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Making informed decisions on future housing policy

Professor Rob Kitchin, Director of the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) at the National University of Ireland Maynooth, provides a comprehensive overview of all existing housing-related data and explains why it is fundamental for sound housing policy.

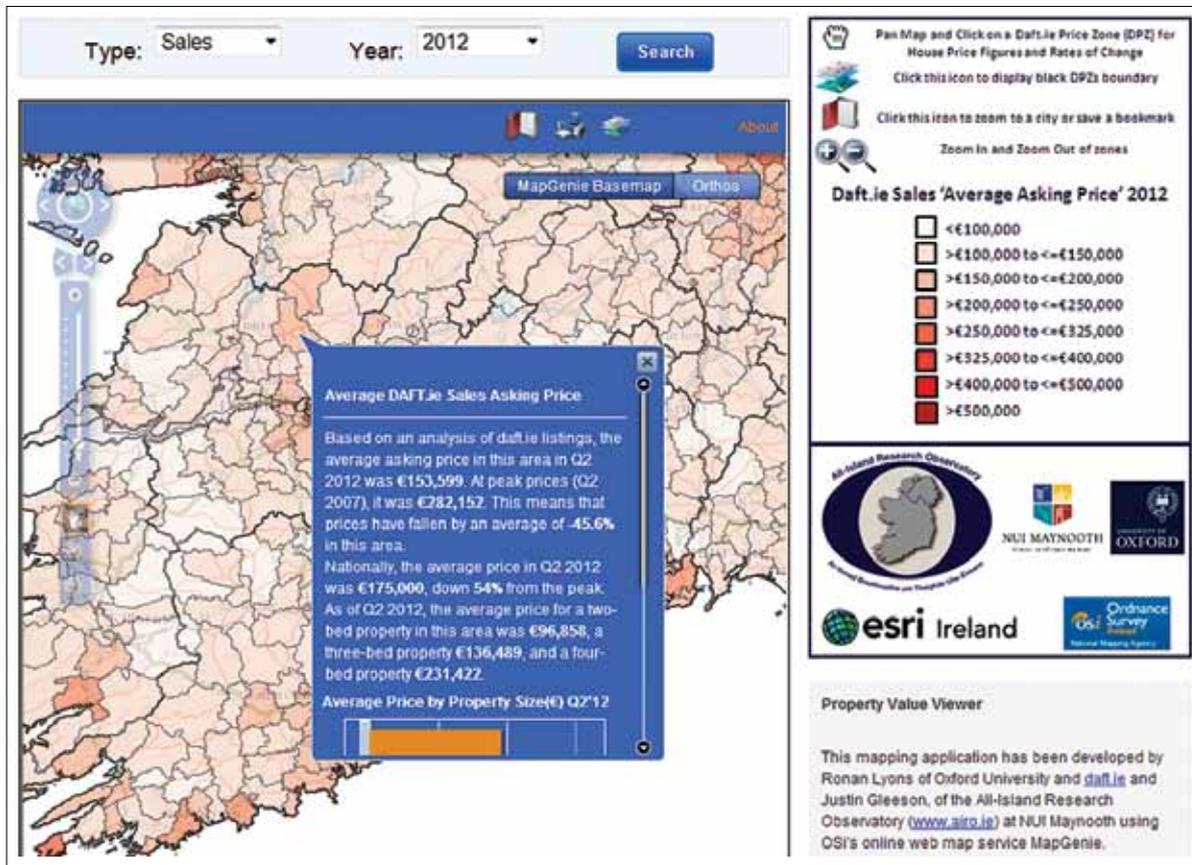


outcomes and scenarios. Policy-making should be guided by strong evidence assessed against utilitarian ideals and principles. This in turn leads to public policy that works for the wider interests of society, seeking to create fairer, more just, better organised, and more efficient and effective services and infrastructures. Without this evidence base and informed analysis, policy creation and decision making is sub-optimal and there is a risk that it is shaped primarily by the views and desires of a small group of politicians, civil servants and powerful lobby groups.

Underpinning evidence-informed policy making is detailed, valid and reliable data. Data captures information about phenomena. Strong data is intelligible, distinguishable, has associated metadata and can be linked to other data to enable wider analysis. Data enables analysts to track, evaluate and compare phenomena across time, space and scale. It provides the raw material to input into models to determine the potential causes and effects for different courses of action, and run predictions and simulations. ►







► Social, economic and environmental data in Ireland is highly variable in its availability and quality. Data produced by organisations such as the Central Statistics Office, Ordnance Survey Ireland, Geological Survey Ireland, Environmental Protection Agency, and the Central Bank meets international standards and is robust, though it often lacks a detailed spatial resolution (in that it is restricted to national, regional or local authority level). Data related to property, planning, welfare, health, education and social issues is often more difficult to access and is generally locked inside government departments and agencies with only limited headline information released to the public.

In some cases, important data is restricted in use because it is commercially owned and subject to a fee for use; for example, data licenses and copyright and intellectual property rights, such as the national address data provided by Geodirectory, a company owned by OSI and An Post. Producing an all-island analysis is even more of a challenge because of a number of issues affecting the marriage of datasets: data can be

generated in slightly different ways, using different questions, data units and categorisation, and is outputted at different spatial scales. This leads to problems of data matching and comparison.

With respect to housing and planning, there are a number of key datasets available for analysis, some of which have only become available in the past couple of years. They vary in both their statistical geography (spatial resolution) and temporality (how often they are collected and released).

Census

The Census is by far the most detailed source of social, economic and demographic data in Ireland (www.cso.ie/census). It provides a wealth of information on population, households, housing, economy, health, education, transport and commuting, with data released at a number of scales including the new 'small areas' (80-100 households), enumerator areas (in cities), electoral districts, local authorities, provinces and national. The household and housing data is very detailed, providing information of housing type, age,

heating, water and sewage systems, occupancy and mortgage/rental status. Other useful derived information for planning and housing concerns social deprivation. The data is generated every five years. It therefore provides a very comprehensive view of Ireland, but on a relatively long timeframe.

DECLG

The Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (DECLG) provides housing and planning data such as housing completions, planning permissions, commencement notices, land zoning, and rental registrations (<http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/StatisticsandRegularPublications/HousingStatistics/>).

Whilst the data is produced on an annual basis, and therefore more timely than the Census, its spatial resolution is not as fine, with the smallest scale being local authorities. It is therefore possible to get a sense of development within a local authority, but not how this is concentrated into particular locales. Since 2010, DECLG has also

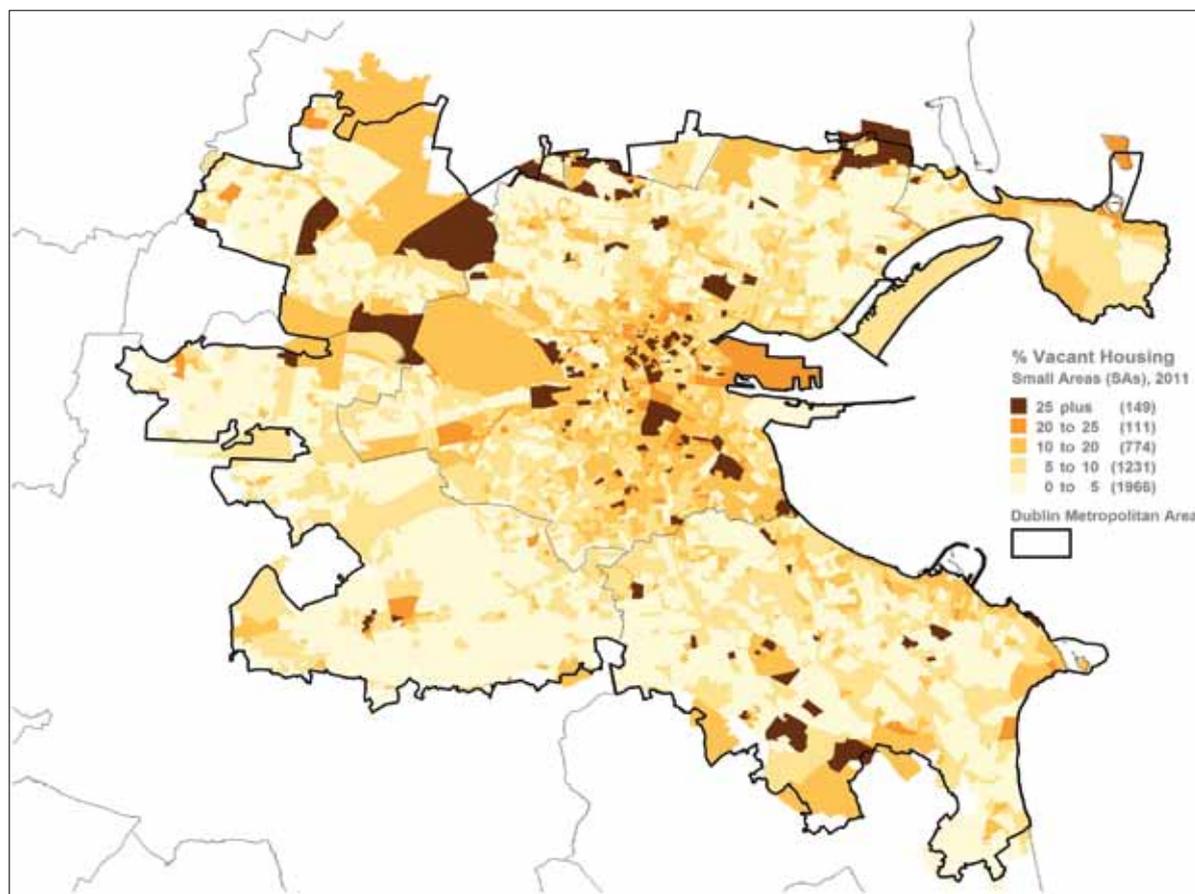
provided a comprehensive dataset with respect to unfinished estates, detailing the status of each estate with regard to completion, occupancy, and the status of roads, paths, lighting, and sewage systems. Since 2012, DECLG's Myplan.ie mapping system has been live providing a detailed overview of all zoned land in the country and other associated planning data such as floodplains.

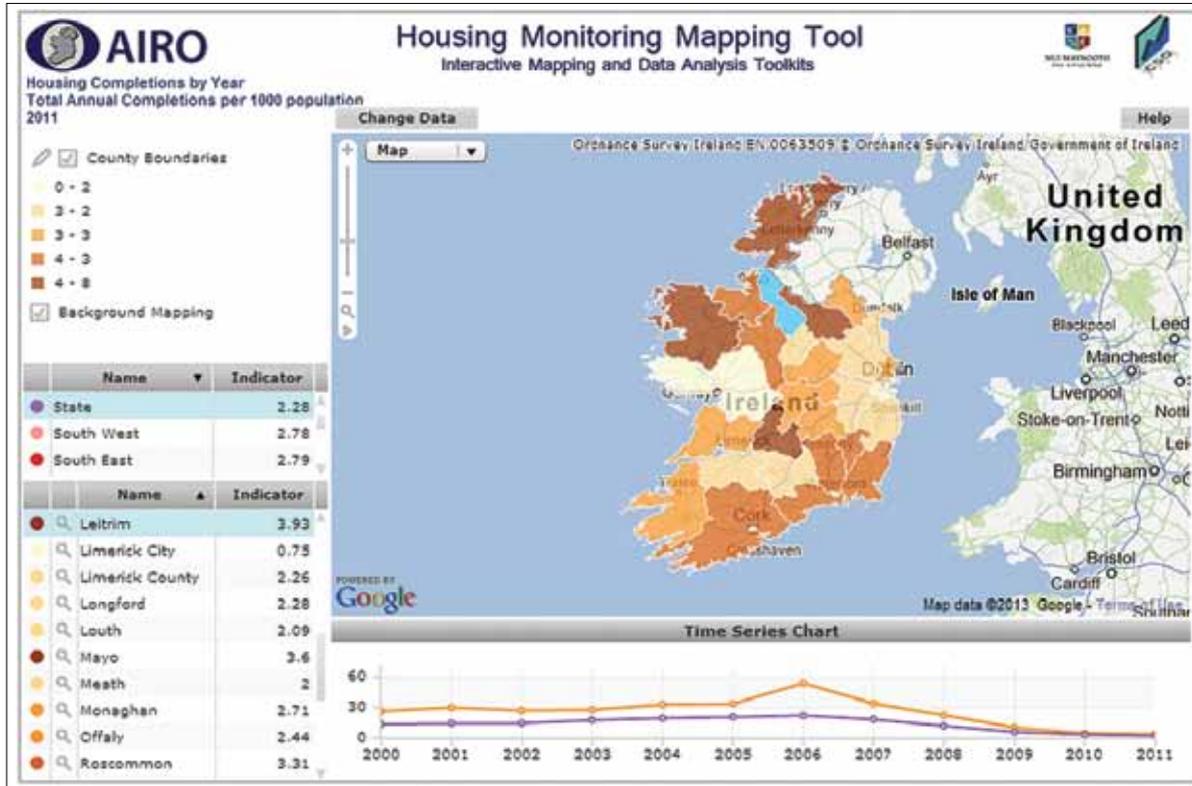
Central Bank

The Central Bank provides data concerning mortgages and mortgage arrears, and household net worth and debt, on a quarterly basis, although its spatial scale is restricted to the national scale (www.centralbank.ie). The Central Statistics Office provides house price data on a monthly basis for houses and apartments, but the data is restricted spatially to the national level and Dublin/rest of the country, making it impossible to know what is happening within local markets (www.cso.ie).

Other data sets

Both Myhome.ie and Daft.ie provide quarterly ►





► overviews of asking prices at local authority level. Daft.ie has also provided an analysis for 1,100 areas across the country (see www.daft.ie/research). Most recently, the Residential Property Price Register (RPPR) was launched by the Property Services Regulatory Authority (PSRA). It provides sale price for individual properties for all residential sales, including cash sales. The data includes the address of each property sold, the date of sale, and the price. Details about the properties sold are limited, with no information about the size of each property (e.g. number of bedrooms) or site size or if a property is a house or apartment (although it does report if they are new or second hand). It also only includes property sold since January 2010.

All of this data, which is released in tabular form, is available as interactive maps and graphs through the All-Island Research Observatory (www.airo.ie), a resource dedicated to making data available in an accessible way to all citizens.

Shortcomings

These different sources of data provide a relatively broad brushstroke understanding of housing and planning in Ireland. However, they all suffer from

either a lack of spatial resolution, or a lack of timeliness which would enable a much deeper and richer analysis. They are also limited in the kinds of data they release, usually focused on a small sample of variables rather than providing a wider selection.

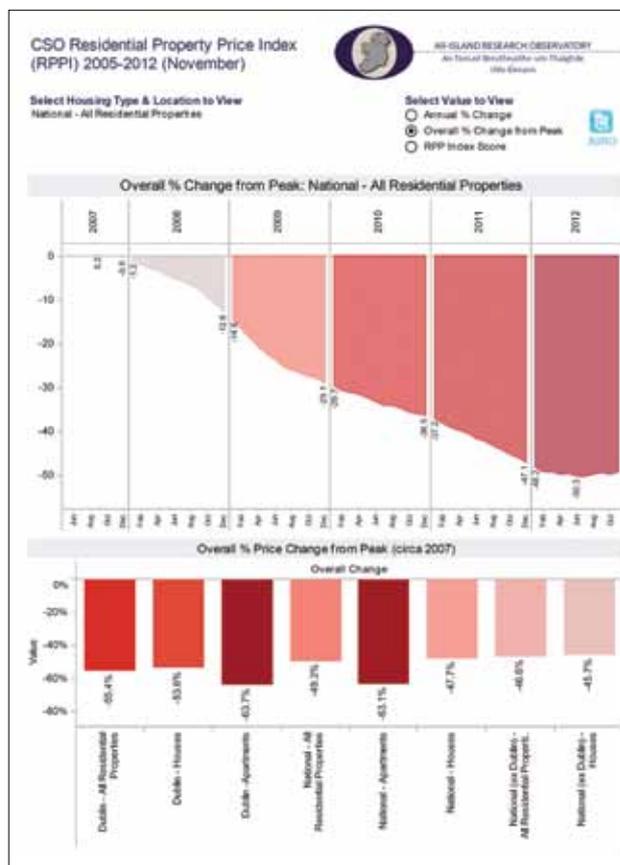
Moreover, there are some significant gaps where we have little to no data. For example, there are no publicly accessible datasets concerning commercial property such as office, retail and industrial units, or land holdings. There is some broad analysis published by property companies such as Savills, Lisney and CBRE, but they do not release the underlying data.

The Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland also release an annual report of market sentiment based on a survey of all its members. However, we have little detailed knowledge of different segments of the housing market, such as renters and their future plans regarding housing, or mortgage holders, how they are coping with the recession and their aspirations. Similarly, there is little publicly available data about NAMA - the state's largest property organisation - and its assets and plans.

With respect to a historical analysis, it is very difficult or impossible to construct detailed datasets on issues such as land zoning, development patterns, localized housing markets, and the effects of property tax incentives. And beyond the data, there is a gap in the skills base to manage, process, analyse and interpret data across institutions.

These gaps in the available data means that, whilst it is possible to produce a picture of housing, planning and development in Ireland, the picture is not as detailed as it could and should be. Nor is it updated and refreshed as regularly as it needs to be. In some cases, for example with respect to commercial property and land, the picture is very sketchy, and constructing a detailed historical perspective is very challenging indeed. What this means is that our understanding of property and development is less advanced than is desirable.

That said, the data which does exist is robust enough to provide very useful inputs into policy formulation. This means that there is little excuse for not using it when assessing future housing and development policy. What is needed over the next few years is a commitment to data generation across relevant government departments that has a higher spatial resolution, is more timely, fills the gaps in our knowledge base and is widely and freely available to all interested parties. This needs to include unlocking data presently contained within institutions, georeferencing all data as a matter of standard practice, developing data visualisation and statistical and modelling tools to enhance interpretation, and rolling out data skills training, including translating analysis into policy. Such data and initiatives will enable us to produce evidence-informed policy that best serves the interests of all citizens.



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