

## Scottish Empty Homes Partnership

### Commission for Housing and Wellbeing Consultation 2014 - Response

#### Introduction

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership welcomes the opportunity to respond to Commission for Housing and Wellbeing Consultation 2014.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership is funded by Scottish Government and hosted by Shelter Scotland. We work with councils and their partners to encourage and help them bring private sector empty homes back into use. We do this through the provision of staff training; developing best practice tools; facilitating networking opportunities; and managing several multi-council empty homes shared services projects. We believe empty homes work can make a key contribution towards wellbeing goals. Over the past 3 and a half years the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership has helped councils and their partners bring over 800 long term empty homes back into use.<sup>1</sup>

Below is an assessment of how empty homes work can contribute to a number of the types of wellbeing detailed on p.10 of the Commission's report. We have also made a number of recommendations and suggestions to be considered for inclusion in the Commission's final report.

#### Housing as "home"

There are over 23,000 long term empty homes in Scotland (empty 6 months or more). Given the housing supply shortage, as recognised by the Commission, we believe it is necessary to not only push for new build housing but to make sure we are making the most of existing supply and not letting it go to waste. Each of those 23,000 empty homes, plus an unquantified amount of empty property suitable for residential conversion, has the

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<sup>1</sup> Based on returns from councils in our [annual reports](#) and 6 month check in survey. These numbers are voluntarily reported and therefore are likely to be an underrepresentation of the true figures.

potential to provide the type of home described in this section. Each home provided by an existing empty property reduces demand for new build. Empty homes can't solve the housing supply crisis but neither does it make sense to focus solely on new development when property is lying empty and unused across the country.

We believe that public subsidy towards increasing housing supply should encourage and enable a range of players from Local Authorities to Housing Associations, Developers and Community Groups to consider the potential of refurbishing existing empty homes and buildings to meet local housing needs as part of the development mix.

Empty homes not only represent wasted housing supply they also bring rise to real community safety and amenity concerns. A recent case, first brought to our attention over a year ago, involved a neighbour reporting an empty home next to hers that was causing her a number of specific safety concerns including water ingress. Upon reporting the case to the local authority in question some of the specific repair issues were addressed but no pro-active attempt was made to encourage the owner of the empty home to bring it back into use. Just this past month the neighbour who had made the initial report (now expecting a baby in the New Year) got back in touch to report that her property had been burgled with the perpetrator gaining access from the adjacent empty property. In this instance (and many others) the proximity to empty property can take away the feeling of security and privacy a home should provide and impede the full realisation of the other elements described by the Commission that make a house a 'home'.

### **Neighbourhood Quality**

There are a number of ways that bringing empty homes back into use can contribute to neighbourhood quality. Among them are improved community safety, reduced vandalism, fly tipping and other forms of anti-social behaviour that empty homes can attract.

Research by the Empty Homes Agency in England also shows that living next to an obviously empty property can reduce neighbouring property values by up to 18%. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership has estimated that the average empty home in Scotland loses £7310 per year in lost rent, council tax payments, insurance and basic security costs. The flipside of this is the clear improvement in the amenity and appearance of an area when a home is brought back in to use. See below the winning photos from the Scottish Empty Homes Champion of the Year Awards, Best Before and After Photo Award for 2014 and imagine the improvement in neighbourhood quality on the completion of this project in Campbelltown, Argyll & Bute:



Bringing empty property back into use as homes in town centres can also play a key role in creating the types of neighbourhoods described by the Commission. Ones with easy to access employment, schools and shops and allowing for the development of neighbourhood cohesion and empowerment. Run down town centres and high streets have the potential to become vibrant and environmentally sustainable neighbourhoods through increasing the footfall that creates and sustains viable local businesses and services. While we agree with the Commission's proposals around community empowerment in the context of regeneration, we would invite the Commission to consider whether further recommendations under the Housing and Regeneration theme could be drawn from the National Review of Town Centres including the recommendations to:

- Work with housing providers to bring empty town centre properties back into use as affordable housing
- Broaden the appeal of town centres with a mix of leisure, public facilities and homes

### **Environmental Sustainability**

Reuse of existing empty property contributes to environmental sustainability in a number of ways. Existing infrastructure, services and transport links are often already in place. In a direct comparison, the refurbishment of an empty property also avoids the embedded carbon of new build. Despite perceptions, existing properties can be retrofitted to provide high levels of energy efficiency<sup>2</sup>.

As outlined above with regards to the town centre living agenda, regeneration and refurbishment of empty property for residential use in existing communities can cut down

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<sup>2</sup> See BEFS New Tricks with Old Bricks, 2008. <http://www.bshf.org/published-information/publication.cfm?thePubID=3DE7278E-15C5-F4C0-99E86A547EB36D44>

on the need to develop green field sites. Encouraging town centre living also cuts down on car dependency and the associated emissions of out of town living and commuting.

We welcome the existing recommendations in the Commission's Report under the theme of getting a better fit between Housing and the Environment, particularly 'providing more support for bringing empty houses into use' and support for the reforms detailed by the Land Reform Review Group.

We would define the type of support needed to promote bringing more empty homes back into use as:

- Mainstream funding for local Empty Homes Officer in all of Scotland's Local Authorities (currently 15 of Scotland's councils have Empty Homes Officers however some are on short term contracts)
- A diversification of financial incentive schemes offered by Scottish Government and Local Authorities to include more types of empty homes for more types of end uses. Specifically empty homes in areas of low demand; empty properties requiring extensive renovations; and empty homes whose end use is expected to be sale or owner-occupation.
- The introduction in legislation by the Scottish Government of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's proposed Housing Re-use Power.
- The inclusion of the Land Reform Review Group's proposal for a Compulsory Sale Order power to be included in the Land Reform Bill with an extension of the scope of the power to cover not just vacant and derelict land but also long term empty homes and buildings.

## **Conclusion**

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership sees private sector empty homes work as enabling the achievement of a number of Scotland's national outcomes, notably those aimed at promoting sustainable places, creating resilient communities safe from crime and valuing and enjoying the built and natural environment.

Bringing an empty home back into use is not just about housing supply it has clear impacts on wellbeing. We have seen this time and time again through feedback from empty home owners who have received support; neighbours who have seen long term eyesores refurbished; and new tenants and owners who have made an empty house into their home (see appendix for a recent case study).

## Empty home brought back into use from...New Road, Bannockburn



**Address: New Road, Bannockburn**

**Total length of time empty: 12 years & 3 months**

The Empty Homes Officer (EHO) first got in touch with the owner in January 2014 after property was highlighted to the EHO by the Stirling Council's Private Sector Team. The Private Sector Team had previously contacted the owner regarding the condition of the property, but had not managed to unstick the property at that time and the property had now fallen into a serious state of repair.

The main reason the property was empty was because the owner didn't live nearby and the property had fallen off owner's radar. The EHO could clearly see that the owner had an emotional attachment to the property, but was keen to motivate the owner into doing something. The owner agreed to allow the EHO to change the locks and enter the property. Once the owner received copies of internal photographs taken, the owner felt ashamed that she had allowed the deterioration to happen and confirmed that she did not realise the property was in such a poor condition.

The EHO was able to help, and the main action taken was to discuss the options available and to support the owner to move things on.

**Outcome:** As a result, the property was sold on the open market in Nov-14

The owner thanked the EHO for her support, patience and for caring. The owner said that now she had finally made the decision, it was a great relief as the property had been both an emotional and financial burden for years.

The neighbour also said "Thanks a million, that's a great weight off my mind", knowing the property will now be refurbished.

The EHO has already met the new owner to offer information and support to bring the property back into a habitable condition. The new owner was delighted to be made aware of the FREE support and help available.

Case study details supplied by (Name (Allyson Allison)), (Job title (Regional Empty homes Officer)), (Local authority/Organisation (Stirling Council))