

DÁTHEANGACH NÓ DÁ THEACH?

The impact of the Housing Crisis on Irish in the Gaeltacht

STAIR NA GAELTACHTA/HISTORY OF THE GAELTACHT

An Ghaeltacht was first recognised in 1926 by the Irish Free State which marked regions as *flór-Ghaeltacht* — ‘true’, with a majority Irish-speaking population — or *breac-Ghaeltacht*, ‘speckled’, with at least 25% of people in the area Irish-speaking (Ó Giollagáin, 2009). Even then, the Irish language — the native language of this island that has been in use for millennia — was severely marginalised and declining, surviving largely in coastal pockets, but the Free State was clear about its intent to protect and to revive Irish in Gaeltacht areas. With 156 townlands across counties Donegal, Kerry, Mayo, Cork, Waterford and Meath, *an Ghaeltacht* has long been viewed as a sanctuary for the Irish language, but in the light of recent research and an ever-worsening housing crisis, we consider the terms *dátheangach* — bilingual — and *dá theach* — two houses, as we ask: What is the impact of the housing crisis on the Irish language in Ireland today?

GAEILGE SA GHAELTACHT/IRISH IN THE GAELTACHT

Bilingualism was a reality for communities *sa Ghaeltacht* even when that designation was first being worked out a century ago: “Tá cainteoirí uile na Gaeilge, bídís sa Ghaeltacht nó lasmuigh di, dátheangach” (Walsh, 2011). Recently however, linguists have raised the alarm, criticising what they have termed Ireland’s *dátheangachas aontreorach* or ‘unidirectional bilingualism’, that is: “Minority-language speakers are bilingual because their acquisition of the majority language is compulsory and unidirectional” (Ó Giollagáin, 2009). Irish-speakers, even *sa Ghaeltacht*, learn English because they have to; because their native language is threatened and minoritised, and: “English serves as the language of the Irish majority [in Ireland]” (McWilliams Consalvo, 1994). In this context: “Bilingual social practice is inherently problematic and disadvantageous for the minority language” (Ó Giollagáin, 2009). We see the impact of the pervasive spread of English in Gaeltacht areas already. As of 2022, there were around 100,000 people living *sa Ghaeltacht*, of which only around 66,000 reported that they had Irish: “The proportion who could speak Irish in the Gaeltacht areas fell from 69% in 2011 to 66% in 2022... 20,261 [people] or 31% spoke the language daily. This was a fall of 2% compared with 2016” (Central Statistics Office, 2023). 28% of those who had Irish reported that they did not speak Irish well, and according to another source, just 23% of families *sa Ghaeltacht* are raising their children with Irish. Not only that, but new studies carried out by several linguists on how Irish-speakers of different ages speak Irish *sa Ghaeltacht* — a field called corpus linguistics — has found that the very Irish being spoken is changing, with researchers heavy inflection by English, and in particular the use of ‘unskilled code-switching’: “Brushann muid na teeth... agus amantaí watchann muid movies”; “Bhuel, níl really tada eile le habair” (Ó Giollagáin, 2024). As a minoritised language in social competition with a majority language, such findings indicate not healthy bilingualism, but signs of language death.

CAD CHUIGE?/WHY?

The deliberation suppression and marginalisation of the Irish language over past centuries is well-documented, and Irish, as any language, is subject to the ‘Principle of Economy’, the economisation of speech long put forward as the driver of language change as all speakers try to achieve their goal, of communicating what they are trying to, as quickly and as easily as possible; as every Irish-speaker is, in Ireland today, also a fluent English-speaker, this economisation of speech undoubtedly plays a role in people’s code-switching, and their use of Irish. That said, there must be a renewed focus on the material conditions of the Irish language *sa Ghaeltacht*. Language materiality, one researcher wrote, is: “Incorporating materiality into linguistic analysis [and] can ground such processes within social, cultural, political and economic structures of power” (Shankar, 2017). We argue that not enough emphasis has been put on what are known as the: “Sociocultural factors which influence language death” (Fishman, 1991), such as: “Physical and cultural dislocation, leading to the disintegration of domain boundaries in which the minority language is used” (ibid.). One oft-cited quote about the decline of Irish implies that it could not be stemmed because: “The conflicts and complicities that define the process work themselves out in

the kitchen and in the bedroom... Such private places” (McCloskey, 2008). But what, then, of the fact that people *sa Ghaeltacht* are increasingly struggling to find their own home, their own kitchen, bedroom and “private places”? What impact is the housing crisis having on Irish?

CÁS-STAIDEAR/CASE-STUDY

One of the Gaeltacht’s 156 areas is *Gaoth Dobhair, Rann na Feirste, Anagaire agus Loch an Iúir*. Results in the latest census showed a decline in Irish speakers, an increase in non-Irish speakers, and an increase in people who declined to answer the question of whether or not they had Irish, summarised by the Council: “The *Gaoth Dobhair, Rann na Feirste, Anagaire and Loch an Iúir* Gaeltacht saw an 8.3% decrease in those who spoke Irish daily... While the population is increasing, the overall ability to speak Irish is in slight decline, and the frequency of daily use is falling”. Figures relating to the growth of Airbnb in the same area between 2019 and 2025 are illustrative. In 2019, sixty-six entire homes were available for short-term rental on Airbnb. In the following six years, seventy-three more homes were added to Airbnb, an increase of 110.6% meaning that one hundred and thirty-nine of the homes in this one area *sa Ghaeltacht* are available for short-term rental on Airbnb. One young person quoted said: “The Gaeltacht is being choked by Airbnb” (The Ditch, 2025), while members of CATU — the Community Action Tenants’ Union — reported that: “We have seen a marked increase in the number of our [Union] members facing eviction to make way for Short-Term Lets (STLs). The result is families made homeless, communities eroded and language and culture lost — all in the pursuit of profit. While STLs are contributing to the crippling housing crisis across the country, we see that it disproportionately affects Gaeltacht areas, threatening their very existence” (Conradh na Gaeilge, 2025).

GAOTH DOBHAIR, RANN NA FEIRSTE, ANAGAIRE AGUS LOCH AN IUIR

Ábaltacht	2016	2022	Ardú idir 2016—2022 (%)
Tá Gaeilge acu	4,773	4,696	-1.6%
Níl Gaeilge acu	839	865	+3%
Gan freagra	92	411	+327%
San iomlán	5,704	5,972	+4.4%

(Central Statistics Office, 2023)

“The Gaeltacht is being choked by Airbnb” (The Ditch, 2025)

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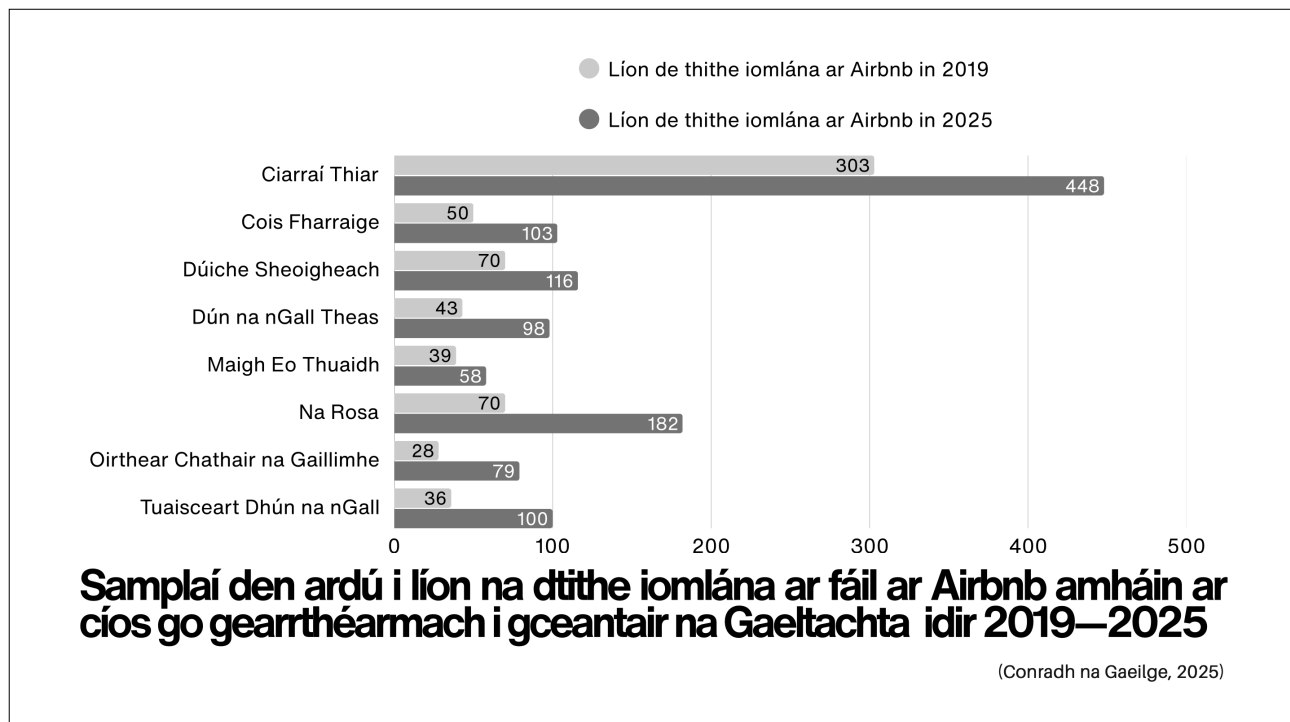
	2019	2025	Ardú idir 2019—2025 (#)	Ardú idir 2019—2025 (%)
Tithe iomlána ar Airbnb	66	139	+73	+110.6%

(Conradh na Gaeilge, 2025)

AIRBNB SA GHAELTACHT/AIRBNB IN THE GAELTACHT

There are now over two thousand full houses available for short-term rental *sa Ghaeltacht*, in the very same areas where the Irish language is so threatened and supposed to be protected. And as the likes of Airbnb grow year on year — with an increase of 88% in the number of Gaeltacht homes listed on Airbnb since 2019 — young Irish speakers are struggling with the lack of housing, and the unaffordability of what housing is available, as Donncha Ó hÉallaithe described to politicians earlier this year: “At one time it was difficult to keep people in the Gaeltacht... It’s great that we’ve come to the point where people, at the age of my kids who are in their twenties, want to live in the Gaeltacht, want to raise children with Irish in the Gaeltacht... But there’s this barrier, the housing barrier”. According to one newspaper: “More than 12,000 houses are needed in the

Gaeltacht to meet the current housing needs of the communities” (Ó Liatháin, 2026), while the Gaelic League itself, Conradh na Gaeilge, has linked the decline of the Irish language directly to the housing crisis: “Without a national policy for housing in the Gaeltacht, without a limit on developments in the Gaeltacht that don’t have language conditions imposed on them, without strong legislative provisions, the erosion of the Irish language in the Gaeltacht will continue” (Conradh na Gaeilge, 2025).



GLUAISEACHTAÍ/MOVEMENTS

People *sa Ghaeltacht* are organising: *Bánú*, which means ‘desertion, depopulation’, formed in Connemara three years ago after a series of public meetings, while *Tinteán*, meaning ‘hearth’ formed two years ago *i gCúige Uladh*. Supported by Conradh na Gaeilge and CATU, these groups demand a new Housing Department, implementation of a ‘Ready to Build’ scheme, changes to planning restrictions, funding support for renovation and building, and a new condition that would see each Language Planning Area *sa Ghaeltacht* designing its own Housing Strategy, as measures to support Irish-speakers to remain in, and to return to, *an Ghaeltacht*. One member of Bánú summarised the issues they currently face as follows: “You essentially just can’t rent in the Gaeltacht. This comes back to the number of holiday homes and second homes in these areas. And when properties come on the market, they’re extortionate... Local people are in competition with someone who’s trying to buy maybe their second or third home. They’re priced out” (Ó Liatháin, 2026). And just as Celtic regions and languages share a history of marginalisation, today they share a story of displacement and unaffordability. Groups such as *Dispac’h*, meaning ‘Revolution’, are organising in Brittany, where in some coastal areas 80% of properties are holiday homes, and the Breton language, long in decline, is further threatened by the exodus of young people who cannot afford to buy or rent in the region (Lucas, 2021). Last year in Scotland, the Green Party attempted to introduce a tax on holiday homes and short-term rentals in what remains of the country’s Gàidhlig-speaking areas, describing how: “Young Gaelic speakers are being forced out of the last communities where it is still the spoken language because holiday homes and Airbnb-style short-term lets have driven up house prices” (Scottish Housing News, 2025). In Wales, where a group called *Meibion Glyndŵr* formed and set fire to around two hundred vacant holiday homes in the nineties, local government is loud about identifying and resolving the problem, a problem illustrated nowhere more clearly than in *Gwynedd*, a region in which 59.6% of local people are currently priced out of the housing market, and a region with a 64.4% Welsh-speaking population (Welsh Language Commissioner, 2022).

FOCAL SCÓIR/FINAL WORD

Even as we speak so often now of the language revival in Ireland, our language remains in a precarious position, one which we cannot separate from the materiality of daily life, and the precarity of housing for so many people in Ireland today. As we organise in *Bánú*, in *Tinteán*, in *Conradh na Gaeilge* and in CATU, we must be clear-headed about the Ireland we want to live in, and about what housing, community and language we want going forward. As the president of Conradh na Gaeilge, Ciarán Mac Giolla Bhéin, recently put it: “Recognition alone will not solve the housing crisis. If families cannot build or buy homes in their own areas, the Gaeltacht cannot survive. And without the Gaeltacht, there is no future for the Irish language as a community language”. To put it another way, we cannot, as Irish-speakers, worry about what language each of us uses in “the kitchen and in the bedroom” of McCloskey’s writings without considering with equal concern whether each of us has our most basic housing needs met: “Housing and language are intrinsically linked” (Ní Chinnéide, 2025).