

# COLD, MOULD AND DAMP

THE **REAL STORY** OF  
IRELAND'S  
SOCIAL HOUSING  
MAINTENANCE CRISIS

*Sinn Féin*

# KEY FINDINGS

**83%**

had issues with mould

**40%**

had experienced issues for longer than 5 years

**1 in 2**

had reported the issue more than 10 times

**97%**

of those with children in their home  
were suffering with mould

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# Background

## Context

In 2017, residents from 20 local authority housing estates, supported by the Community Action Network, took the Irish state to the European Committee of Social Rights. In a landmark judgement the Committee found that Ireland had breached its obligations under the European Social Charter (ESC). Specifically, they found that Ireland had failed to fulfil its obligations, when it came to the condition of local authority housing, under Article 16:

***The family as a fundamental unit of society has the right to appropriate social, legal and economic protection to ensure its full development. (European Social Charter, Article 16)***

The ESC was first ratified in 2000 and 26 years later, it is clear that Ireland continues to fail people living in substandard social housing.

A 2018 study by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) and the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) found that 38% of those living in social housing were experiencing housing deprivation – with a lack of warmth, persistent mould and rotting window frames and floors featuring prevalently.

In England, following the tragic death of Awaab Ishak, a new law has passed directly forcing local authorities to address mould issues in residential properties. Awaab Ishak was a two-year old child who passed away in 2020 and whose death was directly linked to mould and damp in his family home.

A Trinity College Dublin study, in collaboration with the Robert Emmett CDP<sup>1</sup>, found a direct link between asthma and poor quality housing in Dublin's Oliver Bond flats with residents of the mouldy, damp flats found to be 2.4 times more likely to have asthma recorded in their medical records than those in neighbouring estates.

Compounding this are findings from Norris and Hayden's *The Future of Council Housing* (2018) that a lack of resourcing in local authorities led to 760 individual dwellings assigned to each member of the maintenance team. They further identified serious concerns with the lack of any resourcing for preventative maintenance and the inevitable focus on response maintenance due to this resourcing. This finding was echoed in 2019 with research indicating there was a €100m gap in housing maintenance resourcing in local authorities from 2000 to 2018<sup>2</sup>.

This system has undoubtedly led to a situation whereby local authority housing is now run-down and needs significant refurbishment to meet basic standards.

## Political Background

Local government funding was cut substantially during the austerity years with research highlighting that in 2015 Ireland had the lowest per capita EU spend on capital funding for

1 Creane, D., Hayes, C., O Ciardha, D., Smith, S. M., Campbell, A. & Mc Carthy, N., Health data to support local communities, 1, Trinity College Dublin, January 2024, 2024, 1 - 12  
2 E. Lewis, 'Social Housing Policy in Ireland: new directions', Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2019.



local authorities and this would lead to significant backlogs in maintenance of both roads and housing<sup>3</sup>.

In 2009, aggregate funding to local authorities was €5.3bn. These were slashed to a low of €3.79bn in 2015. Staffing was cut from 32,044 in 2009 to 26,858 in 2016<sup>4</sup>. This has left huge deficits in housing maintenance and effectively prevented the implementation of any proactive maintenance plans or stock condition repairs for well over a decade. The staffing and funding levels are rising but the reality is that these increases have not been seen in the provision of response or preventative maintenance.

The Local Government Fund, an autonomous fund to supplement local authority budgets that could be utilised for targeted housing maintenance, was €1.6bn in Budget 2009. In Budget 2026, this is just €670m. Failing to fund local authorities, and the aging housing stock they must maintain, has led to significant issues with mould, damp and broader housing maintenance. It has led to the findings by the European Committee of Social Rights and it has left those living in local authority housing living in unsafe and inhumane conditions.

Sinn Féin believe in public housing to meet social and affordable housing need. We believe in access to secure, adequate and affordable housing. We also believe that the state, as landlord, should adhere to the highest possible standards in the delivery and maintenance of public homes. We have repeatedly called on government to properly implement a programme of preventative maintenance and to adequately fund response maintenance.

3 Turley, Gerard, et al. "Austerity and Irish local government expenditure since the Great Recession" *Administration*, vol. 66, no. 4, The Institute of Public Administration of Ireland, 2018, pp. 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.2478/admin-2018-0030>

4 NOAC-LGMA-Summary-2024.pdf

# Survey

## Background

The survey was undertaken online on the Sinn Féin website from 17<sup>th</sup> November to 17<sup>th</sup> December. The survey link was shared online, through email and via QR code on posters. No physical surveys were undertaken.

Respondents were asked 20 multiple choice questions and one comment box qualitative question. Only fully completed survey responses were counted.

While the survey does not purport to be a representative sample of social renters across the state the findings do provide an important insight into the conditions that many social housing tenants currently live in.



# Results

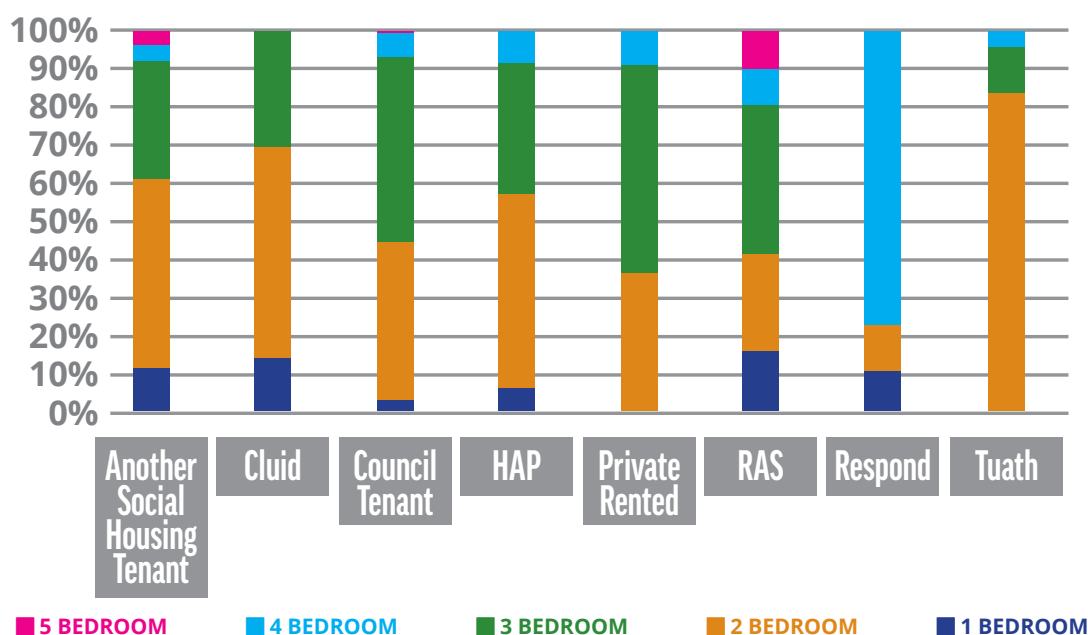
## Demographics of respondents

A number of questions were asked to identify the demographic make-up of respondents. 1445 responses were received from residents in 30 local authority areas. Residents in Dublin City Council’s administrative area account for the highest number of responses (472 responses). This was followed by Cork City Council (235 responses) and Louth County Council (186 responses). 789 respondents had children in the home.

1135 responses were received from residents in local authority housing, 59 from residents in approved Housing Body provided housing and 180 from those in the private rental sector. A further 64 were renting while availing of the HAP or RAS scheme.

Respondents lived in 3-bed homes most commonly (46%) followed closely by 2-bedroom homes (40%).

## How Many Bedrooms is your house?



832 respondents (58.3%) had lived in their homes longer than 10 years, followed by 292 (30%) less than 5 years and the remainder 0-5 years. Tenants living in their homes less than 5 years were more likely to live in 2-bedroom accommodation (64%) than those living in their homes for either 5-10 years (27%) or longer than 10 years (31%).

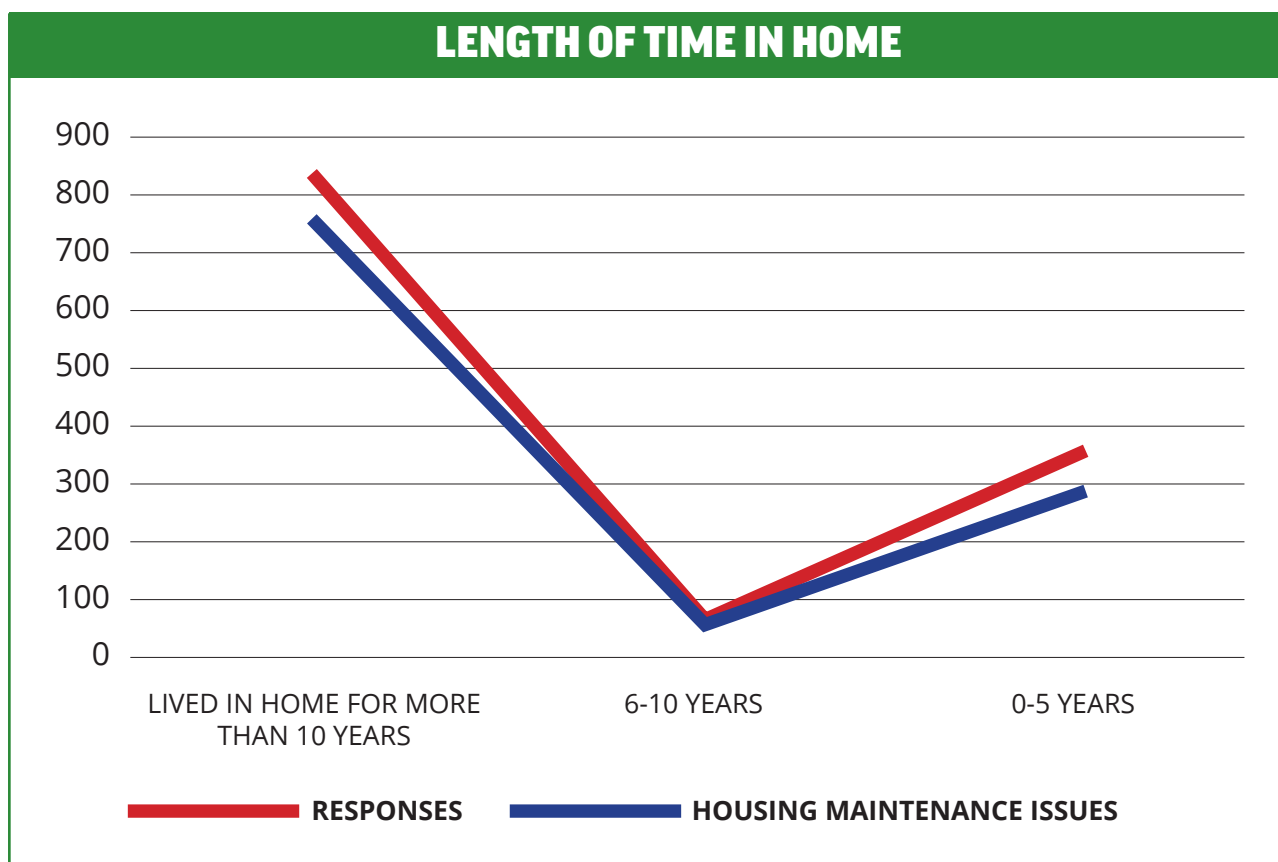
## Housing Maintenance Issues

Of those who responded, 1305 (90%) had current issues with housing maintenance or had experienced housing maintenance issues in the last 5 years. 93% of respondents in local authority and AHB housing had experience of these issues compared to 82% of respondents in private rental or HAP and RAS accommodation.

Of the issues identified by participants, mould was most common (83% of those with housing maintenance issues identified mould as a problem), followed by damp (77%), bathrooms (46%) and kitchens (35%)

ISSUE	%
<b>MOULD</b>	<b>83%</b>
<b>DAMP</b>	<b>77%</b>
<b>WINDOWS</b>	<b>65%</b>
<b>LEAKS</b>	<b>49%</b>
<b>BATHROOM</b>	<b>46%</b>
<b>EXTERNAL DOOR</b>	<b>40%</b>
<b>KITCHEN</b>	<b>35%</b>
<b>INTERNAL DOOR</b>	<b>23%</b>
<b>OTHER</b>	<b>19%</b>
<b>FACIA SOFFETS</b>	<b>9%</b>
<b>STAIRS</b>	<b>9%</b>

832 respondents (57%) had lived in their home for longer than 10 years or longer. Of these, 91% were, or had recently been, experiencing issues with housing maintenance.



Of those with children in the home, 97% identified issues with mould and 87% identified damp.

## Attempts to resolve housing maintenance issues

For 72% of respondents, their issues with housing maintenance had been ongoing for longer than 2 years with 40% of them experiencing these problems for over 5 years.

95% of respondents had reported these issues to their landlord. Of those who had made contact, 680 (51%) had contacted their landlord more than 10 times. 55% of Council tenants who had made reports had done so more than 10 times compared with 25% of those privately renting.

Only 63 respondents had their issue fixed after reporting (30 on the first visit and 33 after multiple visits). The most common response (493 of those who reported or 37%) was that someone had called, inspected the issue and said they'd return to fix it but had not returned. 438 respondents had received minor repairs but the overall issue had not been fixed while 329 had never had anyone come to address the issue.

For 72% of respondents their issues had significantly worsened since the first time they reported them. They had stayed the same for only 14% and had worsened only slightly for 14%.

Respondents were asked to comment on how the issues impact on their daily lives. Asthma was mentioned 466 times, 404 respondents used the word health and "freezing" and "cold" were mentioned a combined 1054 times. Concerns were repeatedly raised for children living in the conditions while others spoke of living in constant fear.



Some comments from respondents included:

“Constant fear of these issues causing serious health issues injury or structural damage”

“If I hear water coming through ceiling I just cry”

“We are very... worn-out from this. All I want is a safe warm home from my children”

“I've no running water in my bathroom. I'm washing my hands, my teeth in my kitchen sink. It's embarrassing”

“Have become so disheartened and depressed having to live like this”

“My children are constantly sick before living in this house my kids were never sick”

“I couldn't put into words... we're broken people”

“It's soul destroying paying €1650 per month to live in a cold, damp, dark house with no natural light”

“I don't want anybody in my home to visit its horrible..”

## Proactive Maintenance and Vacancy

Only 41 respondents across all lengths of residency and tenancy type had ever received proactive maintenance that was not boiler servicing. This represents less than 3% of all respondents<sup>5</sup>. Of those who had received preventative maintenance, including boiler servicing, 51% had only ever received this service once.

638 respondents had received proactive maintenance included boiler servicing. Of this, 428 had lived in their home longer than 10 years (51% of those living in their home for this length of time).

396 respondents had first received preventative housing maintenance this year, 150 from 2020 to 2023, 92 last year and only 31 pre-2020.

Of those who had received no preventative maintenance, 68% had paid to have maintenance work carried out on their homes themselves. Overall, 337 respondents (23%) had paid more than €100 for maintenance works.

56% of respondents identified vacant homes in their areas. This was lowest in Carlow (9%) and highest in Longford and Offaly (100%).

## Analysis

These responses paint a stark and worrying reality for those living on the ground. This is heavily reinforced through academic research and the realities of the political landscape under Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

<sup>5</sup> Many local authorities include an additional 'boiler servicing' charge to tenants who therefore fund preventative boiler maintenance themselves



For far too many tenants, safe, warm and affordable housing is not an option. This does not just include those on social housing waiting lists or trying to rent their own home, it includes those living in substandard accommodation.

The legacy of housing maintenance issues caused by decades of profound underfunding in the local government sector are laid profoundly bare in these results. It is clear that this is leading to serious physical and mental health consequences for tenants and the continued poor condition of social housing stock directly results in the prolonged periods of vacancy between re-letting that have become the norm in far too many areas.

Legacy maintenance issues appear to compound the ongoing issues experienced by many tenants. Mould and damp are the most common issues experienced – these are often caused by minor leaks which go ignored and, as the results show, issues worsen.

There are serious concerns raised about the number of children living in mouldy, damp and unsafe accommodation. The impacts of this have been seen repeatedly and yet, reports by tenants are not acted upon. This is impacting on the physical and mental health of children, their parents and many tenants who responded to the survey.

Tenants want to live in appropriate housing – they report their issues repeatedly and often resort to paying for minor, and major, maintenance themselves. The numbers who had their issue fixed following their first report was shockingly low only worsened by the number who had their issue inspected but no works ever carried out. Leaving people, knowingly, to live in substandard accommodation is unfair and inhumane.

Sinn Féin believe that if the European Social Committee were to revisit Ireland in 2026, they would be shocked to see that these issues had not just failed to improve but, in many areas, have worsened.

We believe that unless sufficient funding is provided now to address housing maintenance - resolve legacy maintenance issues, properly resource preventative maintenance and employ efficient response maintenance teams – then these conditions will worsen and the physical and mental health toll will be profound.



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