

FROM EXORCISING GHOST ESTATES TO CREATING SPIRITED COMMUNITIES

Good Practice Summary

This good practice presented by Longford County Council developed as a result of a problem which was encountered by municipalities all over Ireland. Ireland experienced a significant housing boom in the early 2000's, part of which was fuelled, in rural areas of Ireland at least, by the introduction of the Rural Renewal Tax Incentive Section 23 Scheme. Following the economic crash, many residential developments lacked infrastructure such as roads and lighting, and had no access to schools and other amenities, and were described as having "no potential to be economically viable".

The Upper Shannon Rural Renewal Scheme area had 529 unfinished estates (Cavan 147, Longford 77, Leitrim 96, Roscommon 118, Sligo 91) - 18.6% of the 2,846 such estates in the country. Those 529 estates were made up of 14,814 units - 12.2% of the 121,248 national total. In the 2006 census, these five counties had 5.9% of all households in the state. Therefore, it is clear that the situation in which Longford County Council found itself presented a serious challenge to the Municipality to address.

Prior to the interventions developed by the state, Longford County Council established an Unfinished Estates team. This came following consultations between the elected members and the executive on the most appropriate approach to addressing this serious issue. Following the examination of the various options, the executive of Longford County Council adopted the approach of a co-ordinated project team, with derogation powers to make decisions, providing a one-stop shop and single point of contact for people with queries in relation to unfinished estates. Following on from the establishment of the Unfinished Estates team, the key priority was open communication, both within the team and between all stakeholders. This was the foundation of the good practice and the basis for the success of the project.

The work undertaken at this stage fed into support documents being prepared by the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government and the Department offered significant levels of support to the Unfinished Estates team. The Manager of the Unfinished Estates team sat on a steering group nationally that informed the guidance and approach to be taken nationally. He also made a number of presentations to other Municipalities on the approach taken by Longford County Council to engage developers and to address the serious issues facing the Municipalities.

An example of the extremity of the situation that Longford faced was the Gleann Riada estate in Longford, in which one house was bought for €155,000 in 2006. The estate has subsequently been in the news because of gas seeping into homes from the sewerage. In 2012 two houses were damaged in suspected gas explosions. One house had to be evacuated and one unsold apartment block was demolished. The house bought for €155,000 was tested for the presence of gas. Carbon monoxide and hydrogen sulphide were detected but not at harmful levels. Longford County Council intervened in this estate and addressed the issues with the sewerage system, the unfinished roads, the removal of unsafe and unviable buildings, resulting in an estate that provides an improved quality of life for its residents.

The overall priority in tackling unfinished developments is to improve living conditions for residents. High quality urban housing development is essential in delivering good quality of life, in meeting

citizens' needs and in achieving many other aspects of Government policy in relation to sustainable communities, housing, planning, sustainable transport, energy efficiency and environmental quality. However, the major contraction in housing construction activity adversely affected the normal cycle in completing housing developments. New houses were taking much longer to sell, developments were taking much longer to complete and in many cases construction has slowed down considerably or stopped altogether with uncertainty as to the timescale for the eventual completion of works. Therefore, those who bought and moved into what became unfinished estates faced a number of problems: living on or next to building sites, health and safety issues, poor services and infrastructure, negative equity, anti-social behaviour and a diminished sense of community.

There were originally 128 unfinished estates within the county. By the end of March 2017, 89 estates have been fully completed and resolved. The Unfinished Estates team has negotiated Site Resolution Plans for the remaining 39 and work continues on these on implementing those Site Resolution Plans.

The main approach adopted in respect of addressing the Unfinished Estates within County Longford was as follows:

- "Carrot and Stick" approach
- Meet with all parties concerned
- Introduce Taking in Charge at an early stage in discussions
- Develop and work towards Site Resolution Plans (SRP)
- Consistent follow up with all parties including setting timeframes
- Liaise with Residents Associations and keep informed of progress to date
- Monitor progress on site of actual works being carried out
- Lack of progress in all areas results in legal action being initiated.

There were two sets of key issues facing residents of unfinished developments. Firstly, there is the issue of public safety, which arises where part completed elements of housing developments, that are no longer under construction, were poorly fenced leading to the possibility of public access to hazardous areas such as open excavations, piping, unprotected upper floor areas in part completed housing and so on. Secondly, there are serious completion and compliance issues such as the non completion of public lighting, open space areas or defects with essential services such as water services. These have a major impact on the residents of these developments. Battery Court in Longford was quoted as a good example for actions to resolve a development in the report prepared by the Advisory group on 'Emerging priority issues on unfinished housing developments'.