

## Introduction

My name is Crystal Leiker, and I am a qualified town planner. I was educated in University College Cork, having graduated with a Masters in Planning and Sustainable Development in 2016. Prior to this, I studied Social Sciences and have previous professional financial experience in mortgages. I was present at the public consultation meeting at UCC on 24/2/17 when Simon Coveney T.D. (Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government) introduced his working paper in relation to the new Ireland 2040 National Planning Framework. I have a unique and impartial perspective on Ireland's development practices.

## Context:

Minister Coveney stated that he was open to solutions that may be considered radical to help Ireland become more sustainable. He had discussed for instance the "hollowing out" effect on Irish cities, where people are moving to edge sites and not living in the city. Minister Coveney cited some very compelling examples such as figures showing that only 1,000 people live in Limerick City Centre (one electoral division) and the current development patterns present in Cork and Dublin.

The Issues and Choices document states that the average household size is decreasing, to 2 people per household (2.1.6), and 22% (3.2.6) of all households being single person households. These figures are clearly at odds with the current dominance of 3-4 bedroom semi detached houses on edge sites and suburbs which is currently favored by developers (2.4.6). The development industry and the house building community seem to be completely unaware of these demographic trends. If these figures are correct, Ireland will need to increase 1 and 2 bedroom dwellings as a result.

I had asked the Minister a question pertaining to the possibility of altering the minimum size guidelines for new development in existing older housing stock located in city centres. I had wondered if this had been researched and believe I have an idea that could be taken into consideration which addresses (2.3.3) of the Issue and Choices document.

## Proposal:

There are possibly thousands of dwellings across all cities in Ireland which are considered unfit for current habitation owing to the drastic change in minimum size guidelines and

building guidelines in the last 30 years. These dwellings are too small for office space and generally are unused or underutilised. However, people did live in these buildings and in some instances still do. Many are poorly designed according to existing building standards, yet have the potential to be redesigned and converted to high quality, custom builds that would provide all of a person's requirements within a modern context, and in doing so protect the built heritage and tourism that Ireland depends on while keeping populations within city centres.

Utilising some of these sites for the provision of what are termed 'micro apartments' should be considered in these instances for single young business people (ideal for large multinational tech firms of which there are many across the country), the elderly (keeping them close to services and social needs) students and non-traditional families (of which the numbers are increasing according to CSO data). There are several examples of successful micro apartment conversions in the US, Asia and the UK (See the Arcade Providence, Providence, Rhode Island, the company Inspired Homes in London and other examples in San Francisco, London, Denver and other cities). It is a practical way to encourage people back into the cities (2.2.4; 2.2.8), close to services, public transportation (2.3.1) and workplaces (2.2.10), cutting commuting times, and slowing the progression of the hollowing out of cities (2.2.1). Conversion of these older buildings could greatly increase the provision of housing in urban areas and would contribute to the overall 25,000 dwellings required per annum that are necessary to keep pace with population growth and changing demographics. Additionally, utilising this older housing stock would free up many existing family homes for families in need, while providing housing for the 22% of single person households and the overall shrinkage in household size.

Micro apartments are viable for developers, particularly in an overheating housing market where rents are increasingly unaffordable. There are many designers and suppliers (such as IKEA) who have already started making custom high quality furniture, storage and organisation systems which are designed specifically for small spaces. Additionally, micro dwelling lifestyles lend themselves to community development and engagement. When people live within cities, they are more likely to interact with their community rather than retreat to the suburbs at the close of business.

Public realm and communal areas are generally part of the development process of micro apartments in other countries, and could be required as part of the permission processes here. To build micro apartments, there would need to be some changes to our current systems:

- 1) Minimum dwelling sizes should be relaxed in urban centres, but building standards should be high quality and enforced, particularly in ACAs and other distinctive areas of each city.
- 2) Zoning requirements should be assessed (the nature of micro apartments may have a lesser need for car to dwelling ratio in urban areas, or a greater need for bicycle storage, internal community spaces, etc.)
- 3) Relevant impact assessments would need to be conducted regarding the impact of additional density on existing infrastructure.
- 4) Viability assessments should be done on locations to determine whether or not micro apartments or regular apartments should be constructed or retrofitted depending on locations.
- 5) The planning system at a local level would need to provide controls over the amount and scale of micro-apartment schemes. This could be achieved through the Development Plan process, whereby each local authority would identify specific, clearly identified locations where such developments would be permitted, subject to a range of relevant criteria.

My research has found that the Irish housing market is highly suitable for the utilisation of micro apartments as a *part of* the overall housing shortage solution. If a pilot case can be used in the Irish market, it would be a useful way to demonstrate and publicise the important contribution that this particular housing initiative can have in addressing urban housing challenges. This is an innovative, forward-looking approach that is used widely in international contexts.

You can examine my own research in regards to micro housing in an Irish context here: [https://www.academia.edu/25725879/2016\\_edit\\_Diversifying\\_the\\_Irish\\_Housing\\_Supply\\_Smaller\\_Homes\\_as\\_Alternative\\_Solutions\\_to\\_Housing\\_Needs](https://www.academia.edu/25725879/2016_edit_Diversifying_the_Irish_Housing_Supply_Smaller_Homes_as_Alternative_Solutions_to_Housing_Needs). It is the only research into micro housing for Ireland that I am aware of.

Yours Sincerely,

Crystal Leiker, Town Planner