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

1. Introduction and Background

North Lanarkshire Council (NLC) is committed to the development and maintenance of sustainable communities and town centres. We have a strong track record of working in partnership with others to deliver regeneration projects that have helped create vibrant places and neighbourhoods.

Increasingly, it is disrepair or neglect of private sector properties that is causing concern within our communities and town centres. This includes problems caused by empty and abandoned private properties and we are working hard to tackle these issues using the powers available to us.

We are keen to bring as many empty properties back into use as good quality affordable homes and to this end we have an Empty Homes Officer (EHO) who plays a vital role in helping to encourage owners of empty properties to return them to use.

Work on empty homes can achieve positive outcomes with regards to:

- Housing supply
- Community regeneration/ town centre renewal
- Sustaining rural communities
- Restoring confidence in local property markets
- Discouraging anti-social behaviour (due to fire/ vandalism/ fly tipping of empty properties)
- Climate change and sustainability

NLC will continue to provide advice and support in order to find the best ways to bring empty properties back into use and are pleased to provide a response to the local government and communities committee on Empty Homes in Scotland.

2. Structure

Our response will consider the key questions set by the committee.

3. Main causes of empty homes

In our experience, the main reasons for properties becoming empty are;
• With owners approval;
  o Properties held for demolition (social)
  o Private sector – void period between tenancies mainly due to condition issues
• Relationship breakdown;
• Properties subject to probate proceedings;
• Owners’ financial difficulties (abandonment/returning to relatives etc.)

4. Does the issue of empty homes affect all tenures?

The issue of empty homes is primarily found in the private sector however it can impact upon all tenures of housing. The negative effect of an empty home on a street and surrounding community can be dramatic; neglected properties fall into disrepair and can encourage vermin, vandalism, anti-social behaviour incidents and within common blocks (tenement type properties) an empty home can cause delays for the other willing owners to carry out repairs/maintenance or improvements.

Residents are very aware of the implications of such properties in their area. They often become very frustrated in terms of the processes that are required to be undertaken by our EHO when trying to trace owners to advise them of the issues occurring with their properties. This includes mortgage lenders who are under no obligation to divulge owners’ details or to engage with EHO. Amendments to the data protection law may help with this and promote opportunities for discussion and action on empty properties.

5. Impact on communities in areas where there are large numbers of empty homes

North Lanarkshire has a relatively low proportion of empty homes in a Scottish context. Nevertheless, a small number of empty homes can have a negative and detrimental impact and become a blight on our communities and town centres such as;

• Communal and adjacent properties maybe adversely affected by empty properties either by being directly damaged or in disrepair;
• Communities feel less safe;
• Empty homes may mean rents are lower than area average and neighbouring property values decrease as a result;
• Higher incidences of vandalism and anti-social behaviour;
• Local business, shops and services (doctors, dentists etc.) are less likely to invest in an area with a poor reputation;
• Loss of Council Tax revenue for investment in community services;
• Potential reduction in services (loss of bus services etc.);
• The visual impact of empty properties within a community often results in the area becoming less appealing to potential residents.

6. Is the issue of empty homes a problem in particular areas?

From our data, the number of empty homes are fairly evenly distributed across the whole of North Lanarkshire and the issue is not confined to particular areas.

In North Lanarkshire, our approach has therefore been to prioritise empty homes across all areas focusing on historical, referred cases and longest empty cases.

7. Progress made in addressing the issue of empty homes in North Lanarkshire

NLC employs a dedicated EHO linked to the private sector housing team to provide advice and support to residents and landlords to help bring empty properties back into use. The EHO successfully supported owners to bring back 57 properties back into use during 2018/19.

By tackling and bringing empty properties back into use the following can be achieved:

• Maximise existing housing resources;
• Housing needs are met across all tenures;
• Improve the existing built environment;
• Increase provision of good quality affordable housing;
• Reduce environmental impact associated with new build;
• Revive properties and communities and where applicable, support area regeneration schemes.

NLC operates an Open Market Purchase Scheme which includes the purchase of empty properties. During 2018/19, in addition to the above properties brought back into use detailed above a further 44 empty homes were purchased.

8. Effectiveness of current legislation available to council and central government

There is a variety of legislation but we don’t have the financial resources to use them however, the introduction of the council tax levy is working well.
It allows North Lanarkshire to charge a levy of up to 100% on long term empty properties, this means that a property which is unoccupied for a period of more than 12 months is subject to an increase in liability of 100% in terms of council tax due. The levy applies to all vacant properties from 1 April 2014 with the only exception being unoccupied properties which are being actively marketed for sale or let, for such properties they must be unoccupied for two years before NLC can apply the levy.

Although this legislation has been effective, it is our view that additional enforcement powers would be beneficial.

9. **Would more enforcement powers for council and central government be useful to deal with the issue?**

When all else fails and a property is still presenting an issue for the community, using enforcement to encourage or force an empty home owner to bring their property back into use can sometimes be the only option.

This includes by using Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) which has proven to be a very useful tool although it can be a lengthy process. The process of CPO can be onerous and resource intensive and we would welcome any guidance to improve the implementation and operation of it.

The proposed introduction of the Compulsory Sales Order (CSO), is welcomed as it could provide a valuable alternative to the current legislation. NLC are cautiously optimistic that the CSO, if brought into effect will prove to be a useful additional tool and we look forward to its implementation.

10. **Current information and data sources**

Our EHO currently administers an empty homes database from information provided by our colleagues in Council Tax. This database has a record of all properties currently claiming vacant dwelling discount. The EHO’s role is to maintain this database and to build up the information for properties that are not registered but are known to be empty.

There is good partnership working between NLC and other agencies such as Shelter. There are regular co-ordinated meetings with other EHOs within the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership and collaboration on various issues is undertaken.

11. **Conclusion**
NLC recognises the negative impact that empty homes can have on available housing supply and our local communities and are therefore committed to bring empty homes back into use. We are keen to consider any proposals that would reduce the number of empty homes and would welcome any further opportunity to shape Scotland’s response to the challenge of empty homes.