LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

CALL FOR VIEWS ON EMPTY HOMES IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM FIFE COUNCIL

1. What, in your view, are the main causes of empty homes?

The causes are many and varied, however Fife Council most frequently experiences owners with repair / finance issues: There are many cases of people taking on more than they can manage or afford. They were unaware of repair issues at the time of purchase and repairs can take longer than expected due to seriousness or cost. Owners are sometimes caught in a position of negative equity and not able or willing to sell, often having unrealistic expectations of the value of their property. In some cases landlords are not able to afford repairs to properties which have been damaged by previous tenants. Empty homes can be linked to emotional issues, for example in ignoring the problem as it is too much to deal with; unable to deal with due to bereavement; not wanting to part with home of deceased relatives, etc.

2. Is this a problem which affects all tenures of housing? Please provide further information to explain your answer.

In general there isn’t a problem with empty homes within the social housing sector in Fife. For example, Fife Council’s voids were around 1.2% of stock at 31st March 2019, principally due to normal turnover. There are currently 2,210 long term empty homes on Fife’s Empty Homes Register in private ownership, including landlords, owners improving a property, owners who have inherited a property, etc.

3. What is the impact on communities in areas where there are large numbers of empty homes?

Empty Homes encourage antisocial behaviour, including fly tipping. Homes that aren’t secure make areas unsafe, people start not to take pride in the area, those who can move to nicer areas and properties devalue. If there are large number of empty flats above shops it impacts on Town Centres and represents an under-utilisation of valuable housing stock.

4. Is the issue of empty homes a problem in particular areas and if so, why?

Empty homes are most noticeable in rural communities where a high level of investment is required to bring properties back into use and owners do not want to be restricted in how they let their property, as may be required through the loans scheme. Also noticeable in areas of deprivation, where properties are hard to sell or let. The existence of empty homes exasperate the problem as it discourages people from moving into the area.
5. Are you aware of any areas which have made progress in addressing the issue of empty homes and if so, what other local authorities could learn?

- Dumfries and Galloway has had good take up from their mixture of grant and loans for bringing empty properties back into use in town centres.
- The partnership working between YMCA and Fife Council to bring properties back into use provides a good project template, although currently on a small scale.
- Leeds Council works with a charity called LATCH which provides a similar project to that of the YMCA in Fife, although on a larger scale it has been very successful.
- North Lanarkshire Empty Homes Purchase Scheme.

6. How effective are current tools open to local authorities/central government to deal with empty homes? Should they have more powers?

CPO’s have been too lengthy and complicated in the past. The Empty Homes Loan scheme has proved difficult to use, only 2 units have been brought back into use through the scheme in Fife. In general I think owners find the conditions too restrictive. Networking and knowledge sharing via the Empty Homes Partnership allows Empty Homes Officers to provide owners with the most up-to-date information on bringing properties back to housing use.

7. Should there be more enforcement powers for local authorities/central government to deal with the issue? If so, what could these be?

The proposal for Compulsory Sale Orders could offer an easier and less complicated tool which will not tie the council in to purchasing the property.

8. Is there enough information/data to provide an accurate picture of empty homes in Scotland? If not, how could this be improved?

Information from Council Tax and Assessors databases could provide Empty Homes Officers with data on the location of empty homes, providing it is consistently made available for that purpose. Each council could do an Empty Home Survey to provide more in-depth analysis into why properties are empty and what could help bring them back into use. Continued media coverage on Empty Homes by The Empty Homes Partnership is useful to encourage the public to identify empties as some of these properties are not on the Empty Homes Officers radar.