

Introduction to Action on Empty Homes

Action on Empty Homes campaigns for empty homes to be brought into use for people in housing need. Our aims are to:

- Raise awareness of the waste of long-term empty homes.
- Campaign for changes to national policy.
- Support local communities in transforming their neighbourhoods.
- Provide advice for those seeking to bring empty homes back into use.
- Research and develop ideas for bringing long-term empty homes back into use for those in housing need

We recognise that we mainly focus on empty homes in England however we believe certain aspects of our current work may be of interest to the National Assembly for Wales and could provide valuable evidence to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee Inquiry into Empty Homes.

Our Evidence

Our evidence will primarily address Question 2 only, as it refers to the impact of empty homes for communities. We hope our response to Question 2 will also help to inform Question 8 concerning delivery of affordable housing from empty homes, as we show how community-based approaches to bringing empty homes into use help to deliver secure affordable housing for local people.

In providing evidence we draw on our recent report '*Community action on empty homes – Using empty homes to regenerate communities*', details of which are outlined in our response to Question 2, also applicable to Question 8.

We have one comment to make in response to Question 9. Is the power to charge a council tax premium on long-term empty homes a useful tool and is it being effectively used? If not, how could this tool be made more effective?

Inquiry Question 2

What impact can empty properties have on a community?

1. Impacts for communities

Many councils rely on a casework approach to bringing empty homes into use, addressing individual properties using persuasion and their statutory powers to cajole or force owners to take remedial action. Although they make steady progress, the individual casework approach misses something we believe to be of urgent concern: the pernicious impact on communities of living in areas with high levels of long-term empty homes. The impact is widely recognised. The *House of Commons Briefing Paper 'Empty Housing (England)'* published in June 2018 states:

“High levels of empty properties are recognised as having a serious impact on the viability of communities... As the number of empty properties within an area increases, so can the incidence of vandalism, which acts as a further disincentive to occupation....This spiral of decline can continue as further households are deterred from moving into an area devoid of amenities, and where empty property and derelict shops add to a sense of neglect.”¹

Communities can become trapped in a cycle of decline. This has significant implications for their residents' physical and mental health, educational achievement and access to work. A recent report from the Human City Institute, *“The Power of Place: Health Inequalities, Housing and Community in the West Midlands Conurbation”*², is just one quality research document of many to demonstrate the link between area deprivation and life-impacting inequalities. It is time to broaden our vision, to see not just the empty homes but the effect they have on those living near them and on those who need decent secure housing and a chance to thrive.

Engaging & Rebuilding Communities

Supported by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Action on Empty Homes has undertaken a three-year project to look at an approach to bringing empty homes into use that ensures the process of renovation itself is a vehicle for engaging and rebuilding communities, for developing skills and confidence, supporting vulnerable and excluded households, and by doing so addressing, in a lasting way, the underlying issues, breaking the cycle of decline.

In our report – *“Community action on empty homes – Using empty homes to regenerate communities”* – we share our learning from studying six demonstration projects, each at different stages of development but all employing community-based approaches to bringing empty homes into use. All the projects provide work experience and training for local people with diverse needs as integral to the process of renovating empty homes to deliver affordable housing. We aim to encourage others to form community-based partnerships, to bring empty homes into use for local people and through doing so to help address the persistent underlying issues that keep people locked into poor housing and locked out of a safe, secure and affordable home.

¹ House of Commons Library Briefing Paper Number 3012, 13 June 2018 Empty Housing (England) By Wendy Wilson Hannah Cromarty Cassie Barton

² Human City Institute The Power of Place: Health Inequalities, Housing and Community in the West Midlands Conurbation, March 2019 <https://humancityinstitute.com/reports>

2. Combatting a spiral of reactive spend

Our community-based approaches project has highlighted that as well as locking communities into a spiral of decline, areas with concentrations of empty homes can trap local authorities and other public services into a spiral of reactive spend.

Reactive spend occurs when:

- Local authorities act to address fly-tipping and statutory nuisance
- Police services respond to vandalism, antisocial behaviour (ASB) and substance misuse
- Fire services respond to arson
- Health services manage and treat poor physical and mental health.

The impacts – the costs and risks – of homes standing empty are largely shouldered by local people and local public services. Reactive spend is public spend.

In reality, the home-owner is responsible for the property. We think this balance of spend is wrong and believe a review is overdue of where responsibility for the cost of empty homes should lie. We think public funding should be focused on investment in communities to make use of empty homes to meet their need for secure affordable housing, for providing work and training, for rebuilding community networks, fostering resilience and supporting opportunities for change and growth. This investment approach would provide better 'value for money' and help to reduce the amount of public funding currently pouring into reactive spend.

3. A Solution - Community action on empty homes

This is a link to our report: *“Community action on empty homes – Using empty homes to regenerate communities”*

<https://www.actiononemptyhomes.org/publications-and-research>

The Report is on the Action on Empty Homes website³ and is free to download. It has 38 pages and contains short summary tables of research data, and photographs of communities at work bringing empty homes into use. There are broadly three sections:

- a) What communities can achieve
 - b) A description of the six projects we followed
 - c) Achieving change through community action on empty homes
- a) **'What communities can achieve'** sets out the case for collaboration with and investment in communities to bring empty homes into use. There are summary tables to show, for example:
 - i. How many empty homes were brought into use over the three-year period (65), and how much funding was levered into communities to

³ Action on Empty Homes: <https://www.actiononemptyhomes.org>

create affordable homes, funding that would otherwise have been unavailable (£3.09m)

- ii. How many local people received vocational training (644), and of these how many went on into employment or further education (21.1%).
 - iii. How many local people felt safer and more included in the community (1,017), how many moved into an affordable home (108) and how many people received tenancy support (82).
- b) **The description of the six projects** we followed explains how the community groups started to work in empty homes and their objectives, the area they work in, and the way they bring empty homes into use. Each project is at a different stage of development. Sincil Community Land Trust (CLT) in Lincoln is still forming while Giroscope in West Hull has been operating since 1986.

Each community group works with local people. Cultures Community Interest Company (CIC) in Stockton-on-Tees works with new entrants to the UK, another, Methodist Action North West works in Darwen with young people to prevent homelessness. Groundwork in Rochdale works with long-term unemployed people and is renovating a disused manor house to provide affordable homes for ex-service personnel. North Ormesby Community Land Trust is neighbourhood based and delivers affordable housing from empty homes for people with diverse needs including mental health needs. Working closely with statutory services, Giroscope provides work experience and training for ex-offenders and people in recovery to deliver affordable homes for people in housing need.

The community projects also promote and support local community enterprise. Giroscope in West Hull has converted empty properties to provide a local business hub with workspaces, a community café, a bicycle repair scheme and a training centre. North Ormesby Community Land Trust has established a social lettings agency and as well as managing its own homes provides management services for private sector landlords. They also run the local market, have a shop and advice centre, a child-care service and provide free broadband in their own properties. Cultures Community Interest Company provides English language tutoring, has set up a gardening enterprise which grows food and makes wooden planters and has an annual food and music festival.

The description of the projects helps to demonstrate how much communities can return on investment made in them, we believe this is because they are best placed to understand what needs to be done and to do it, in collaboration with partners and other agencies.

- c) **Achieving change through community action on empty homes.** Although each community project we followed is unique, we looked at the barriers commonly faced by community-based projects and at how these could be overcome. This part of the report provides an overview of the challenges inherent in community action on empty homes and shows how local authorities,

funders, housing associations and communities can work together to achieve change. This includes:

- i. Seeing the whole picture from a community perspective, not just the empty homes. This involves seeing empty homes as not just a housing issues but one which is fundamentally about people: the place they live in, their aspirations and needs; and the delivery of secure affordable homes
- ii. Investing in and supporting communities rather than reacting to problems with fragmented spending, to resolve issues in partnership and collaboration.
- iii. Getting strategies, policies and practices aligned to deliver coherent multi-services outcomes rather than focussing on divisional targets. For example, working with communities to renovate empty homes as shared housing for looked after young people can provide secure supported independence while saving significant spending on residential care.
- iv. Recognising that capital works are revenue led. People bring empty homes into use. We ask that funders review the revenue implications associated with capital funding and either consider incorporating a percentage of revenue to support delivery, or partner with another funder better able to provide revenue funding.
- v. Partnering funding. We found that many funding bodies work in isolation and allocate funding directly in line with their own priorities and target groups. Looking across the funding sector, there are many parallel streams where funding is focussed on specific needs or specific activities, coexisting but not collaborating. Funding can achieve more as part of a jigsaw than as an individual piece.

4. Summary

The evidence provided by Action on Empty Homes in response to Inquiry Question 2 is intended to show that empty homes can have significant adverse impacts for communities.

However, communities can be a key part of the solution:

- acting to address a broad range of underlying issues,
- providing work experience and training for local people and
- delivering secure affordable housing for people in housing need.

Inquiry Question 9.

Is the power to charge a council tax premium on long-term empty homes a useful tool and is it being effectively used? If not, how could this tool be made more effective?

Yes, it can be a useful tool, but we'd like to highlight the impact of council tax charges on empty homes awaiting refurbishment by communities.

Each of the community-based projects we followed reported the additional burden of cost arising from Council Tax levied on empty homes awaiting

refurbishment and awaiting letting. Community-based schemes bringing empty homes into use while offering training and work experience and providing engagement opportunities for local or vulnerable people should be recognised for delivering community benefit. While we support the council tax premium on long-term empty homes, we call on local authorities to exempt empty homes owned or leased by community-based organisations from Council Tax until they are occupied.