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Harnessing the Power of Data Can Help Solve our Housing Needs

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'Tis the season to buy at auction

LINDA DALY
MARKET WATCH



THE private treaty market may be preparing to tuck itself in for the Christmas break, but the auctioneers are ready for one final hooley of the year. Auctions will be taking place around Ireland over the next 10 days as agents give it a last big push before the season ends.

Allsop is hoping to finish the year on a high with its last auction of 2015 on Wednesday. It's putting 203 houses and apartments under the hammer and more than a quarter of these are in Dublin. It's not all low-end stuff – a unit at the Cubes in Sandyford is listed, plus eight properties in Malahide and a detached, five-bedroom period house with 15 apartments and a pool in Cork. The total reserve for the residential side tops up to a cool €28m.

GW2, the Ganly Walters division for sub-€500,000 properties, has two auctions this week. The first leaves the starting gate at Leopardstown at 11am on Thursday. Advised minimum values start from €20,000 for a commercial unit in Cork. If RTE's Designing Ireland whets your appetite for building your own gem in the country, there are also land sales that day.

Perhaps you would like a renovation job? On Thursday, Ganly Walters will put Uppercourt Manor under the hammer. The 17-bedroom pile in Kilkenny on 34 acres comes with two cottages and a church. It has an AMV of €995,000.

GW2 will follow this with an auction in Sligo of former garda stations on December 14, including one in Easkey, in Co Sligo, for €40,000, or you could head to Leitrim to buy a cottage for €60,000. The Leinster Property Auction will also be holding its shindig on Thursday and auctioneer REA has a few Leinster auctions on Tuesday.

Remember, though, houses aren't just for Christmas.

Price watch: Cork City

Springfort Montenotte
3-bed semi

2010 €270,000

2015 €285,000

Up 6%

Wyndgates Douglas
4-bed detached

2010 €335,000

2015 €410,000

Up 22%

Skehard Blackrock
4-bed semi

2010 €242,000

2015 €255,000

Up 5%

Hartys Quay Rochestown
2-bed apartment

2010 €285,000

2015 €180,000

Down 37%

Source: propertyregister.ie



Keep festive displays to a minimum, not like Danny DeVito's electric palace in Deck The Halls

TOO MUCH TINSEL WILL KNOCK THE STUFFING OUT OF A SALE

When it comes to embracing festive cheer, a growing number of Irish people are doing so with the help of ever-bigger and brighter decorations and lighting, both inside and outside their homes. But if you are in the process of trying to sell your home and plan to show it in the weeks leading up to Christmas when, if ever, is the right time to dust off the baubles, fairy lights and tinsel, and how much decoration is too much?

As with the decorations people choose, it all comes down to personal taste. Clodagh Murphy, branch manager at Quillisen in Ranelagh, says that in her experience the majority of vendors tend to hold off on decorations if they are still showing their homes in the run-up to Christmas.

"It would be very rare for us to walk into a house that would be fully decorated while we are showing it," she says. "What I've found with quite a number of vendors over the years is that if their home is still on the market in December, they would leave putting up their decorations until the 14th or 15th. And coming into the last week before Christmas they would probably say to us that they're not ready for any more viewings until the new year."

Murphy makes the point that decorations can often make a house look smaller, particularly if furniture has to be rearranged to make room for a tree. "So, the house is not being shown to its

best advantage because the decorations are crowding in on top of the space," she says.

Murphy also says that taking small children to view a house that has Christmas decorations in place can have an unexpected consequence. "Children can suddenly get very upset about the fact that they might be moving home and wondering where Santa is going to go," she says.

However, Gordon Lennox, a director at Sherry Fitzgerald, believes that holding off on decorations in December can make a house seem soulless. "Barring if a house is vacant, all our clients are still doing Christmas," he says. "They have the tree up and they have the lights up. They might not do it quite as flamboyantly when they know they have a viewing and the house should be reasonably clutter-free. But why should they put Christmas on hold, especially if they have young children?"

Catherine McAuliffe, residential director at Savills Cork, is also of the view that a house should reflect the season that it is in. "When people walk into a house they expect it to be as a normal home would be, especially if it is

being marketed as a family home," she says. "However, if the room is small, keep the decorations to a minimum and make sure the tree is as small as possible."

It is important not to go overboard with the decorations, either inside or in the garden. "Most people are fairly savvy with regards to Christmas decorations," says Giaran Cassidy, divisional director of residential sales at Lisney. "If we were giving people advice it would be to not overdo it and to keep it as tasteful as possible, but most people do that anyway. And houses do look great when the decorations are up."

Vendors may not have any control over their neighbours' external Christmas decorations, but this is usually not considered to be a problem for viewers. "If there were a heap of scrap cars in the garden behind a rusting metal gate next door, that would be far more likely to put people off than loud lights for a few weeks of the year," says Lennox.

The house may look fantastic decked out with a Christmas tree, tinsel and fairy lights, but photographing it like that for sales materials is not recommended, as it will reveal how long it has been on the market. "If you take all the photographs

with the Christmas decorations up – festive and all, as it will look for 10 minutes – by February it will look quite jaded," says Lennox.

"At the risk of depersonalising a house, we would say try to be as unseasonal as possible, and take the photos before you put up the decorations."

"If you must launch with the full Christmas kit, take a fresh set of interior pictures after the season is over," he says. "It's not that madly expensive,

PHOTOGRAPHING A HOUSE DECKED OUT WITH FAIRY LIGHTS MEANS IT WILL LOOK JADED BY FEBRUARY

unless you're dealing with a particularly large home."

Other seasonal factors such as snow should be avoided where possible when taking a photograph of the house.

"Of course we had difficulties a few years ago when we had six weeks of it, but we'd be avoiding having snow in the photographs because if the house isn't selling as quickly as we would like, it dates it as to when it went on the market," says Murphy.

While most house viewings will tail off in the week before Christmas and estate agents generally close for a week over the holiday period, there can be a flurry of appointments between St Stephen's Day and New Year's Eve.

"The office will be closed but we have a lot of expats who are home for Christmas, looking at houses," says McAuliffe. "They are contacting us at the moment and setting up appointments for the week they're back."

But there will also be plenty of email inquiries to estate agents about properties in the days immediately after Christmas. "Decisions to move are often made over the Christmas holiday when people have time to think," says Lennox.

Making your house available for viewing over the festive period can have its advantages. "Families around the country who are looking to have an investment in Dublin now have days free and they're phoning in advance to make their appointments to look at apartments and houses. That's pretty much what's driving our viewings at the moment."

Harnessing the power of data can help solve our housing needs

Ireland has traditionally been poor at collecting data, collating statistics and disseminating information. It's not that we are an innumerate country; I think it is more that facts often inconveniently jar with opinion on a range of topics, from rural Ireland to road safety, to housing.

There are several cultural reasons for "data poverty". First, people and organisations are often afraid of what statistics might reveal, as data can indicate how well or not a job is being done, especially if targets have been set and measured. This is called accountability.

Second, there is little institutional respect for statistics among politicians or many agencies – the ponderings of the taoiseach's "man with two pints" are easier to accept than any potentially uncomfortable data.

Finally, there is a lack of appreciation of the long-term benefits that data can bring.

It's hardly reassuring, therefore, to think that the last time the Road Safety Authority published its annual "factbook"

was in 2012. Indeed, the old garda form for collecting information at the scene of a vehicle collision was four pages long, whereas the Northern Ireland equivalent is 12. There is no form-filling at the scene; data collection relies on a garda notebook and memory.

Data from collision reporting is used by the authority, Transport Infrastructure Ireland, the HSE and local councils to help inform budgets, policies and strategies:

the more detailed the data, the more effective the measures aimed at reducing road deaths and injuries. Poor data collection is a lost opportunity.

Housing too has suffered from a lack of data over the decades.

What information that was available was often ignored in favour of politically convenient actions such as re-zoning unsuitable land for housing. There is now a better understanding of

what housing we have, its value and, more importantly, what we need and where. We know, for example, that about 10,000 houses fall into obsolescence each year.

The Housing Agency's report from 2014, Housing Supply Requirements in Ireland's Urban Settlements, is a good example of using data to plan for the effective provision of housing where it is needed, not where developers happen to own land. For the first time we have a chance to have evidence-led policies, not policy-led evidence.

Across Europe, too, various bodies are collecting data that will allow individual countries and the EU as a whole to plan for housing its population. Housing Europe published The State of Housing in the EU earlier this year, a report looking at broad trends and country-specific statistics. Throughout Europe



home-ownership levels are falling and the proportion of those renting is rising – home ownership in Ireland is below 70% – except in new member states where the opposite is true. The production of social housing has also fallen in the EU, with the notable exception of

France. Finance for social housing is typically one of the first funding measures to get the chop in times of crisis.

In Ireland we can hold our heads up after having built 20 social housing units in the first half of 2015. I kid you not.

Mainland Europe has to deal with issues that are thankfully not as prevalent here. Hungary, Romania, Poland, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Latvia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Greece, Italy and Lithuania all have a percentage of the population living in overcrowded dwellings that is higher than the EU average. The number of households that lack flushing lavatories is higher in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria and the Baltic states. Two-thirds of Romanian homes have running water, and 74% of Slovaks aged 18-34 live with their parents. Fuel poverty affects up to 125m people in the EU. It is most

significant in central, eastern and Mediterranean Europe, and has serious potential health impacts. The most effective way of tackling fuel poverty is not by increasing allowances, but by reducing the energy demand of the building.

The Danes are therefore busy with energy renovation, planning to reduce household energy needs by 35% by 2050, whereas 70% of Estonians live in energy-inefficient apartments. In Croatia they are still dealing with the aftermath of conflict and have a housing programme for "homeland war victims".

There is no social housing in Greece, but homelessness is increasing there, while there are more than 1.3m households in Britain on local authority housing waiting lists.

The point of this is to illustrate that without such data the EU could not allocate an extra €315bn in its investment plan: it would not know where to spend it, on what types of housing and issues and how to measure success or failure.

We should not be afraid of data.

LORCAN SIRR
ON THE
HOME FRONT

