LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE
CALL FOR VIEWS ON EMPTY HOMES IN SCOTLAND
SUBMISSION FROM ANGUS COUNCIL

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

Previous analysis of empty properties returned to residential use highlighted that 45% of properties had remained empty due to a lack of information (the owner was unsure of the end use, or required advice of some form); 26% had remained empty because the owner experienced financial difficulty; while 29% had been empty due to unsuccessful marketing (rent or sale).

Property inheritance and the associated legal processes often lead to additional long term empty private sector homes. Analysis highlights that 18% of all long term empty homes in Angus were directly related to bereavements or in the hands of an executor. Local analysis also highlights a possible relationship between empty properties and local industry and employment opportunities. The downturn in the North Sea oil industry may be a factor, with proportionately more private sector empty properties in the North Housing Market Area of Angus than elsewhere. Such factors impact demand in the local housing market and owner’s ability to access finance / level of disposable income.

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

Empty homes is primarily a private sector issue. 81% of Angus long term empty homes relate to private sector property. As previously mentioned, many of these homes were empty following inheritance and feedback from the new owners suggested that there was a general reluctance to become landlords.

For empty social stock, 79% is Council owned with the majority of these properties being long term vacant due to ongoing regeneration work. The Council is aware of its vacant stock and is working to provide solutions that will minimise the likelihood of future (longer-term) vacancies.

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

Empty properties can have a detrimental impact on sustaining our neighbourhoods as vibrant and attractive places to both live and work. They can drain valuable resources in trying to identify absentee owners to deal with on-going maintenance or antisocial behaviour complications, while visually; they detract from the positive look of our communities.
Large numbers of empty homes in one locality will not only lead to a lack of available housing options but can also have a negative impact on the economic, social, and environmental performance of the area; influencing rents, sale prices and demand within local housing markets, the impact of which can be long-term and challenging and costly to reverse.

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

Empty homes are often perceived as being a town centre problem - this may be related to increased footfall and therefore visibility of properties within town centres. Analysis highlights that long term empty homes are found consistently throughout Angus. Only 12% of empty homes are located within our town centre postcodes. GIS data confirms that the majority of long term empty homes are located on the periphery of our town centres and urban areas. Empty homes are also located within rural Angus although these may be tied to agriculture (for example empty farm cottages).

As previously mentioned, there are proportionately more empty homes in North Angus (Montrose, Brechin and surrounding area) than elsewhere in the county. This may be linked to the downturn in the oil industry as skilled workers seek employment and residence elsewhere.

**Are you aware of any areas which have made progress in addressing empty homes and if so, what other local authorities could learn?**

Angus Council has successfully operated an award winning Empty Homes Loan Fund, utilising the entire fund and hitting their designated targets. The fund has been invaluable in offering financial assistance to empty home owners, in addition to the tailored information and advice to help bring properties back into use. We found that the fund has been popular in areas where local market rents are similar to ‘affordable’ local housing allowance rates.

We are aware that some local authorities offer grant funding to help bring empty homes back into use, and these have been well received with a high uptake.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnerships 2017/18 annual report highlights that the majority of local authorities are now undertaking proactive empty homes work. The Scottish Empty Homes Champion of the Year Awards are used to showcase best practice from across Scotland and honour practitioners who have accomplished excellent results in empty homes work. Successful Councils include: Angus Council (5 awards); Perth & Kinross (4 awards); Argyll & Bute Council (3 awards); Stirling Council (2 awards).

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership regularly operate ‘Northern’ and ‘Central’ Empty Homes Best Practice Meetings. These meetings allow Councils to share and
learn from current best practice. These are attended by both urban and rural local authorities.

How effective are current tools open to local authorities/central government to deal with the issue? Should they have more powers?

The availability of powers is useful although this is only a small component. Having the necessary resources to implement these powers is another. Many tools can bring with them accompanying constraints – for example: increased demand on staffing; increased funding requirement; increased administration; and increased pressure and demand on legal and democratic services. Although additional powers may seem positive, on the face of things this may potentially impose additional pressure on already squeezed local authority resources.

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

Resources are fundamental to the use of any powers. Compulsory Open Market Sale may be beneficial as this could remove the local authority’s requirement to fund the purchase and disposal of identified stock. This may also reduce pressures on resources in comparison to CPOs, where there can be significant financial resources; demand on legal services; and staff time.

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

The service offered from the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership works well. This partnership is housed within Shelter Scotland and funded by the Scottish Government. They provide practitioners with required knowledge to undertake empty homes work while also undertaking data gathering/analysis and reporting. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnerships Annual Report provides an accurate representation of empty homes in Scotland.

However, gathering accurate data on empty homes can be difficult as the numbers are constantly fluctuating. Further analysis of national data would be beneficial – for example breaking down the data into sections related to the length of time unoccupied (6-12 months; 12-24 months; 24-60 months; etc.). This information would help to identify and compare national trends against local trends, or any worsening problems which could influence future empty homes work.