

HOUSING MATTERS – KEY POINTS TO BE ADDRESSED BY THE INCOMING GOVERNMENT

Most candidates for election refer to the Island’s housing needs. Frequently mentioned topics are support for first-time buyers and the need for additional social housing. Much attention is given to the needs of both young Manx people and essential workers moving to the Island. While not dismissing either of these needs, at Housing Matters, our overriding concern is for **those who have no home - “No fixed abode”**. There is a small but persistent number of people in housing crisis - in any one month, we have approximately 40 “no fixed abode” cases on our books, while we are aware of a few having to manage sleeping rough – this remains too many. Homelessness is an issue that simply should not exist in a community such as ours and one which we believe could be almost entirely resolved.

Decisive action must be taken in the recognition that there will always be some people for whom home ownership is unlikely to ever be appropriate and for whom social housing remains an ever-distant dream. Solutions for those people will, at least in the short term, only ever be found in either the private sector or in dedicated, Government or charity sponsored emergency accommodation.

In the lifetime of Housing Matters, we have seen four general elections but although the faces may change the problems and challenges don't.

So what action do we suggest?

We invite all would-be MHKs to consider the following four initiatives which could and should be completed quite swiftly, as relevant documents, ideas and solutions have been kicking around the corridors of power for years and all of these would be relatively straightforward to implement.

We would ask every successful candidate to commit to one simple objective: that within their first 12 months in office, there should be a measurable reduction in the number of people recorded as ‘no fixed abode’ together with a clear plan to eliminate the need for long-term use of emergency accommodation.

This should not be another long-term strategy or consultation. The Island already has much of the knowledge, unused or under-used property and practical solutions required. What is needed now is political ownership, a clear timetable and delivery.

Regeneration of town centre accommodation	What could be done to make this happen?
All our high streets are struggling through lack of footfall. Yet look upwards and you will see rows of shop premises with empty upper floors that could be converted for use as accommodation, within easy reach of workplaces and public transport, thereby providing much needed homes as well as on the spot customers for local shops. Equally, there are numerous former office premises lying empty.	• Reduce the red tape and blinkered approach to repurposing dormant buildings / properties across the island, thereby generating income from rates and taxes; more importantly to provide the stability of a home for those lost souls who are currently left to drift from one care agency and temporary solution to another. • “Permitted development” planning/building control approach to facilitate conversion of empty office space and upper floors of shop premises to dwellings without unnecessary and over-burdensome regulation • Grants, interest-free loans or tax/rates relief (possibly subject to meeting appropriate and simple criteria) to encourage: a. Development of dwellings suitable for those with mobility problems

	b. Improvements to/refurbishment of poorer quality rental properties c. Entry of additional residential properties to rental market, especially existing empty buildings • Reallocate rates to reduce burden on shops and proportionally transfer to residential parts of the shop properties • Stronger powers for local government to intervene on dilapidated properties
Support for the private rental market The 2021 Census revealed that private landlords provide nearly 18% of the accommodation for the Island, while 5,695 residential properties (15.3% of homes) were recorded as being vacant. For many people private rental is the only realistic option. Yes, this sector should be regulated appropriately to prevent bad practice but it should also be supported and recognised for its contribution. Current regulation is half-implemented and arguably over-burdensome, and there is little to encourage new or further investment into the sector or incentive to improve its quality.	We suggest: • Amending the planning system to allow permitted development for new rental dwellings meeting appropriate criteria • Financial penalties for residential dwellings unoccupied for prolonged periods e.g. full rates on empty or demolished properties • Adjustment of levels of housing benefit to meet current market rent levels in order to bring decent quality private rentals within the financial reach of those with very limited means coupled with a simple system for DHSS housing payments to be made direct to landlords • Establishment of a simple and efficient escrow scheme for deposits as envisaged in the Landlord Registration Act but never yet implemented. This needs to be coupled with a low cost, swift and accessible process for tenancy dispute resolution. • Effective and efficient monitoring and enforcement of existing regulation without adding further complications arising through the yet unimplemented Landlord Registration Act
Utilisation of existing Government owned property for emergency, transitional and supported accommodation. Some progress has been made during the last Government in terms of setting up a Homeless Pathway, in particular the Manx Care Wellbeing Units and the provision of Emergency Accommodation in a variety of	Our solution: What is needed is a multi-functioning building within Douglas to reduce the pressure on Probation (Tromode House) young leavers from care and all those that are roofless / homeless for a short period. The Government-owned former 40 bed Elderly Persons Housing Complex at Reayrt ny Baie has lain empty since November 2024 – almost 2 years. This building would be highly suitable for conversion to

hotels and HMOs. There are, however, two significant problems with the current provision: 1) In July this year, over 62% of those placed in Emergency Accommodation had been in such accommodation for over 57 nights – there being simply insufficient appropriate accommodation to enable them to move on. This makes a mockery of the word “emergency” 2) This Emergency Accommodation is a huge expense to the taxpayer: it can cost up to £80 per night per person and is rarely less than £200 per week: amounts way in excess of the level of housing benefit.	emergency and transitional use, with separate floors able to be segregated for differing service user needs as well as space for use by support services. It could be seen as one solution fits all for a homeless pathway, night shelter, probation, care leavers, any persons needing a more supportive environment. It could also become a central point for Eastern Wellbeing partnership. Housing Matters has over the past two years discussed the possibility of its use with numerous politicians and Government agencies, all of whom agree that it would provide a practical and economic solution, yet <u>absolutely nothing has happened</u>. If Reayrt ny Baie is not considered suitable, Government should explain publicly why and identify an alternative property capable of delivering the same range of emergency, transitional and supported accommodation. The question is no longer whether the Island needs this accommodation - it clearly does. The question is why, after almost two years of an empty Government-owned building and repeated discussions, it is still not being used.
Create a clear program of social housing construction/acquisition	Please consider: • Widening the specifications for social housing to include homes that are appropriate and suitable for a diverse Island population e.g. different modes of accommodation including pods, quick and affordable to erect, possibly offering a 20 year life span - 20 years of affordable housing for many. • Streamlining social housing applications, to bring more flexibility of allocation and transfers across the Island and using technology to increase the effectiveness of the housing officer's role by coordination across the many housing authorities on the island.

We are not asking Government simply to announce another housing strategy. We are asking for outcomes that can be measured.

Housing Matters would welcome the publication of a small number of regular, Island-wide measures, including:

the number of people recorded as 'no fixed abode';

the number of people sleeping rough;

the number and proportion of people in emergency accommodation for more than 28 and 56 nights.

These figures would provide a straightforward way for Government, politicians and the public to judge whether progress is actually being made. Housing Matters is willing to provide its own monthly data and experience to help establish a meaningful baseline.

As you, the elected MHK's ,progress through your parliamentary career, other approaches to Housing can be developed. Housing Matters remains available to provide up to date monthly statistics, causes and trends relating to those in Housing Crisis and to discuss your ideas for the benefit of the Island to grow and remain as a good place for all to live.

PLEASE TALK TO US.