LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

CALL FOR VIEWS ON EMPTY HOMES IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

1. Main Causes of Empty Homes:

- Inheriting a property and not dealing with it due to mental health issues, emotional attachment etc
- No Grant of Confirmation made
- Family breakups and not dealing with the property
- Moving on and property not selling and/or owners just leaving it.

2. Is this a problem which affects all tenures of housing?

Empty homes can affect all tenures if the owner is negligent of the property, i.e. failing to get another tenant in when one moves out. Not specific to the tenure but more related to the owner.

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

Empty homes cause a blight on the neighbourhood and can affect house prices in the street, they attract unwanted antisocial behaviour and can cause major repair issues to other homes when they are in communal flats or adjoining properties.

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

Empty homes can occur in areas that are run down and have received a lack of investment over the years, causing more people to leave and not be able to resell their properties so they continue to sit empty. Empty homes however are not always linked to specific areas as they can occur anywhere due to issues mentioned in Q1.

5. Are you aware of any areas which have made progress in addressing the issue of empty homes?

Some local authorities have had good success in being able to offer the loan fund to owners of empty buildings for renovation projects, creating multiple flats for affordable rent. This has occurred in areas where the local housing allowance is more than the levels of private rents so that owners can stay within the loan fund guidelines of letting their properties for 10% below LHA levels without a large financial impact.
The PRS is increasing year on year in West Dunbartonshire however WD has a clear misalignment between private sector rents and the LHA. This makes selling the loan fund as an option to empty home owners whose properties are in need of upgrading a very difficult task as they will be losing more money on their monthly rental than they would be saving on an interest free loan. This loan fund stipulation could be relaxed to allow the loan fund to be more attractive to such empty home owners and make this a more useable tool in West Dunbartonshire.

6. How effective are current tools open to local authorities to deal with empty homes?

The tools Local Authorities have are more tailored towards motivating, encouraging and assisting the empty home owners to get their properties back into use. These can be effective with implementation from a dedicated empty homes officer but if the owner decides not to engage the empty homes officer can do little to get the property back into use.

7. Should there be more enforcement powers for Local Authorities to deal with the issue?

Yes, local authorities don’t have many usable tools to force the owner into action. Legal teams in local authorities are very reluctant to consider the use of CPO’s for this purpose and works notices served by Environmental Health are not useful either as nothing happens if the owner hasn’t the funds to make the repairs - so the house continues to sit in the state of disrepair. The introduction of Compulsory Sale Orders could play a role in assisting Empty Homes Officers to encourage home owners to either rent/sell or move into the empty home.

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

Shelter contact all Local Authorities seeking detailed empty homes statistics every year; which they publicise providing vast empty homes information. However I don’t know if they send these surveys to Local Authorities that do not have any empty homes work in place. If these local authorities don’t contribute to the statistics this could affect the numbers that are reported on.