LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

CALL FOR VIEWS ON EMPTY HOMES IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM RURAL HOUSING SCOTLAND

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

Many different reasons for homes remaining empty:

- inability to sell property due to market conditions;
- unwillingness to sell or let property - could be retaining for future family use; waiting for house prices to increase/ return to level at which property was purchased; empty property too close to new occupied home; empty property close by working farm/ croft/ estate;
- lack of funds to bring property to condition to be able to sell or rent - such as meeting energy efficiency standards, private water supply quality;
- changes to work practices on estates - fewer employees and unwilling to let remote property;
- farm cottages part of farm tenancies - no long term security to enable tenant to invest and restrictions of the lease affecting owner's ability to invest in renovations.

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

In rural Scotland this a primarily an issue relating to the private sector; estate/croft/farm properties previously occupied; or single properties owned by individuals. There is little social housing in rural Scotland and what is available is in high demand and does not remain empty for long.

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

Empty properties can become a blight on communities; affecting the amenity of the whole area and inhibit efforts to regenerate villages and towns. WAT IF?, a community development trust in South Lanarkshire have sought to improve their community through the purchase and renovation of empty property. This community body are using wind farm funds and the Rural Housing Fund to buy, renovate and let an empty property in Tarbrax. They were however unable to purchase the properties which are in poorest condition because either owners were unwilling to sell (keeping it for family but had been empty 20 years) or they couldn't trace the owner.

Empty homes take up drainage capacity and might affect the ability to develop new housing in rural communities where limited mains capacity can restrict development. Empty homes are missed opportunities to provide housing for the local population and
provide opportunities for the large numbers of the “young and stuck” in rural Scotland - young people living at homes because there are few affordable housing options.

Alongside second homes, empty homes add to the level of non occupied housing within communities. These “dark villages” can impact on the quality of life of the remaining permanent population and sustainability of local services.

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

Yes - rural Scotland, predominately remote rural Scotland which represents 70% of the land. 5% of all dwellings in remote rural Scotland are empty and 3% of dwellings in accessible rural areas are empty.

In some rural local authorities like Eilean Siar, empty homes comprise 8.3% of all dwellings with concentrations of over 11% in South Lewis and South Uist. In the north isles of Orkney almost 17% of dwellings are vacant, and in some rural areas close to the central belt such as the south of Clydesdale over 13% of dwellings are empty.

In these areas there has been significant depopulation and the empty homes reflect this. However, in the island areas in particular, communities are working to stem this depopulation and empty homes are an opportunity to provide affordable housing to enable people to stay, return or move to the islands.

In rural areas where there is significant demand for housing, either as permanent homes or second homes, there is also significant levels of vacant dwellings, for example in:

- **Earlsferry, Fife** 4.5% of homes are empty - whilst 54.2% are second homes and average house prices are three times to average in Fife; the average % of vacant dwellings in Fife is 3.3%;
- **Braemar** 5.6% of homes are empty - 22% of houses are second homes and average house prices are the highest in the Cairngorms National Park;
- **Kinloch Rannoch and Aberfeldy** 6.1% of homes are empty significantly higher than the Perthshire average of 3.7% - average house prices are also higher;
- The west of **Arran** 5.8% of homes are empty almost double the North Ayshire average of 3% - at the same time 25% of homes are second homes and average house prices significantly higher.

The reasons homes are empty in these areas will encompass all of the reasons set out at Q1 above, but their vacancy contrasts sharply with significant levels of local housing need in these areas with lack of affordable housing restricting local business development.
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?

Most local authorities now have a dedicated Empty Homes Officer. This role is crucial in providing a focus for action on empty homes in a local authority area. They can be the catalyst for a number of approaches to dealing with empty properties.

Argyll & Bute Council have made significant progress to tackling empty homes which has been central to the regeneration of towns like Campbeltown. The council provides grant funding to property owners to renovate empty housing with grants of up to £20,000 available in return for the lease of the property to a housing association.

Communities like Tarbrax have sought to use the Rural & Islands Housing Fund to renovate empty properties. This builds on action twenty years ago by communities using funding from the Empty Homes Initiative to buy and renovate empty properties at Laggan and Crianlarich.

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

Empty Homes Officers where they exist have been very effective in providing support, advice and information and to enable homes to be brought back into use.

The Rural & Islands Housing Fund has had a limited impact on empty homes as the funding is only sufficient to support projects where the empty property is already owned by the community trust/organisation or where the empty property has been purchased using their own funds or the Scottish Land Fund.

There is potential for communities to utilise both Rural & Islands Housing Fund and Scottish Land Fund in conjunction with their powers to compulsory purchase vacant and derelict land or land for sustainable development. These projects however require significant development support - funding for this is limited and will be more restricted with Scottish Government funding support for Rural Housing Scotland due to end in March 2020.

The Rural & Islands Housing Fund is also due to finish in March 2021. If there is further funding for this grant there should be consideration given to removing the “perpetuity” clawback arrangements. This restricts the potential for the fund to be used to lease and renovate property on a long term basis; where a community trust could let an empty property for 20/30 years from a private owner or estate and use the housing fund to renovate the property and let it at affordable rates. This is not possible at the moment as the property has to be made available for rent at affordable rates in perpetuity.

It is unclear how much income from Empty Homes Council Tax Levy is used to fund initiatives to reduce the number of empty homes or use them as a resource to provide
affordable housing.

Current compulsory purchase powers are seldom used by councils. We support the introduction of Compulsory Sale Orders and trust that they will provide a more effective option.

Consideration could also be given to the development of compulsory leasing of empty property - to bring back property into use to provide affordable housing in return for grant support to renovate the property with lease terms/lengths variable dependent on the amount required to restore the property. Compulsory leasing could be a less nuclear option than compulsory sale orders but could achieve similar aims.

In rural communities, the long term leasing of empty property (compulsory or voluntary) has the potential to provide a cost effective route to delivering small numbers of affordable homes, provide a source of accommodation for homeless people to help meet objectives of local council Rapid Rehousing Plans, as well as reducing the blight of empty homes in the landscape.

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

Yes, please see above regarding the role of compulsory sale orders and compulsory leasing arrangements.

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

Statistics Scotland provide data on empty homes by census datazone - it would be useful to have this as a GIS resource. It would also be useful to know the ownership of properties and the reasons they are empty.