Irish language should be central to the planning process in Gaeltacht areas rather than treated as an additional consideration alongside environmental, water and sewage, climate, tourism, views and prospects, and other considerations concerning the “wellbeing of future generations” (FGD, F). These participants envisaged the national approach to planning in Gaeltacht areas as encompassing “...the environment, to [everything!] language, housing, everything. Everything is included.” (FGD, F). This theme also emerged in focus group C with a discussion focusing on the perception that ‘views and prospects’ and the requirements of tourism take precedence over Irish language protections and policy provisions:

“ There's an aspiration there regarding the language and, when one conflicts with another, it always goes in favour of the protected views, rather than the language. It has to be that the language is not just an aspiration but it needs to be deeper than that and much clearer, and there needs to be much more respect for the language [in policy and planning – author's clarification]” (FGD, C)

Other discussions centred on the belief that the West Kerry Gaeltacht is experiencing “...a time of emergency.” (FGD, E) with concerns expressed that politicians do not fully appreciate the extent to which the housing crisis - particularly the absence of affordable or social housing and private rental accommodation; the proliferation of holiday homes and STR - is contributing to the decline of the West Kerry Gaeltacht: “Do you think politicians will agree that this is a crisis?” (FGD, E). Focus group B considered the possibility that politicians may not listen to the findings of this study and suggested that if policy fails to address the marked decline in the number of people speaking Irish every day since 2011 and provide “...protection to the Irish-speaking community” in West Kerry, there may be “...no Gaeltacht here in fifty years.” (FGD, B)

6.4 International comparator: Wales

The Commission for Welsh-speaking Communities: Report on Town and Country Planning (2025) provides a useful comparator with the Gaeltacht case. Published on 19 February 2025, the Commission recommended the development of a single statutory assessment methodology covering areas of decision-making that may affect linguistically sensitive areas, which was welcomed by the Welsh Government in principle on 24 February 2026. The Commission's recommendation asked for “a clear framework ...for assessing the effects of a planning application on areas of higher density linguistic significance”¹¹⁴

The Welsh Government is currently exploring legislative options, including whether existing approaches in other areas of legislation, such as habitats legislation, could provide a model for a statutory linguistic assessment methodology. If implemented, such an approach would, in our view, require appropriately qualified language-planning professionals or sociolinguists to undertake assessments independently of developers or single planning permission applicants.

6.5 Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 6.1: Introduce a single statutory linguistic impact assessment methodology for planning in Gaeltacht areas, supported by appropriately qualified language-planning professionals, to ensure a clear, consistent and standardised approach across all Gaeltacht areas.

Recommendation 6.2: Devolve responsibility for the development, implementation and oversight of linguistic impact assessments to an existing body, or bodies, with the necessary expertise and capacity to undertake this function, thereby enabling local authorities to concentrate on core planning responsibilities.

Recommendation 6.3: Place the protection and promotion of Irish as a community language at the heart of planning policy and decision-making in Gaeltacht areas.

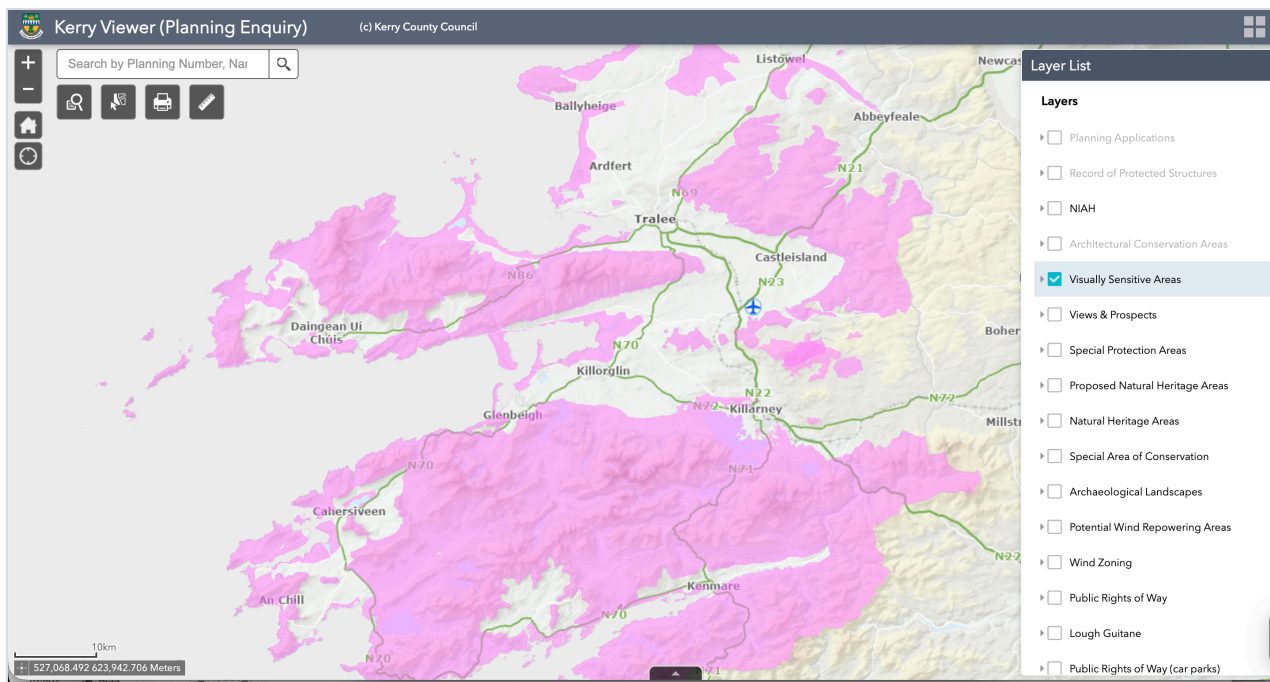
Development constraints in highly sensitive scenic areas

The draft NPS (2026) makes a distinction between high amenity areas where housing is open for consideration, but emphasises the need for careful management of highly sensitive scenic areas,

“...where housing development is not generally permissible and should generally be restricted to the sensitive replacement and/or refurbishment of existing structures. In these highly sensitive areas, new housing development should only be granted in exceptional circumstances where the planning authority is satisfied that an individual proposal would not have an adverse effect on the special character and environmental quality of the area in question.” (draft NPS (2026), 2026:17-18).

Kerry County Council’s Development Plan 2022-2028 provides specific protection for scenic vantage points, and prospects along major routes that are identified as crucial tourism and amenity assets. Specific designations under this condition can be viewed interactively via the official Kerry County Development Plan Map Browser¹¹⁵ which provides a useful tool through which to examine areas that have been designated as “visually sensitive”. Figure 7 – Kerry County Development Plan Map Browser, showing “Visually Sensitive Areas for planning purposes in West Kerry”, points to a significant proportion of the West Kerry Gaeltacht identified as “visually sensitive” by Kerry County Council. This raises questions as to how the Gaeltacht may be sustained if planning permissions are restricted in these areas due to their designation as highly scenic.

Figure 7 - Kerry County Development Plan Map Browser, showing “Visually Sensitive Areas” for planning purposes in West Kerry ¹¹⁶



Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar participants recounted examples of where planning permission was denied. Focus group C discussed this issue at length and claimed that protected views and prospects appeared to take precedence over language requirements in Kerry County Council’s planning application processes:

- “ Protected views and prospects, [mm] and, you know, there is nowhere in West Kerry without them; the Council is very clear about views and prospects.” (FGD, C)
- “ So when people in the Planning Office have to choose between the language and the views, if anything goes to An Coimisiún Pleanála (The Planning Commission), time after time, they rely on the County Development Plan and say it is clear in the plan that there is protection for 'views and prospects'. There's an aspiration there regarding the language and, when one conflicts with another, it always goes in favour of the protected views, rather than the language.” (FGD, C)

In light of draft NPS (2026) emphasis on the need for careful management of highly sensitive scenic areas, it is imperative that the policy provides clearer guidance to planning officials given that many Gaeltachtaí are located in areas of outstanding

natural beauty.

7.1 Recommendations

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 7.1: Clarification and more detailed guidance is required in relation to restrictions on developments in ‘high amenity areas’ and ‘highly sensitive scenic areas’ given that many Gaeltachta are located in areas that include scenic routes, views and landscapes such as coastal areas, estuaries, lakelands etc and contain designated areas of international heritage conservation.

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Conclusion

Since the first Gaeltacht Commission, the State has recognised that the future of Irish as a community language depends not only on the number of people who can speak it, but on the social and material conditions that enable speakers to remain in their communities, use Irish in everyday life and transmit it to the next generation.

The findings of the *Ó Bhéal an Phobail: Tithíocht i nGaeltacht Chiarraí Thiar* study reinforce this principle. Participants understood access to sustainable and affordable housing as intrinsically connected to the future of Irish in the West Kerry Gaeltacht. Yet the evidence presented in this briefing indicates a substantial disconnect between local incomes and housing costs, alongside pressures associated with the loss of permanent housing to holiday homes and short-term rentals.

The draft NPS (2026) recognises the relationship between housing and the sustainability of Irish as a community language. However, the overall findings of this policy briefing paper identify a significant gap between that policy objective and some of the mechanisms proposed to achieve it. In particular, the analysis identifies housing affordability as a fundamental barrier to remaining in or returning to the Gaeltacht; a definition of economic need that does not adequately reflect contemporary Gaeltacht employment; insufficient mechanisms to address existing concentrations of holiday homes and STRs; a methodology that would reduce the proportion of housing reserved for Irish speakers in multi-unit developments; a reduction in the existing enurement period alongside continuing concerns about monitoring and enforcement; insufficient clarity and consistency in the proposed system of Linguistic Impact Statements; and unresolved tensions between restrictions on development in highly sensitive scenic areas and the housing needs of permanent Gaeltacht communities.

The recommendations therefore call for closer integration of housing and language-planning policy; consideration of the legal basis for proportionate regulation of the use of residential property in pursuit of housing and community-sustainability objectives, particularly in light of the European Commission's *Affordable Housing Act*; a broader and gender-proofed definition of economic need aligned with

contemporary rural employment and national remote-working policy; stronger and appropriately targeted regulation of holiday homes and STRs; restoration and strengthening of housing protections for Irish speakers in multi-unit developments; retention and effective enforcement of the 15-year permanent-residence requirement; a single statutory and professionally supported methodology for Linguistic Impact Statements; and clearer guidance on reconciling housing need with environmental and scenic protections in Gaeltacht areas.

The experience of the 20-Year Strategy provides an important context for these recommendations. While the number of people reporting an ability to speak Irish has increased, the Strategy has not achieved its objective of increasing daily Irish use in the Gaeltachtaí, with the proportion of Gaeltacht residents speaking Irish every day declining since 2011.

Budget 2027 announced €161 million to support Gaeltacht communities, strengthen the Irish language and improve services and transport links for island communities, together with an additional €1 million to enable more people in Gaeltacht communities to develop and maintain their Irish-language skills¹¹⁷. While these investments have the potential to strengthen linguistic competence, as this policy briefing paper has demonstrated, language-specific interventions alone are unlikely to reverse declining levels of daily spoken Irish in Gaeltacht communities unless they are accompanied by measures addressing the structural conditions necessary for intergenerational language transmission. Providing a relatively small amount of funding to enabling more people in Gaeltacht communities to ‘develop and maintain their Irish-language skills’ holds limited value if the *“Where, with whom, and the range of topics for which a language is used directly affects whether or not it will be transmitted to the next generation.”*¹¹⁸

The use of ABAIR-ÉIST in this study, which produced Irish-language transcripts from focus group discussions, was groundbreaking in demonstrating how speech recognition technologies can support and strengthen participatory democracy by increasing opportunities for Gaeltacht communities to influence the policy making process. The successful application of this tool reinforces the case made to broaden the draft NPS (2026)’s (2026) definition of ‘economic need’ to embrace digitisation and AI not only in the public service, as announced in Budget 2027, but in Gaeltacht areas also.

The final NPS therefore presents an opportunity to adopt a more integrated whole-of-government approach in which housing policy and language policy are treated as interdependent. Protecting Irish as a living community language ultimately means sustaining communities in which people can afford to live, work and raise their families, and where the richness of the language continues to describe the ordinary events that characterise everyday life — between neighbours and friends, in workplaces and community groups, in shops and pubs, and in conversations about politics, climate change, current affairs, poetry and philosophy, and the future of the community itself.

NOTES

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