

Consultation response

Building a sustainable future discussion paper

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Shelter
Scotland

Introduction

Shelter Scotland welcomes this discussion of regeneration in Scotland. The introduction to this discussion paper uses the definition of regeneration as the holistic process of reversing the economic, social and physical decline of places where market forces alone will not suffice. In this context, while we do not feel it is appropriate for us to address all the questions posed in the discussion paper we do feel we have something to input based primarily on our role as hosts of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership has been funded by the Scottish Government for two years to build the capacity of Scottish local authorities and their partners to bring private sector empty homes back into use. Our most recent publication is a guide for local authorities on producing a private sector empty homes action plan ([see here](#)).

Bringing empty homes back into use has a clear role to play in promoting the regeneration of Scotland's communities. The benefits of bringing empty homes back into use cover a range of policy outcomes which can all contribute to either rejuvenating communities or halting deterioration in communities beginning to show signs of decline. These benefits include:

- Increasing housing supply
- Town centre renewal
- Sustaining rural communities and schools
- Restoring confidence in local property markets
- Discouraging crime and anti-social behaviour (fire/vandalism/flytipping of empty properties)
- Carbon emissions reductions by avoiding the embedded carbon in new build

Bringing empty homes back into use is also a cost effective way of promoting change within a neighbourhood. Homes from Empty Homes (formerly the Empty Homes Agency) have estimated that it takes between £6,000-£25,000 to bring an empty home back into use. Bearing in mind that this need not all be publically funded and considering the wide ranging community benefits of such investment there is a clear case to be made for including empty homes work in regeneration efforts.

As the discussion paper points out, regeneration means different things to different people. It is often seen as an area wide development of the physical environment coupled with development of local and community services and employment opportunities. In this context private sector empty homes work can play a role by contributing to these wider efforts. The refurbishment of empty homes can provide opportunities for local employment, contribute towards developing safe mixed tenure communities and improve the visual impression of the built environment.

While empty homes can play a role in the wider regeneration of an area we also believe that one of the outcomes of this discussion exercise should be recognition of efforts to take an early intervention approach to regeneration. Bringing private sector empty homes back into use can form part of such an approach. Having one empty home on your street can be detrimental to the perception of a neighbourhood, lowering property values, creating feelings of insecurity among residents and causing a genuine crime and safety

risk. Bringing these empty homes back into use can ensure that communities on the edge of decline do not suffer because of the decisions of individual property owners.

Indeed where empty homes are pepper potted around an area rather than dominating an entire neighbourhood it is more likely that it is not simply economic factors that are to blame. Homes can remain empty for a variety of reasons including disputes over ownership, lack of desire to take on the responsibility of becoming a landlord, or a lack of information about how to sell or renovate the property. In many cases without intervention empty home owners would not recognise the effect their property is having on a community nor their responsibility to bring it back into use. Market forces have not solved the problem of empty homes and it is for this reason that governments, both national and local have a role in enabling these properties to be brought back into use.

Empty homes also have a role to play in revitalising our town centres. At a recent event celebrating the work of the Ayr Renaissance project, the Minister, Alex Neil MSP, commented in his speech on the need to re-envision the role of Scotland's town centres. He painted a potential picture of town centres with larger residential populations and specialist shops, forming vibrant communities. We agree with the desirability of this vision and would point to the role of converting flats above shops in town centres in appropriate circumstances to increase the local population and re-vitalise these economic centres. We need not stop at buildings whose former use was residential however and opportunities should be sought to convert other redundant buildings for housing where it is judged that this could contribute to the regeneration of town and city centres. Of course an appropriate balance between residential and commercial uses will need to be retained.

The paper asks a number of questions about funding models. We will not respond to all those questions but briefly would point to examples such as the Kent 'No Use Empty' Initiative that prove that loan based (rather than grants based) funding can be effective in revitalising properties and neighbourhoods. To date, a total of £3.7m has been issued in loans that will be repaid in full and recycled into the scheme. The number of new homes created through this scheme currently stands at 1,627.

Finally the paper briefly mentions the renewed government circular on compulsory purchase. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership has been working closely with the Scottish Government to ensure that the potential use of compulsory purchase on private sector empty homes is recognised. We would encourage the government to follow up this renewed advice to councils with demonstration projects that could dispel some of the myths about compulsory purchase and its potential use on private sector empty homes with absentee or uncooperative owners.

Recommendations

- The role of local private sector empty homes action plans should be recognised and promoted as a contributor to early intervention and prevention in declining neighbourhoods as well as wider area based regeneration efforts.
- The potential of private sector empty homes to contribute to local housing supply should be prioritised in allocating funding within the £50m Housing Investment and Innovation Fund.

- Re-focus the use of the Derelict and Vacant Land Fund to include the renovation of redundant buildings for residential use.
- Prioritise regeneration funding for town centre renewal towards projects that include renovation of flats above shops and town centre buildings for residential use.
- Consider loans based funding for regeneration work that includes bringing private sector homes back into use.
- Consider funding demonstration projects to show how local authorities can use compulsory purchase powers to bring private sector empty homes back into use.

For case studies or further information on any of the suggestions made in this response please contact Kristen Miller, Empty Homes Coordinator, Shelter Scotland, kristen_miller@shelter.org.uk.