LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

CALL FOR VIEWS ON EMPTY HOMES IN SCOTLAND

SUBMISSION FROM STIRLING COUNCIL

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

In Stirling Council our records confirm:

- Lack of motivation,
- Owners struggling to finance repairs
- Unsuccessful marketing for rent/sale are the main causes.

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

With the exception on social housing, this could affect the owner/responsible person/association if they cannot raise funds to renovate or identify a suitable tenant.

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

Potential increase in:

- Anti-social behaviour i.e. graffiti, fly-tipping, break ins, squatting, drug/alcohol dens
- Drop in neighbouring house prices
- Reduction in demand to live in the area
- More people move out to secure work/better homes/neighbourhoods
- Businesses close due to drop in population
- Issues getting communal repairs work carried out

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

In Stirling council area, empty homes are not concentrated in any one particular area.

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?

The removal of ring fencing Statutory Repair Grants by the Housing (Scotland) 2016 Act restricted funding that could be made available to help owner with some of their renovation costs. However some LA’s choose to offer grant funding when owner make
significant progress bringing their empty homes back into use/ or converting commercial property into residential property.

Some local authorities use the “Buy Back” process as a way to reducing empty home numbers within their area. Some local authorities have full-time empty homes officers.

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

Paragraph 6 schedule 1 of The Council Tax (Exempt Dwellings) (Scotland) Order 1997 allows LA’s to award council exemptions when an owner dies. However there can be a reluctance to settle estates/ or for an application to be submitted for confirmation as people appear to be coming more aware that if they are liable, they may face 200% council tax charges and its therefore not in their best interest to settle the estate. It would be helpful if there was some sort of deadline to when confirmation/ executor needs to be appointed by.

It also appears that Lenders are reluctant to repossess an empty home if it is in negative equity due to the additional costs/ losses to the lender if the property was to be repossessed. However these unnecessary delays can cause further debts accumulating for the owner. It would also appear that lenders do not understand or take into consideration the impact the situation is potentially having on the owner and their families lives. Spiralling debts can have a severe impact on owner’s mental and physical health, even if they are supported by money advice services.

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

Legal timescales for confirmation to be granted or new owner to be appointed. Failure to comply could result in the LA becoming the executor.

Alternatively if no executor is appointed or an executor refuses to renovate and then rent/ sell or occupy the property, potentially LA’s could consider issuing the owner/ executor with a forced sale notice.

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

Not all vacant properties are on the council tax “empty” register as they are awarded an exemption due to the “estate” not being settled.

Properties that have been historically awarded agricultural exemptions or removed by the assessor are not easily identifiable.
Owners historically took kitchen and bathrooms out of properties to make them “uninhabitable”. The Assessor has confirmed that they would consider removing the exemption or placing the property back onto council tax register until properties are sold. Again no incentive for owner to do anything, when there is no financial consequence for the owner.

Commercial property which has once been residential/ could be residential, no process of counting empty numbers.

Commercial properties may be lying empty due to being awarded small business bonus relief, therefore financially unattractive to owner to bring them back into use.

In some instances this is having a major impact on owners of residential properties, who share communal repair works. Need incentive for business owner to carry out improvement work.