LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

CALL FOR VIEWS ON EMPTY HOMES IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM PERTH AND KINROSS COUNCIL

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

In Perth & Kinross the largest number of empty homes are as a result of properties having been purchased with the intention of renovating prior to letting the property. The next largest number is properties requiring renovation that have been inherited, where the new owner possibly does not have the funds or the knowledge to carry out the necessary repairs. We also find that the difficulties involved in carrying out common repairs to tenement properties is often the cause of empty flats.

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

The problem of empty homes affects all types of properties from one bedroom flats to large detached houses. In Perth & Kinross it affects homes in rural areas and in all the main settlements fairly equally. The tenure is not particularly relevant since all empty homes are owned.

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

Empty homes affect communities by adversely impacting the supply of housing both to rent and to buy. In rural areas a large number of empty homes can impact services such as making a local shop uneconomic or a primary school close. Where there are a large number of empty properties which have become derelict this can impact values and saleability of neighbouring properties and can adversely affect residents’ pride in their community.

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

In Perth & Kinross, empty homes are more of an issue in areas where demand for housing is not high and capital and rental levels are low. There are many empty houses in remote areas of Perth & Kinross which are not economic to renovate as the capital cost outweighs the benefit from renting or selling the property.

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?

In Perth & Kinross we have Empty Homes Initiative grant which funds renovation of properties which are then let for 5 years at Local Housing Allowance levels to people at risk of becoming homeless. We also have a Vacant Property Feasibility grant which match funds professional fees for the renovation or repair of empty homes. We have made full use of the Scottish Government Empty Homes Loan Fund. We have a vacant Property Development Officer and Support Assistant (1.6FTE). As well as residential properties we deal with empty commercial properties and provide
advice and assistance to owners of empty shops and offices considering converting their properties to flats. We work closely with Perth & Kinross Heritage Trust who manage the Perth City Heritage Fund. One of their main aims is to bring empty properties back into use so we try to offer tailored packages to owners to help make property renovations economically viable especially when dealing with pre-1919 and listed buildings. Finally we have an Eyesore Buildings Task Force which concentrates on the worst eyesore properties in the area and we construct plans for each of these properties involving representatives from Planning (Enforcement and Conservation), Building Standards, Housing, Heritage Trust, Vacant Property, City Development and City Centre Management chaired by The Head of Planning and Development.

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

The introduction of the 100% Council Tax surcharge on properties empty for over 12 months has been a very useful tool in bringing empty homes back into use especially when used in conjunction with Manager’s Discretion where we give up to 18 months reduction from 200% to 90% in cases where owners are undertaking repair works to their properties. We have dealt with over 140 properties in this way since the Managers discretion was introduced by Perth & Kinross Council 2 years ago.

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

Compulsory Purchase Orders for single dwellings are not popular due to the officer time they take up so Compulsory Sale Orders would be welcome if they were simpler to administer than CPOs. With regard to common repairs to tenement properties it would help greatly if legislation was introduced requiring owners of flats to pay regular sums into a sinking fund to deal with repairs and that property factors had to be used in a similar way to new blocks of flats.

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

In common with other Empty Homes Officers, we obtain information on empty homes from Council Tax Revenues. The properties listed are those which owners have advised the Local Authority that their properties are empty. We do come across properties which are listed as occupied but are clearly empty where owners are possibly attempting to avoid the 100% surcharge on long term empty properties. This means that the picture of empty homes in Scotland is probably underestimated. There is no easy way to improve this other than Empty Homes Officers reporting empty properties to Council Tax when they come across them.

9. What more can be done to prevent homes remaining empty and to encourage owners to bring them back into use?

If more funding was available for grants to assist owners repair empty homes linked to the requirement to lease the property for 5 years at LHA levels this would certainly
bring more empty homes back into use. This would necessitate additional staff to administer these grants.