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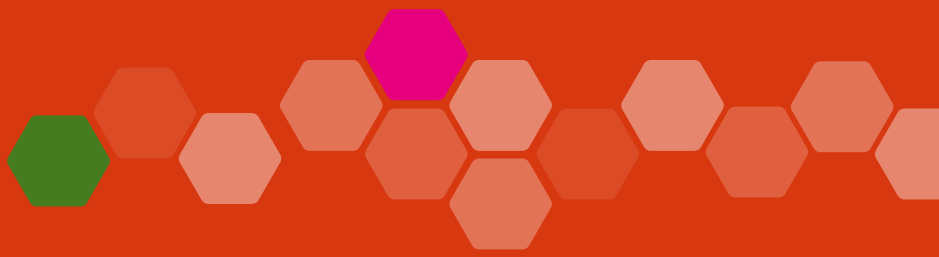
Bringing empty homes back in to use: approaches and interventions - an evidence scoping review



PEOPLE, COMMUNITIES AND PLACES

social research

Bringing empty homes back into use: approaches and interventions – an evidence scoping review

Housing and Regeneration Research
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Executive Summary

Background

Tackling empty homes remains a priority for the Scottish Government. Annual statistics show that as at January 2023, there were 42,865 long-term empty properties in Scotland. Empty properties are part of the solution to meet housing demand and we want to see all homes occupied and no homes left empty without good reason.

Ensuring that empty homes are maintained, improved and put to the best possible use forms part of the Housing to 2040 strategy. The strategy sets out a vision for housing in Scotland to 2040 and a route map to get there. It aims to deliver Scottish Government's ambition for everyone to have a safe, good quality and affordable home that meets their needs in the place they want to be (Scottish Government 2021). Within the strategy there are commitments to:

- work with local authorities (LAs) to audit empty homes and determine those that should be brought back into use
- support the work of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) and continue to roll out the approach across Scotland
- give LAs the powers they need to regulate and charge owners appropriately for homes lying empty and ensure they have the mechanisms to bring them back into productive use
- create a support package for homeowners in trouble to help them stay in their home, if that is right for them, and to prevent homes falling into disrepair or becoming empty in the first place

As part of our commitment to take forward aims within Housing to 2040, an Empty Homes Audit was commissioned last year. This evidence review was undertaken to complement and inform the Empty Homes Audit.

Aim

This scoping review aims to explore the literature and present relevant examples to better understand the range of approaches that have been employed to bring empty homes back in to use, with a focus on the UK, Scotland and internationally, as well as some of the challenges they highlight. It is intended to provide an initial summary of evidence from the literature in terms of a brief description of their outcomes and relevance to the Scottish context.

Findings

Challenges identified within the empty homes literature

There were two main themes related to challenges in bringing empty homes back into use noted in the literature: data quality in the identification and classification of empty homes; and challenges related to the application of interventions.

LA Council Tax data is the main source used for the identification of empty homes in Scotland, but complexities may make this data less reliable for adequately measuring empty homes. Difficulties may arise because owners are required to self-report empty homes; some categories of empty homes are exempt or appear in different figures and current data collection arrangements are not designed to gather information about the condition of homes, making it difficult to identify the most appropriate intervention.

Pressures on human resource capacity and budgets for repair and renovation; the time and resource intensive nature of empty homes work; and long timeframes involved in carrying out processes required to bring empty homes back into use were cited as limiting the effectiveness of the interventions available.

Reasons for empty homes

The reasons for the existence of empty homes are locally specific and can vary depending on whether the empty home is located in an area of high or low housing demand. Underlying causes identified in the literature included systemic effects relating to de-population, demographic change and socio-economic decline. Individual level reasons ranged from emotional attachment to the property, inheritance and probate processes, ill-health to a lack of knowledge or finances.

Bringing empty homes back into use: approaches and interventions

The review identified approaches designed to tackle these issues could be grouped into five thematic areas: dedicated empty homes roles; the provision of information to support engagement; financial measures; statutory powers; and community action initiatives:

- dedicated empty homes roles were found to be effective because they provide specialist knowledge and act strategically to push the empty homes agenda to promote good practice with the overall aim of reducing the numbers of empty homes
- providing information to support engagement was found to sometimes be enough in itself. For example, several studies noted that signposting empty homes owners, housing associations, third sector organisations and potential buyers to opportunities can lead to successful outcomes
- financial measures discussed in the literature focused on Council Tax arrangements, loan and grant funding and reduced VAT on renovation of empty homes - several studies reported that uneven application meant the use of these discretionary powers was not maximised
- statutory powers, such as CPOs, were found to be effective but required considerable resource and time to undertake the processes involved

- community action initiatives that integrated bringing empty homes back into use with actions to address other social and economic priorities were able to provide skills training and routes into work, and increase affordable housing provision - however, alignment of the different participants values towards the common goal of bringing empty homes back into use was found to be important to achieve delivery

Conclusions

This scoping review identified a range of approaches and activities that have been used to bring empty homes back into use and identified a number of related challenges. Data related to empty homes can be limited and challenging to collect, and homes can be empty for various and complex reasons at individual, societal and structural levels. Additionally, bringing homes back into use can require dedicated effort. For these reasons, it is likely that a range of interventions may be required to bring empty homes back into use.

Further research

Based on the findings of this evidence review, research on the following topics may help to understand the complexities related to bringing long term empty homes back into use by:

- understanding potential behavioural impacts of planned interventions, such as changes to taxation, as these may have unintended consequences on rates of empty homes.

- exploring the practicalities of partnership management to increase the evidence on how shared culture can develop between public, private and third sector groups and accelerate achieving common goals around empty homes work.

1. Introduction

The literature on empty homes acknowledges that short-term vacant properties can form part of a healthy housing market, however, when properties are left empty over the long term, this can have wider social and economic implications for the community . Bringing long term empty homes back into use and minimising their potential negative environmental and social impacts on communities is important for a well-functioning housing system. The deterioration of homes that fall into disuse have the potential to cause problems for neighbours, and have been described as being associated with physical “blight”, antisocial behaviour and other social problems that may add to the pressure on public services and negatively impact communities. Wider economic effects and longer term community impacts can stem from these issues, such as reduction in the value of nearby properties, reduced investment in the area and a decline in local amenities (Action on Empty Homes 2019; Wilson et al 2020).

Reducing the ‘wasted assets’ of empty homes can contribute to regeneration and is an important component of maximising available housing supply (Carnuccio 2014). Where the presence of empty homes restricts the choice of households to live - for example in rural communities - this may adversely affect the viability of schools, shops and other local services and facilities, potentially threatening the sustainability of rural communities (Local Government and Communities Committee 2019). In cities and regions with pressured housing markets, the nature of supply, demand and shortage is complex but bringing empty homes back into use can form part of strategies used to meet housing need. A lack of suitable accommodation drives up house prices and rents (Breach 2021) and increases the incidence and risk of homelessness (Davies 2014; Feantsa 2019). There are many factors that can put pressure on a local housing system. These include demand factors, both within a country, such as domestic demographic trends and internal migration, as well as across countries, such as the arrival of a significant number of internationally displaced populations; supply factors, such as the availability of land through the planning system and cost of construction; as well as wider economic factors, such as the affordability of lending. Accordingly, it is prudent to consider how existing stock is used, as provision of new homes alone may not be sufficient to address need (Dunning and Moore 2020).

Tackling empty homes is a priority for the Scottish Government. Annual statistics published in January 2023 show that in Scotland there were an estimated 42,865 long-term empty properties (defined as property that has been vacant for 6 months or more and is liable for council tax i.e. it does not qualify for an unoccupied exemption as set out in Housing statistics: Empty properties and second homes - gov.scot (www.gov.scot) (Scottish Government 2023). However, as the following section on challenges will detail, it is problematic to definitively determine the number of empty homes due to data quality issues in their identification and classification. Ensuring that empty homes are maintained, improved and put to the best possible use forms part of the *Housing to 2040* strategy. The strategy sets out

a vision for housing in Scotland to 2040 and a route map to get there. It aims to deliver Scottish Government's ambition for everyone to have a safe, good quality and affordable home that meets their needs in the place they want to be (Scottish Government 2021). Within the strategy there are commitments to:

- work with LAs to audit empty homes and determine those that should be brought back into use
- support the work of the SEHP and continue to roll out the approach across Scotland
- give LAs the powers they need to regulate and charge owners appropriately for homes lying empty and ensure they have the mechanisms to bring them back into productive use
- create a support package for homeowners in trouble to help them stay in their home, if that is right for them, and to prevent homes falling into disrepair or becoming empty in the first place

Since 2010, the Scottish Government has funded Shelter Scotland to develop and deliver the SEHP, which gives advice to councils and empty home owners.

This review will aim to explore the literature and present relevant examples to better understand the range of approaches that have been employed to bring empty homes back in to use both locally and internationally.

2. Methodology

This document is intended to provide an initial summary of evidence from the literature on approaches to tackling empty homes as well as a brief description of their outcomes and relevance to the Scottish context. This work is intended as a scoping review on these topics and is not intended to be exhaustive. While every attempt was made to scope the literature in a robust way, this work does not constitute a systematic review and therefore it is possible that some relevant sources may not be included. Studies are reported as they were described in the literature at the time of their production, and data are gathered from multiple places and multiple time periods. As such, programmes and funding streams discussed may have ceased and this paper is not intended to provide a comprehensive statement of policy actions or positions in Scotland or elsewhere. This review has been produced at the same time that an independently conducted audit of empty homes in Scotland has been contracted. This audit is currently being undertaken by external researchers and the findings are due for publication in 2023.

This evidence review is primarily based on sources compiled by the Scottish Government library, identified as part of a literature search conducted in April 2022 and supplemented with additional ad hoc searches to address gaps. The evidence from this initial review is drawn from trusted databases the library subscribes to, and from subsequently identified publicly available resources on the internet. It includes both peer reviewed and non-peer reviewed content (i.e. grey literature).

The library database search aimed to identify research articles published globally in English within the last ten years and available via K&E, IDOX, Knowledge Network, Policy Commons, ProQuest and Google Advanced Search.

To be considered for inclusion the literature had to be published between April 2012 and April 2022, written in English and include the following terminology in the title and/or abstract or summary:

1. Empty Homes
    - 1.1 OR Vacant Homes
    - 1.2 OR Unoccupied Homes
2. AND one or more of the following:
    - 2.1 managing numbers of
    - 2.2 powers to manage
    - 2.3 problems
    - 2.4 issues
    - 2.5 taxation/taxes
    - 2.6 preventing
    - 2.7 regeneration
    - 2.8 bringing back into use
    - 2.9 repairs
    - 3.0 blight

3.1 solutions
3.2 strategies
3.3 interventions

These terms were drawn from an initial scoping of key terms from relevant articles already known to the research team. The initial literature search conducted by the library returned 98 articles and reports. The library search was complemented by a general search of third and public sector sites to identify policy initiatives or recommendations made in relation to empty homes. The detail of initiatives mentioned in the literature was also checked and to determine whether these initiatives remained in operation where possible. The 37 sources included in this overview were selected by reviewing titles and abstracts for relevance to the Scottish context, in terms of information and examples of schemes, laws, rules, systems, approaches and models from around the world to manage numbers of empty homes. The evidence included in this overview draws from the UK nations, Europe, the USA, Canada, Japan and South Korea.

3. Challenges identified within the empty homes literature

A review of the literature identified two main areas of challenges within the work of bringing empty homes back in to use: data quality in the identification and classification of empty homes, and challenges the application of interventions.

3.1 Data quality in the identification and classification of empty homes

There are well documented challenges to accurately assessing the number and status of empty homes. LA Council Tax data is the main underlying data source on empty homes in Scotland. Figures from the National Records of Scotland and Scottish Government annual data are both derived from this data. However, figures drawn from Council Tax data can be less reliable. In part, this is because data quality is contingent on owners self-reporting their empty home, and the abilities of the LA to identify non-self-reported empty homes by other means (Dunning and Moore 2020). In areas where a Council Tax premium is applied to empty homes, there may be a risk that owners will attempt to avoid the increased tax by failing to report their empty home. Whereas, in areas which still apply an empty homes tax discount, there may be a risk that owners fail to report when properties are brought back in to use. An example of this could be seen in 2013 and 2014 in Scotland, where the number of properties classed as long-term empty rose, potentially in part as a result of reclassification exercises carried out by LAs. This coincided with LAs gaining discretionary power to remove the empty properties discount or set a Council Tax increase of 100% on certain properties which have been empty for one year or more (Scottish Government 2023).

Given Council Tax data is the main data source on the number of empty homes, undercounting may arise from property types which are not captured by Council Tax recording methods. In England and Wales, derelict homes are not classified as dwellings for the purposes of Council Tax which can lead to a situation where some of the most problematic long term empties, causing the greatest impact on communities, are not represented in the figures (Action on Empty Homes 2019; Wilson et al 2020). In Scotland, 'dwellings under repair' or some 'awaiting demolition' are captured by Council Tax data because they are eligible for exemptions, but derelict properties are not specifically identified in the Council Tax data and recording may vary between LAs. Empty commercial properties which could be regenerated as housing are also not captured, which may lead to missed opportunities to convert this stock as part of housing strategy and town centre regeneration, for example, in line with Scottish Government's *Town Centre Action Plan*. A recommendation of the National Assemby for Wales' 2019 report on empty homes was to progress the design of a method of data collection which is not reliant on the Council Tax valuation list and instead includes derelict and non-

residential properties. Until new data collection methods are designed and progressed, it remains difficult to identify and quantify non-residential, derelict and other types of properties suitable for development into housing, although there are annual Scottish Government statistics available that provide information on the number of conversions of non-residential properties to housing and the number of rehabilitations completed as part of the Affordable Housing Supply Programme. The Scottish Vacant and Derelict Land Survey also publishes statistics on vacant and derelict land, and includes a classification category for 'Vacant Land and Buildings'. Although the survey does not include vacant buildings with no associated land component, data is available on individual sites, including their previous use which can help identify potential for development into housing. Most councils submit annual data for the survey. Councils are also encouraged to keep separate lists of vacant buildings, so whilst this information is not collated at national level, these lists may be another potential source of information worthy of exploration.

Other property types that may not be captured by Council Tax recording methods include church owned stock and properties held in possession of a mortgage lender or trustee in cases of bankruptcy.

A further limitation of current data collection arrangements is that they are only able to quantify empty homes. It is not possible to gather comprehensive information about the condition of the homes or extent of repair necessary ahead of potential re-inhabitation. This makes it difficult to forecast the financial input and interventions necessary to bring Scotland's empty homes back into use. Other methods mentioned in the literature to collect data on empty homes included using censuses, electricity consumption records (Pearson 2018), data from other types of tax records, and the postal service (Manda 2015).

Arguments have also been made in Wales for improvements to data collection categories and changes to performance measures to better represent the work being done by LAs in a way which matters to the public. Results from the National Assembly for Wales' 2019 consultation into empty homes showed respondents were concerned the most problematic empty properties, often those that are derelict or long term empty commercial or public ownership premises, are not represented in data or council performance measures yet consume disproportionate amounts of staff resource and reactive spend of public funds (Action on Empty Homes 2019).

3.2 Challenges to applying interventions: time, capacity, resource and scalability

Evidence on the approaches and interventions described in this review shared the common theme that applying them effectively and at scale was limited by available capacity and resource and the length of time it takes to carry out processes required to bring an empty home back into use.

In the literature reviewed, owners, community groups, third sector organisations, housing associations and members of the public described the often complex, unclear and lengthy processes involved. It is not always clear to people reporting how information will be acted on and this varies between councils (Mullins 2018). A report based on English research noted that every LA had a webpage with information on empty homes, including how to report them and that most LAs had staff who ran their own campaigns aimed at reducing empty homes (Albert 2021). This decentralisation within the English system was characterised as representing a barrier to easy reporting as it is largely done through individual LA services in differing ways, using multiple different websites and contact details. Since the formation of the SEHP the approach in Scotland has been different as there is a central body to approach for information and support, however the provisions and approaches adopted by individual Scottish councils do differ. Not all areas have an Empty Homes Officer (EHO) or an equivalent member of staff responsible for bringing empty homes back in to use and this may be problematic as it is those in empty homes roles who are able to provide a knowledgeable overview to support stakeholders (Scottish Government 2019). Pressures on staff capacity and budgets for capital outlays; lack of specialist knowledge; the absence of a national level legal support service; the time and resource intensive nature of empty homes work; and long timeframes involved were all cited by authors as limiting the most effective use of the interventions available (Davies 2014; Carnuccio 2014; Ceranic et al 2017; Dunning and Moore 2020; National Assembly for Wales 2019).

Specific limitations to Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs) which operate in England and Wales, and refurbish and lease models which are used across the UK, were described which prevent them being used at scale. EDMOs allow LAs to take control of and manage empty properties where the dwelling has been unoccupied for at least two years, all attempts to locate and/or negotiate with the owner to bring the property back into use have failed and there is a reasonable chance the dwelling could be reoccupied if an EDMO approach was taken (Carnuccio 2014). Unlike EDMOs, wider use of refurbish and lease models across the UK tends to be undertaken when it is deemed appropriate by the LA. For example, one recent project in Comhairle nan Eilean Siar aimed to purchase and refurbish 12 empty properties over the course of two years. The properties will then be made available to members of the community through social rent, mid-market rent, and rent-to-buy. Time consuming identification of and access to suitable properties; the availability of budgets for refurbishment works; and financial risk of advancing capital costs from council budgets, coupled with restrictions from mortgage lenders and owner expectations over rental income, limits scaling up to bring more empty homes back into use using these approaches (Carnuccio 2014).

The way funding often operates also limits the opportunities to use successful approaches at scale. Short term funding pots run out and funding strategies may change between governments and LA leaderships (Mullins 2018). Learning can be lost once the funding for a successful project comes to an end, or a change in approach from government alters the funding it is possible to access. Arrangements for grant and loan funding, and the eligibility criteria and timeframes involved, varies

between different places (National Assembly for Wales 2019). Although tailoring interventions to local circumstances can be beneficial it can also make the changing landscape of support options complex to understand. Dedicated empty homes roles, empty homes practitioner networks and organisations such as SEHP and the UK group Self-Help Housing contribute to knowledge sharing of successful approaches. However, replicating what works at a scale which can reduce the number of empty homes significantly enough to address the problem is difficult due to these challenges raised in the literature.

4. Reasons for empty homes

As previously mentioned, the literature on empty homes acknowledges that short-term vacant properties can be a part of a healthy housing market, for example, occurring as estates are disposed of or as properties wait to be sold or rented. Where short-term vacancies exist, these are likely to be filled quickly, particularly in areas where housing demand is high (Davies 2014). Whilst efforts to bring empty homes back into use are an important part of housing policy, empty homes are a part of a well-functioning housing market: for there not to be a shortage of homes, there must logically be a surplus at any given time to ensure availability of properties to those seeking accommodation. More available properties can mitigate the consequences of a pressured housing market which skews against first time buyers and renters by driving up prices (Breach 2021). However, when properties are left empty over the long term, this can have wider social and economic implications for the community. Causes of empty homes explored in this literature include de-population and demographic change, socio-economic decline and lack of knowledge and finances for repairs (Brouard-Sala et al 2018; Ceranic et al 2017; Feantsa 2019; Huuhka 2015; Housing Agency Ireland 2016; Manda 2015; Seirin-Lee et al 2019). In other cases, properties are long-term empty due to personal reasons such as emotional attachment to the property, inheritance and probate processes, bankruptcy, imprisonment, mental incapacity or long-term hospitalisation (National Assembly for Wales 2019; Davies 2014; Tanner 2013; Greenland and Coupland 2014).

Studies found that properties often remained empty because the property had fallen into disrepair and the owner was unable to cover the cost to make it habitable or bring it up to a suitable enough condition to sell (Scottish Government 2019; National Assembly for Wales 2019). Where new owners may not live locally, or may lack the resources, time or motivation to deal with a property, properties acquired through inheritance could sometimes become an issue for the new owner and lie empty for long periods of time (National Assembly for Wales 2019). Moreover, in areas where demand for housing is low, owners may be unwilling to sell their property at market value or be unable to sell at all thus preventing the property from being brought back into use (National Assembly for Wales 2019). Respondents to a consultation detailed in a report for the National Assembly for Wales also noted that properties could become long-term empty in cases where the property was located above commercial premises and the commercial property was not let. Additionally, where the LA is involved, uncooperative owners may be reluctant to engage or difficult to trace (National Assembly for Wales 2019).

5. Impact of empty homes

The literature on empty homes identified various issues that they related to empty homes, which intersect and combine to impact on an area, including:

- an increase in anti-social behaviour
- repair issues to neighbouring properties
- a reduction in property values
- fly-tipping

A number of the studies within the literature referred to empty homes as a “blight” on the local area, making people reluctant to move there and often causing the value of surrounding properties to decline (Scottish Government 2019; National Assembly for Wales 2019; Davies 2014; Action on Empty Homes 2019). Where concentrations of empty homes exist, fly-tipping and anti-social or criminal behaviour can become more common, making the area unattractive to prospective buyers (Scottish Government 2019). Moreover, damage to neighbouring properties can also occur when empty homes fall into disrepair, increasing the risk of, for example, water ingress (Scottish Government 2019) or damp (National Assembly for Wales 2019) as well as environmental issues such as vermin and pest infestations (National Assembly for Wales 2019).

Three studies referred to the wider impacts of empty homes on an area, in terms of demographics and adverse effects on the housing market (For figures and further trend analysis on empty homes, please see Scottish Government 2023) (Scottish Government 2019; National Assembly for Wales; Davies 2014). De-population (which may be attributable to empty homes, or for which empty homes may be a symptom) may lead to a decline in amenities and infrastructure, discouraging people from moving to the area when they cannot access services or schools (Scottish Government 2019). A large number of long-term empty homes can also restrict the types of accommodation available by limiting the number of properties available in local housing markets. Long-term trends concerning an ageing population and the increase of single person households alter demand for certain property types and impact on the suitability of existing housing stock (Seirin-Lee et al 2018). Some evidence indicates that a narrower range of properties can disproportionately affect younger people looking to buy and older people requiring adapted housing (Scottish Government 2019). Without suitable accommodation, households may move away and a lack of amenities can result in health and social issues for those that remain (Scottish Government 2019; Action on Empty Homes 2019).

Alongside depreciating property values, long-term empty homes may also have wider financial implications for an area, where loss of rental income, Council Tax revenue (in the cases of those Councils which still apply a discount rate; 50% discount is the default set in regulations but Councils have discretion to reduce the discount or charge a premium) and spending by occupiers results in less money that is re-invested back into the area (Scottish Government 2019). A higher number of empty homes may also mean fewer customers for businesses, resulting in less revenue and increasing the risk of businesses closing down or their re-location to a more profitable area (Scottish Government 2019).

In addition to this, there are environmental impacts related to empty housing stock. Empty homes occupy land which is blocked from use, consume energy and create emissions (for example heat used to stop pipes from freezing in winter conditions and avoid the risk of water damage and further disrepair), and have unused natural resources, building components and materials embedded in them (Huuhka 2016).

6. Bringing empty homes back in to use: approaches and interventions

Across the literature, various interventions and powers have been used to bring empty properties back into use. These are used in different strategic combinations and can be broadly grouped into five non-exclusive types:

- dedicated empty homes roles (Empty Homes Officers (EHOs) in Scotland)
- providing information and engagement
- financial measures
- statutory powers
- community action and partnership approaches

Research from England on community led approaches (Mullins and Sacranie 2014; Mullins 2018) suggests there are five key elements of approaches to bringing empty homes back into use: finance, properties, workforce, residents and partners. The central components are accessing grants, loans and other types of financing; identifying and securing properties for renovation; volunteering, employment and business opportunities associated with renovation work; engagement and involvement of local people and the successful coordination of partnership working practices. This review will explore a number of approaches which touch on all these elements.

The following sections detail approaches and interventions in each of the five areas described above and present evidence on their implementation, drawing on literature and case studies from the UK nations, and in instances relevant for the Scottish context, from Europe, the US and Japan.

6.1 Dedicated empty homes roles

Empty Homes Officers are dedicated members of Council staff who are responsible for the work of bringing empty homes back in to use. The role of Empty Homes Officers (EHOs) has rapidly expanded across Scotland since the position was introduced. In 2016, just over half of Scottish LAs had an EHO (Hubert 2016), whereas internal Scottish Government figures show this had increased to 27 out of the 32 LAs by 2021.

The value of the role played by dedicated empty homes workers was noted by several studies in the literature (Scottish Government 2019; National Assembly for Wales 2019; Greenland and Coupland 2014). Research carried out for Scottish Government (2019) found strong support for EHOs, highlighting the tangible

difference they can make in bringing empty homes back into use (Scottish Government 2019) due to their in-depth knowledge of empty homes and their connections to key local actors. The researchers found that EHOs not only provide a useful service to members of the public who own an empty property but in acting as a go-between for other stakeholders, such as the LA. However, the study also noted that despite the valued work EHOs provide, all LAs did not have an EHO in place and some were not considering appointing one (Scottish Government 2019). Similar findings were identified in research by the National Assembly for Wales, where not all LAs employed staff in dedicated empty homes roles and varying arrangements were in place across different areas (National Assembly for Wales 2019).

Rudman (2014) noted additional possibilities within the remit of Welsh empty homes project officers (EHPOs) that go beyond providing an advisory and support service to homeowners, arguing the EHPOs' role should be to push the empty homes agenda at not only operational but strategic level. At a strategic level, Rudman argues, there is a role for EHPOs to play in wider awareness raising activities; the promotion of best practice; championing successful case studies; and the building and maintenance of digital platforms to share knowledge with the aim of coordinating and scaling up efforts to bring empty homes back into use. Relationship management was found to be core to the work of dedicated empty homes roles, ensuring boundaries and expectations with partners and stakeholders are well understood to achieve successful outcomes (Rudman 2014). These strategic aims are also fundamental to the approach of the work carried out by SEHP which was set up to provide empty homes services to help bring private sector empty homes back into use.

Coordinating best practice through partnership working, and the importance of relationship management were also prominent themes in the literature on dedicated empty homes roles. For example in Leeds, a social enterprise acquired a contract from the council to administer an Empty Homes Doctor service. The service supported owners to bring their properties back into use through the use of a detailed report outlining possible options for the owner (Greenland and Coupland 2014). The service offered between two and 30 hours of support and by the end of the first year, 26 out of 137 homes were brought back into use. Although successful, the small numbers of empty homes brought back into use in such examples highlights the resource intensive nature of the work of dedicated empty homes staff and empty homes partnership services such as the Empty Homes Doctor (Greenland and Coupland 2014).

6.2 Providing information and engagement

The previous section concerning dedicated empty homes roles detailed the importance of awareness raising, advice and relationship management components of this remit. One study focusing on England highlighted that providing information and effective signposting may in some cases be sufficient to encourage some owners to bring properties back into use on its own (Tanner 2013). The study

described a range of information that LAs can offer to empty home owners, including:

- providing information on options for renting, selling and refurbishment for owners, such as information on financial support and tax rules
- making the process to report empty homes as simple and easy as possible through information and streamlining of reporting processes
- referring owners to local organisations who are able to provide professional advice

Engaging with local housing associations to regenerate empty homes was also reported in two studies (Carnuccio 2014; Tanner 2013). The Tanner study noted that reaching out to local housing organisations can not only provide social benefits such as opportunities for skills and training but a leasing arrangement can also be attractive to owners and councils, where it provides owners with an income in return for allocation rights (Tanner 2013).

In a Scottish example based on an information service to drive engagement, Aberdeen City Council Housing Access team offers a 'Property Matchmaker' scheme promoting long term empty homes to potential tenants or buyers through their dedicated empty homes website. This free to use service provides owners of empty homes with exposure and free marketing to tenant and buyer groups, and provides renters and potential buyers with access to a pool of properties which would not necessarily be listed by commercial websites or estate agents.

Feantsa (2019) detail a case study of Ireland's Empty Homes Initiative, founded by a non-profit housing association and co-funded by the government under the Rebuilding Ireland strategy. The methodology of the Empty Homes Initiative is founded on the principles 'Advocacy + Action = Solution' and focuses heavily on the importance of advocacy and awareness raising. This work contributed to the introduction of two schemes for reactivating empty properties and revised planning laws to allow the reuse of long-term empty commercial buildings for housing. The two schemes available as part of the strategy are Repair and Leasing, consisting of an interest-free loan of up to €40,000 to convert empty homes into social housing, and Buy and Renew funding to purchase empty properties to live in. However, the study pointed to insufficient understanding of the available schemes amongst LAs, homeowners and buyers. This highlights the need for promotion and awareness raising to drive uptake; and intense relationship management activities between LAs, EHOs and homeowners to ensure potential can be realised. Indeed, the English Empty Homes Loan Fund initiative, announced in 2013 to provide loans to empty property owners as a joint project between an empty homes charity, building society and participating LAs was abolished a year later due to low uptake (Wilson et al 2020).

Whilst many individual LAs provide schemes to address empty homes, the work of organisations including SEHP in Scotland and Self Help Housing in the UK play a central role accessibly collating information on the support options available and

engaging with individuals and groups signposting them to make use of what is on offer.

6.3 Financial measures

Financial measures such as a Council Tax premium, VAT discount, empty home loans and grant funding were also reported as effective interventions to help bring empty homes back into use.

6.3.1 Tax premiums

The use of a Council Tax premium designed to disincentivise empty properties was reported in several papers drawing on data from studies across Scotland, England and Wales (Scottish Government 2019; National Assembly for Wales 2019; Davies 2014; Tanner 2013). In Scotland, empty homes which would normally be eligible for Council Tax are exempt up to a period of 6 months, after which they are liable for council tax, although a 50% discount applies. However, since April 2013, LAs have had a discretionary power to reduce this discount to between 10% and 50%, as well as, for certain properties that have been empty for 12 months or more, a further discretionary power to remove the discount altogether, or charge a Council Tax premium of up to 100% (Scottish Government 2019). In other words, Council Tax is used to provide an incentive to make use of the empty home by homeowners, and to the extent that it does not achieve this, it provides revenue to the LAs to address the loss of revenue and the wider impact that empty homes have on the community, as set-out in section 5. However, there is evidence in England that the use of Council Tax premiums is limited, with only around one in four of long-term empty properties subject to the premium (Davies 2014). In Wales, the Council Tax premium for empty homes will be raised to a maximum of 300% from April 2023 and in England the premium is based on the length of time the home has been empty, with powers to charge up to 300% premium on properties empty for ten years or more. In Scotland, the discretionary power is used to various extents in different ways, with use also varying regionally but only two LAs do not apply the premium at all (SEHP 2022). Scottish Government statistics show that in 2021-22 councils raised a total of around £28 million from their discretionary power to vary the council tax on empty homes from the baseline discount of 50%, of which around £15 million was from the additional discretionary power to remove the discount altogether or a charge a premium of up to 100% on dwellings empty for 12 months or more. Internal Scottish Government analysis estimates that if a 100% premium were added to council tax on all homes empty for 12 months or longer across Scotland, this could generate around £35 million in additional council tax each year, although this figure assumes no behavioural change as a result of increased council tax charges (Scottish Government 2023).

On one hand, this flexible application is provides an example of powers which can be tailored and responsive to local needs. In the context of some areas of the country struggling with housing market viability, the importance of being able to

apply policy differently may provide LAs more freedom to apply the premium in the best interests of their community (Davies 2014). On the other hand the evidence suggests that Council Tax levies can be unevenly applied across different LAs depending on outlook and resource.

It has also been suggested that, given the relatively low level of Council Tax premium relative to property value, the premium may not be sufficiently high enough to disincentivise certain types of empty property owner who are wealthier and motivated by capital gains (Wilson et al 2020). Other countries have taken approaches to taxing empty homes based on the rental or market value of the property, generating larger penalties. In France, the 2013 Vacant Housing Tax on private properties left vacant for over a year ran at 12.5% of rental value for the first tax year rising to 25% for each following year and, in Ireland, since 2017 there is an annual premium of 3% of the market value of the empty property or site (Housing Agency Ireland 2016). In a more radical example from Spain, disincentivising empty properties included imposing a system of fines, whereby the Catalonian 'Right to Housing Act (2007) introduced the possibility of fining banks who hold empty properties in their ownership and fining companies who hold empty housing stock for two years or more (Housing Agency Ireland 2016). Davies argues approaches which carry costly financial implications for owners and penalisation through fines have a role to play. However, they also point out that LAs must have discretion to work with genuinely 'stuck' owners who want to resolve the problem with their empty property but are unable to act due to a range of legitimate personal circumstances, such as long term illness or complex bereavement, or structural issues around inability to secure tenants in areas of economic decline (Davies 2014).

Changes to taxation on rental properties may also have unintended consequences for rates of empty homes, highlighting the need to research the potential behavioural impacts of planned interventions, particularly where they take place within complex systems. A news article describing 2018 research in the UK undertaken by Bloomberg Economics reported that changes to capital-gains tax breaks may mean it makes more financial sense to some potential landlords to leave properties empty rather than to take in tenants; by removing the home from the rental sector owners avoid capital gains tax but continue to benefit from property speculation (Shah 2018) in an own-to-leave investment approach (Dunning and Moore 2020; Wilson et al 2020). The concept of the financialisation of housing holds that housing is used as a financial tool rather than simply a place to live (Bourne 2019). Financialised housing practices may problematise interventions based on an approaches which hold housing as a social good existing for use as homes (Feantsa 2019). Interventions must be designed with sensitivity to the complexity of different reasons for homes being empty in different contexts. For example, in declining communities and rural areas tendencies for homes to be empty for involuntary structural reasons may require interventions which take account of this. In thriving housing markets and urban centres, it is possible that homes may be voluntarily left empty by owners who seek financial speculation over time as property values increase and will require different approaches to encourage occupation (Feantsa 2019).

6.3.2 Empty home loans, grants and VAT discounts

This section details the current funding available for bringing empty homes back into use in Scotland, then goes on to present examples of various schemes drawn from across the UK and one example from South Korea, to illustrate the ways that loans, grants and VAT discounts can be employed.

There are currently (as of April 2023) multiple streams of Scottish Government funding that can be used to contribute to bringing empty homes back in to use:

- **Empty Homes Loan Fund**: A £4.5 million legacy funding scheme introduced in 2012. Accessed by LAs to fund repairs in exchange for a period of affordable letting by private landlords, and has been opened up to facilitate affordable sales and buy-backs for social housings stock.
- **Affordable Housing Supply Programme**: A broad funding scheme including an element to buy-back empty homes and convert/refurbish empty buildings for use as affordable housing that can be accessed by LAs and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs).
- **Rural and Islands Housing Fund**: A £3.5 million element of this funding package is directed at bringing empty homes back into use in remote communities and it can be accessd by community bodies, rural landowners, landlords and private developers.
- **Vacant and Derelict Land Programme**: Launched in 2021, accessible by LAs intended to unblock long term vacant and derelict land sites. As detailed in Scottish Government's Housing to 2040 strategy, the fund will also enable the purchase and reuse of vacant town centre buildings for housing.
- **Town Centre Fund** – A £50 million fund introduced to enable LAs to stimulate and support investments that encourage town centres to diversify and flourish and to take a town centre first principle.
- **Social Housing Net-Zero Heat Fund**: Supports LAs and RSLs to install zero emissions heating systems and energy efficiency measures in homes that have been bought back as social housing stock, including an element of the funding stream for empty homes.

As noted in the introduction, internationally displaced populations arriving to Scotland also have the potential to create additional pressures on housing for LAs. Most recently, 23,397 displaced people from Ukraine have arrived in the UK with a Scottish sponsor (Scottish Government or individual) as at 14 February 2023 due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. If all displaced people from Ukraine who hold a visa with a Scottish sponsor arrive, this would rise to 37,897. As part of Scottish Government's effort to provide safety and support to those arriving from Ukraine, Councils and Registered Social Landlords in 2022/23 have been able to apply for SG funding (up to £50 million) to refurbish properties for social rent that would otherwise not be available for let. This follows a pilot project involving two tower blocks in North Lanarkshire that were set for demolition, which will bring up to 200

homes back into use. Furthermore, so far the funding is enabling up to 500 void properties to be brought back into use across Aberdeen City, up to 24 void properties in Glasgow and up to 30 void properties in North Ayrshire, where the councils or RSLs confirmed they do not hold the resources to fund or contribute to the improvement works. More homes are anticipated with applications being actively progressed through the Fund's due diligence process. The homes provided are intended to achieve minimum quality and affordability standards and will be available for rent for up to three years, in line with visa length, after which some will continue to be available as social rented homes.

Empty home loans and grant funding were also mentioned by several studies in the literature (Ambrose 2019; Tanner 2013). Often owners of empty properties want to bring them back into use but find it difficult to do so due to practical barriers, such as the cost of major repairs (Tanner 2013). Providing grants and financial incentives can allow owners to carry out repairs and bring homes up to a habitable standard, making them more attractive to buyers and easier to sell (Tanner 2013).

Within the Scottish context, there may be gaps in provision of such individual-level funding as there is variation in the extent to which funding is available across LAs. Some local councils do offer support in this way; for example Argyll and Bute Council offer 40% of the cost of the works up to a value of £10,000 to owners of homes which have been empty for a minimum of three years who wish to renovate their property for personal occupancy. Funding is targeted in areas of high housing need where reoccupying an empty property would mean the occupiers vacating a property in the social sector. This creates a social rental opportunity for other tenants as well as bringing an empty home back in to use.

Some councils in the UK offer schemes which incentivise buyers seeking an affordable home to acquire empty properties at a lower cost with a view to subsequently carrying out repairs. Two English case studies show different ways this can be achieved. Ipswich Council currently offers a First Time Buyers Empty Homes Grant to first time buyers who have savings of less than £7000 and whose mortgage is over 80% alongside an Estate Agency Discount Scheme, offering reduced fees for empty homes owners and free submission to auction. Stoke City Council previously ran a version of a 'homesteading scheme' whereby empty properties from social housing stock were offered for a very small sum of money in exchange for occupants renovating the property, and there are various LAs who have used this approach (Carnuccio 2014). In the case of Stoke, under the Reviving Communities Scheme the council chose to cover the initial costs of refurbishing empty social homes and sold these for £1 to eligible buyers from the local community, on the proviso that the new owners repay the cost of the refurbishment over a set time period (Tanner 2013; Stoke on Trent Council 2021). Liverpool City Council also ran a homes for £1 scheme as part of their empty homes strategy which allocated at least 100 families an affordable home from previous social housing stock on the basis of their owner occupancy for at least five years before the scheme closed due to oversubscription.

There are also examples of schemes for tackling obsolete empty social housing stock while assisting first time buyers. Riverside Housing Association's Own Place initiative helped people with low earnings get onto the property ladder by selling rundown properties they could no longer economically manage. The initiative supported basic repairs to ensure properties were structurally sound and mortgage-able before selling them at a 25% discount on the condition that the buyers remained as owner occupiers for a minimum of five years. Own Place re-invested funds from the sales into new and existing affordable housing stock and the initiative was subsequently adopted by several other English LAs (Carnuccio 2014).

Councils in Kent rolled out the No Use Empty initiative from 2005 which remains active, based on an approach to funding refurbishment of empty homes through the potential of government loans being used as leverage for owners to secure further investment. Seven million pounds in loans were allocated to the owners of empty homes from the National Empty Homes Fund, leveraging a further £12.5 million in funding which was reported as creating 'conditions of affordability' for 2500 homes to be brought back in to use (Grimshaw 2013). This model may be particularly instructive in the current context of reduced bank lending and rising interest rates. The interest free loans were repayable over a period which allowed the monies to be recycled into the scheme, with 42% of loans recovered for re-investment by 2013 and a further phase of the scheme planned at the time to convert empty commercial buildings into homes based on a five year interest free loan in exchange for letting as affordable housing during the loan repayment period (Grimshaw 2013).

Salford Council's Empty Homes team previously applied a successful approach to maximising the impact of funding initiatives and revenue raising opportunities to become one of the top five best performing councils in England, bringing a reported nearly 3000 vacant properties back into use between 2011-6 and halving the empty homes rate of their total housing stock from 6% to 3% (Malone 2017). Their approach has particular relevance for urban centres with pressures on the housing market due to population growth; for context over half of Scotland's LAs are forecast to have population growth to 2028 centred mostly in urban areas across the central belt. Salford achieved significant improvements in bringing empty homes back into use by firstly analysing records and reports of empty homes, contacting owners to establish why the particular properties were empty and discuss the best way of bringing them back into use, then accessing central government funding to distribute to owners, community groups and charities to carry out refurbishment works (Malone 2017). By taking a targeted approach to accessing funding pots, Salford Council created a diversity of options from £10,000 grant funding to owners on the proviso they would match fund and bring their property up to the Decent Home standard (The Decent Homes Standard sets out guidance which applies to the social rented sector in England. More detail here A decent home: definition and guidance - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)', to grants of up to £34,000 for owners who agreed to let their properties as affordable housing for a minimum of five years. Salford Council received 28% more New Homes Bonus funding allocation for the period to 2021, based on properties brought back into use between 2010 and 2015,

than would have been received had they not carried out the empty homes initiative, illustrating long term beneficial effects on their resources.

In Scotland, some local councils currently run similar loan and grant schemes. Perth and Kinross council's Empty Homes Initiative offers grants of up to £7500 per bedroom for works to bring empty properties up to the Repairing Standard as outlined in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006. The grants are made based on the condition of the home, then let through Perth and Kinross Council's Rent Bond Guarantee Scheme at the relevant Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rate for a period of at least five years. Dumfries and Galloway's Town Centre Living Fund aims to increase the supply of affordable housing in town centres by bringing properties which have been empty for at least one year back into use through provision of a 50% grant, up to a maximum award of £20,000, based on five year letting at or below the LHA rate or owner occupancy. These examples indicate the ways LAs can tailor the model to respond to local circumstances. However, the refurbish and lease model has been reported to encounter barriers which act to limit potential, notably access to suitable properties; mortgage restrictions; and owner-landlord expectations over rental income, especially in areas with pressured housing markets and market rate rents that sit well above LHA (Carnuccio 2014).

To assist and encourage refurbishment, a VAT reduction applies on building works undertaken on properties which have been empty for two years or more. EHOs can also advise on referrals to access trade discounts on goods and services from an approved list of construction merchants maintained by SEHP (Rudman 2014). Whilst this can support some empty property owners with limited resource to take more affordable action to bring their property back in to use, critics have noted that the two year timeframe before properties become eligible for the discount may be problematic for some (Ceranic et al 2017).

The eligibility timeframes for loan, grant and VAT reduction schemes are variable. Based on research in the UK, Dunning and Moore (2020) have suggested a timeframe of six months as a suitable indicator of a home being empty for policy purposes and in contexts of pressured housing markets reducing the time period to apply interventions would potentially benefit housing supply (six months is also the timeframe the Scottish Government currently uses). Since 2015, the local government in Seoul have supported 50% of refurbishment costs on homes which have been vacant for six months, turning them into rentals for low income households at 80% of market price. This represents an example of a LA interpreting rules strictly to address critical housing need as evidence suggested that empty homes in South Korea had become a significant problem in urban centres. Authors Yoo and Kwon (2019) suggest that this demonstrates the value of taking a local approach to act on regional differences in causes, impacts and scale.

Although the tax, loan and grant interventions described in the cases above differ in their specifics, they all share a strategic design intended to contribute to regeneration; increase affordable housing provision; reduce the potential reactive public spend impacts of empty homes on communities; and in some cases to raise revenue for LAs to reinvest. In the Scottish context, the work of EHOs, the wider

work of SEHP, are referenced throughout the literature as central to raising awareness of, and supporting routes to access, these available forms of financial support.

6.4 Statutory powers

In some cases, encouragement, incentivisation and penalties designed to bring empty properties back into use will not be sufficient and statutory powers may need to be enacted to bring empty homes back into use. The most common statutory powers for empty homes in Scotland are compulsory purchase orders (CPOs), these can be used in all UK nations and in Ireland. Empty dwelling management orders (EDMOs) and enforced sales procedures are the most common statutory powers in England and Wales, but these are not statutory powers in use in Scotland. CPOs enable LAs, other public sector bodies and infrastructure providers to acquire land and/or buildings to enable projects which are in the public interest. The order allows the property to be sold on, allowing the LA to recover reasonable costs through the sale of the property. However, it is noted that the process requires an investment of time and resources (Tanner 2013).

In a Scottish example of CPOs being deployed, Glasgow City Council have sought authorisation for 52 CPOs since 2019 as part of their Empty Homes Strategy. Between 2019 and March 2022, fifty two CPOs were applied for and thirty seven of these were progressed. Of the remaining 15 properties, two were sold or occupied by family members and the other 13 were acquired by housing associations on a voluntary basis. This use of CPOs was achieved largely through the actions of EHOs working closely with the SEHP and an acquisitions strategy involving partnership with RSLs to bring CPO properties back into use for social rent. In this example, Glasgow City Council reported a number of contextual factors worked together to bring empty homes back into use. Firstly, the availability of a significant number of empty properties suitable for the intervention were located in a LA with significant demand for social housing stock. Secondly, there was available capacity and expertise linked to Glasgow City Council's three EHOs roles. Thirdly, the support of partners was described as being critical to achieving these outcomes.

Enforced sale procedures allow the forced sale of private property where there is a debt to the LA against the property and where the present owner is unable or unwilling to deal with the property and/or is unable to repay the debt. Relevant debts mainly arise from LAs undertaking work against statutory notices where the owner failed to undertake the work themselves. Similarly to CPOs, enforced sales procedures also require investment of time and resources and may involve upfront costs to make the property safe and secure prior to the requirement to take the property to auction to achieve market value which is paid to the owner without full cost recovery of public funds (Tanner 2013; National Assembly for Wales 2019). Research carried out by the National Assembly for Wales indicated that most LAs were prevented from using their statutory powers due to financial constraints, staffing, lack of expertise or a mixture of these issues (National Assembly for Wales 2019). In the National Assembly for Wales report, a SEHP submission to their

research highlighted the issue of legal resources as a particular barrier. It may not be possible for all LA lawyers to develop expertise specific to empty homes and it was suggested that the limitations on capacity mean this work may not constitute a top legal priority for councils. The National Assembly for Wales highlighted potential for a national bespoke legal service for expert knowledge to be shared and accessible across all authorities, reducing the impact of this challenge and moving away from a more fragmented approach which may prevent available tools being deployed at scale (National Assembly for Wales 2019).

In England and Wales, EDMOs allow LAs to take over management of empty properties for a period of time of up to seven years. They are the only legislative tool designed specifically for long term empty homes and one of their key characteristics is that the property retains its ownership (Wilson 2019). Wilson suggests EDMOs may strike a fairer balance between the rights of property owners and the duty of LAs to secure occupation of empty properties in the public interest. EDMOs are considered best suited for properties requiring minor repairs, where the LA can pay for initial repairs and refurbishment. Costs are then recouped through a leasing arrangement with the owner (Tanner 2013). LAs undertaking an EDMO do have to provide financing for these property improvements, with the attendant financial risk, possibility of non-repayment, and risk that some types of cost outlay will be non-recoverable (National Assembly for Wales 2019).

In Wales, there is some evidence that although the powers to utilise EDMOs are in place, these powers may be under-used in relation to the scale of local empty homes. Tanner noted in 2013 that whilst some councils had used EDMOs to good effect, their use was not then widespread with only forty three authorisations recorded between 2006 and 2011. The National Assembly for Wales (2019) reported the main reasons for under-use provided in the literature were lack of resources, a lack of knowledge, and/or the absence of specialist legal support. In light of this, the Deputy First Minister for Wales has described EDMOs as ‘notoriously problematic’ and the South East Wales Empty Property Working Group suggested that enforced sale is their most commonly used tool rather than EDMOs or CPOs, because there are fewer ‘hurdles and risks’ (National Assembly for Wales 2019). Although being critiqued as under-used, it is argued that EDMOs were envisaged as a last resort power, with the expectation that their introduction would persuade owners to bring properties back into use and encourage constructive dialogue with EHOs supporting owners to access the range of available options (Wilson 2019).

6.5 Community action and partnership approaches

A number of good practice examples drawn from the literature describe partnership initiatives between LAs, community action and third sector groups, RSLs and private developers. Partnership approaches are usually targeted, not only to address the problem of empty homes, but to integrate empty homes work with approaches to address other priority policy areas. In the context of Scottish Government’s holistic Housing to 2040 improvements strategy, projects which base

empty homes interventions on approaches which also increase affordable housing; address homelessness; engage communities in planning and regeneration; improve the energy efficiency of housing stock; and offer skills training and routes into work, especially for young people and disadvantaged groups may be particularly appropriate. A selection of case study examples is presented in this section, before a short summary of the opportunities and challenges of partnership approaches is presented which draws on a longitudinal study of an empty homes project.

6.5.1 Examples and case studies

Action on Empty Homes' 2019 report presents six 'good practice' examples from England. Through their analysis of the projects, they employ a 'Community Return on Investment' (CROI) approach. Based on a fairness narrative which presupposes that investment should be directed to whole community benefit and reactive spend of public money on private property avoided, Action on Empty Homes recommended LAs should support community-based neighbourhood regeneration approaches in their work to bring empty homes back in to use. In doing so, their adoption of an 'invest to save' approach recognised that supporting local schemes and services could bring wider benefits to local people, such as jobs and improved community safety, improved health and well-being as well as increasing the supply of affordable housing (Action on Empty Homes 2019).

As a practical example, the report highlighted the Giroscope project, delivered with grant funding from Hull City Council and generated from Right to Buy Receipts through its 'Right to Buy Replacement Programme Grant Fund', which has a component for refurbishment of empty housing. This provides 30% of the capital funding for Giroscope's refurbishment projects, with the remainder secured through multi-agency funding appeals (Action on Empty Homes 2019). Other key features of this project included the locally embedded and community-led nature of Giroscope's organisation, engagement with local residents to develop positive support, and recognition that the process of bringing empty homes back into use can create opportunities for training and work experience. The international significance of the Giroscope project was recognised with a joint win in the World Habitat Awards 2015–2016, illustrating the potential of multi-agency funded partnerships to achieve positive results through engagement of local residents (Mullins 2018).

Carnuccio (2014) notes that initiatives are more likely to be successful where housing associations work in partnership with LAs, private owners and community groups. The Woodnook regeneration scheme in Lancashire is an example which demonstrated gains that can be made in remodelling derelict houses through a partnership initiative. A joint venture between Twin Valley Homes and Place First created 131 larger, more energy efficient homes through the remodelling of derelict rows of 'two up two down' terraces to increase housing supply and address changing accommodation needs in the area (Carnuccio 2014). Feantsa's (2019) report on innovative housing solutions details a case study of Scottish Churches

Housing Action, a project between the main Christian denominations and organisations in Scotland, a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity. The project works to convert obsolete church stock into homes, renovating empty church buildings through partnership funding from Scottish Government, church members and charitable trusts.

It was reported in the literature that approaches which tackle the physical, social and economic factors affecting empty properties have the most lasting impact, for example by using apprenticeship schemes to refurbish properties and supporting local community engagement to add to the impact. The recent resurgence of interest in 'community-based' and 'collaborative housing' approaches in many countries has been noted by Mullins (2018), who argues that one of the barriers to community action is the need for government housing policy and funding frameworks to support these types of groups. In a research project from England based on semi-structured interviews with individuals involved in six community-led empty homes projects, Mullins and Sacranie (2014) found that local knowledge gave community-led projects significant advantages in identifying and securing properties and concluded that this competitive advantage could be reinforced by maintaining good links with those in dedicated empty homes roles (such as EHOs).

In a Scottish example of a community action partnership approach, YMCA Glenrothes established a multi-agency funded partnership delivering a ten year property refurbishment plan, working with young people to renovate small numbers of empty properties then letting these to people who have experienced homelessness. In another example of a larger scale project taking place in the west of Scotland, SEHP worked in partnership with social enterprise letting agency Homes for Good, renovating empty homes to let to people on low incomes and experiencing homelessness, as an approach to provide more affordable private rental sector housing. The partnership identified potential properties through liaison with EHOs as well as referrals from the Scottish Empty Homes Advisory service, and relied on community reports and local knowledge (Din 2021). The partnership has been reported to have brought 100 homes back into use as of 2021 (Scottish Housing News 2021).

Having conducted a review to build on knowledge of community-led housing initiatives in England, Mullins and Sacranie (2014) and Mullins (2018) provide an account of an evaluation of the 'Empty Homes Community Grants Programme' (EHCGP) in England. This programme enabled over £50 million public funding to be invested by over 100 grassroots groups between 2012 and 2015 to bring a reported 1299 homes back into use, demonstrating the potential in re-designing funding and procurement processes to provide access to grassroots community action organisations. A capacity building programme supporting community-led organisations to make successful funding bids led to more opportunities for local organisations, embedded in and knowledgeable about their communities, to carry out empty homes refurbishments involving volunteer labour, trainee opportunities and local business contacts (Mullins 2018).

Self-help housing is a term commonly used to describe the work of community-led groups bringing empty homes back into use and involves local organisations procuring empty housing and organising the repairs to make them habitable (Mullins and Sacranie 2014). Research on self-help housing in England (Mullins, Jones, and Teasdale 2011 and Sacranie 2015 cited in Mullins 2018) found that of five factors identified as necessary for success (finance, properties, workforce, residents and partners), the most important factor was the existence of strong external partnerships with bodies such as LAs.

Another study, this time drawing on pilot research and case studies from the East Midlands region of England, involved building a model for sustainable retrofitting aimed at empty homes. Central to this approach was the concept of forming a Community Interest Company (CIC) (Ceranic et al 2017). Focusing on financing, procurement, supply chain and project management processes, this model involved the CIC making funding applications and securing nominal sum leases. The authors concluded that this work demonstrated that Retro-Tek sustainable refurbishment could be delivered at scale through subsequent leasing and rent recuperation with profit reinvested in more empty housing refurbishment projects. The authors argue that the profit from small initial project numbers could be used to build financial capacity to refurbish a potential 1000 homes across a four year period: 10 homes as part of the pilot in year one, funding for 100 in year two, 300 in year three and 590 in year four. Their case study described an end terrace in deprived town in East Midlands which was brought from EPC rating F to C with an uplift in property value post-retrofit minus costs of approximately £10,000. This was delivered on the basis of a training component of the model which used the build to upskill local unemployed workers, addressing below average educational attainment; reduced demand for workers; and a skills mismatch within the local area. This project provides an example of a retrofit approach bringing empty homes back into use at scale through community partnerships, whilst addressing multiple policy priorities around workforce upskilling, energy efficiency and the climate crisis.

As mentioned previously, empty homes may also be used as part of a wider strategy to house displaced people if brought back into use. A case study from the US provides an example of how displaced people and immigrant populations can be housed whilst also contributing to self-help refurbishment of empty homes and repopulation of struggling regions. An initiative in Cleveland, in an area in significant economic and population decline, involved a non-profit group partnering with local firms, buying and refurbishing empty homes whilst providing jobs training and placements with local employers. The properties were then rented at affordable rates to the displaced people and new immigrants involved in the work (Barth 2017). The author argues that this case study illustrates the value of harnessing the power of incoming groups to revitalise a local area, fostering empowerment, community integration and ultimately recovery from population loss through an empty homes initiative which links immigration planning with regeneration. This project may provide useful insights for post-industrial areas of Scotland dealing with similar challenges.

In Scotland, Aberdeenshire Council provide information and support for a Sweat Equity initiative, based on a 'homesteading' approach similar to the US case study. This involves creating low/no rent long term lease agreements between owners of empty homes who cannot afford to refurbish and tenants who have skills to carry out repairs, taking on responsibility for bringing the property up to habitable standard in return for accommodation. Owners are able to retain ownership of their property by benefitting from the labour of tenants, whilst tenants benefit from low cost, secure long term housing. The Council concluded that people with local connections to the area and requisite skills may otherwise struggle to stay in the community because of a shortage of suitable homes, whilst landowners are unable to bring empty dwellings in rural agricultural areas back into use. Aberdeenshire Council also detail a case study in Dumfries and Galloway where a similar outcome was achieved for an empty farm cottage dwelling through the coordination efforts of the EHO and a well matched owner and tenant.

It was previously noted in Section 3 that there are challenges to collecting robust data on empty homes. As an innovative route to improve the reporting of empty homes, and to better understand barriers to reporting and raise public awareness, an Empty Houses citizen social science pilot project undertaken in England investigated mobilising the public to collect data about empty houses in their local area. Employing citizen reporting was found to be potentially useful and contributes to changing attitudes about whose role it is to participate in addressing empty homes through the notion of citizen duty. Participants in this project fed back that receiving feedback on how the information they submit would be used increased their likelihood of reporting (Albert 2021).

6.5.2 Research on the challenges and opportunities of partnership models

Action on Empty Homes' 2019 review concluded by identifying common barriers to success in partnership initiatives around five themes:

1. **Expectations and capacity across the groups collaborating, in terms of approaches to the partnership, organisational identity and levels of knowledge and support:** authors found that the better partner organisations understood what could reasonably be expected of each other within their respective capacities, the fewer barriers to success arose. For example, community-led organisations well placed to mobilise local support may face steep learning curves around housing law and health and safety standards in carrying out renovation work, while other partner groups may possess this knowledge but are not embedded in the locality.
2. **Decision making processes and pace between collaborating partners**: authors concluded that decision making within partnership initiatives needs to be collaborative. Partners need to understand the implications for others of delays in decision making, particularly in the context of different organisational sizes and cultures of decision making.

3. **Funding complexities and variances in eligibility, with the absence of a cohesive national funding framework:** in the projects the authors studied, funding was 'pieced together' from different sources, sometimes for each individual empty property being renovated. This can present barriers because each funding source has its own criteria. Bringing together fully funded business proposals and fund monitoring reports requires time, resources and skills.
4. **Difficulties in the case of delays to scheduled project delivery or rising costs in light of inflation and the limited funds held in reserve by third sector partners or individuals:** lengthy delays in connections to essential services were a persistent concern for the projects the authors studied. Delays which hold up completion dates can consequently impact on the cash-flow of small partner organisations, sometimes leading to critical difficulties.
5. **Difficulties of tight schedules for contractors and volunteers in balance with delivering job training and mentoring:** Attracting and engaging local firms who are willing and able to provide on the job training and mentorship whilst delivering the renovations within deadline was found to take time and present barriers. Working with the construction industry and colleges to encourage models which can accommodate work experience and training on community-led renovation projects was found to potentially help to mitigate this barrier.

Gillett et al (2016; 2019) provide further evidence around these themes based on a four year qualitative, grounded theory-based longitudinal study. This involved a critical review of literature and archival data, and data collection through regular informant interviews and focus groups with key informants from participant organisations in an empty homes partnership project over the period of study from 2011 to 2016. These organisations included a housing association, a social housing provider, a housing trust, and a local Council. Researchers analysed the tensions in this partnership involving a social alliance comprising three social enterprises and a local council. Their findings illustrate that the barriers identified above result in part from different institutional logics as well as competing social welfare and commercial objectives, but that such tensions do not prevent success if all partners align in their values and beliefs relating to the importance of the community social impact of their project. Their work suggests that given the growth of interest from policy makers in cross-sectoral collaboration to solve complex problems they cannot address alone (Bryson et al. 2015 cited in Gillett et al. 2019), additional research is needed into how management of such partnerships work in practice. In the context of collaborators holding common goals but differing priorities, evidence on how shared culture develops within a collaboration involving public, private and third sector groups and how long this takes to achieve good performance may provide insights on how this work might be accelerated to tackle empty homes.

7. Conclusions

Ensuring that empty homes are maintained, improved and put to the best possible use forms part of the *Housing to 2040* strategy. This scoping review aimed to provide an initial summary of evidence from the literature on empty homes, focusing on approaches to bringing them back into use. This concluding section summarises themes found in this literature.

7.1 Key findings relating to challenges identified in empty homes literature

Two main challenges to the work of bringing empty homes back in to use were highlighted: data quality in the identification and classification of empty homes, and challenges related to the application of interventions.

7.1.1 Data quality in identifying and classifying empty homes

LA Council Tax data is the main source used for the identification of empty homes in Scotland, but it was found that complexities may make this data less reliable for robustly measuring empty homes. Difficulties may arise because:

- owners are required to self-report empty homes, and there are reasons why they may not do this - in areas where a Council Tax premium is charged, there may be a risk that owners will try to avoid increased tax by failing to report their empty home and in areas where a Council Tax discount is applied to empty homes, owners may be disincentivised to report when their properties are brought back into use

- some specific categories of empty homes are exempt from Council Tax

- empty commercial properties and empty buildings with a land component which may be suitable for conversion into housing appear in different figures

- current data collection arrangements aim to quantify empty homes but are not designed to gather information about the condition of the homes - this makes it difficult to identify the most appropriate interventions and to forecast the financial input required to repair them to a standard which would make them suitable for re-inhabitation.

7.1.2 Challenges to the application of interventions

Pressures on human resource capacity and budgets for repair and renovation, the time and resource intensive nature of empty homes work and long timeframes

involved in carrying out processes required to bring empty homes back into use were cited as challenging the effectiveness of the interventions available. In the Scottish context, although the SEHP provides a national service, each council area has locally specific challenges, their approaches to bringing empty homes back into use may differ and not all areas have a dedicated EHO.

7.2 Key findings relating to reasons for and impact of empty homes

The reasons for homes to be empty are locally specific and can vary depending on whether the empty home is located in an area of high or low housing demand. Underlying causes identified in the literature included systemic effects relating to de-population, demographic change and socio-economic decline. Individual level reasons ranged from emotional attachment to the property, inheritance and probate processes, ill-health to a lack of knowledge or finances. A finding common to several studies was that properties often remained empty because of the costs involved in addressing disrepair and the difficulty to LAs in locating and engaging sometimes uncooperative owners who may live at a distance and may lack the resources, time or motivation to bring their empty property back into use.

Themes in the literature drew out the way various issues related to empty homes as both symptom and cause can intersect to impact on a community. A number of the studies referred to empty homes as a “blight”, referring to a potential association between long-term empty homes and damage to adjacent properties, as well as possible wider impacts of disrepair in areas with high rates of empty homes, which may affect property values and sustainability of local amenities, making people potentially more reluctant to move to the area, however in some cases it may be unclear whether empty homes are causes of or result from these issues. It was acknowledged in the literature that some amount of short-term empty homes form part of a healthy housing system.

7.3 Key findings relating to approaches and interventions identified to bring empty homes into use

The review identified approaches designed to address long-term empty homes that could be grouped into five thematic areas. Each will be taken in turn and the findings outlined.

- **Dedicated Empty Homes roles (Empty Homes Officers (EHOs) in Scotland)**

  The role of EHOs is central to the SEHP approach and has rapidly expanded across Scotland. Several studies reported EHOs and their equivalents in other UK nations were found to be effective because they provide specialist knowledge and coordinate relationships for stakeholders at an operational level, but also act strategically to advance larger issues related to empty homes. This focuses on raising awareness and promoting good practice with

the overall aim of reducing the numbers of empty homes and increasing the availability of housing. However, it was also acknowledged that this approach can be resource-intensive.

- **Providing information and engagement**

  Providing information to support engagement was found to *sometimes* be sufficient in itself. Several studies noted that signposting empty home owners, housing associations, third sector organisations and potential buyers to opportunities can lead to successful outcomes. Discussions in the literature on information services also highlighted the importance of making the reporting process for empty homes as streamlined as possible and publicising and promoting options for owners, with coordinating organisations like SEHP playing a role in accessibly collating the support available.

- **Financial measures**

  Financial measures discussed in the literature focused on Council Tax arrangements, loan and grant funding and reduced VAT on renovation of empty homes. Discretionary Council Tax discounts and premiums were, on the one hand, reported as positive evidence of powers which can be tailored and made responsive to local needs while avoiding penalising owners who are legitimately unable to act. However, several studies reported uneven application which meant the use of these discretionary powers was not maximised. In addition, some literature discussed the tension between perspectives of property as a home versus an asset and questioned whether the level of premiums was high enough to disincentivise wealthier empty property owners who may be motivated by long term gains resulting from rising property prices.

  Case study examples illustrated the different ways loans and grants have been used to incentivise and support empty home owners who want to bring them back into use but find it difficult to do so due to practical cost barriers. A theme emerged relating to the particular success of councils who designed longer term strategic plans to access funding pots and used a targeted approach to maximise the social impact of available financial measures to contribute to wider regeneration projects. Although the tax, loan and grant interventions differ in their specifics the work of SEHP and EHOs, and equivalent roles in other UK nations, was described throughout the literature as central to raising awareness of, and supporting routes to access for, these available forms of financial support.

- **Statutory Powers**

  The most common statutory powers for empty homes in the UK were found to be CPOs in Scotland and EDMOs in England and Wales. Whilst these tools were presented as an option to unblock some of the most problematic empty homes, the main drawback reported in the literature is the length of

time and considerable resource required to undertake the processes involved. Financial and staffing constraints, lack of legal expertise or a mixture of these factors were the most cited barriers to using statutory powers. EDMOs can be advantageous because they facilitate empty homeowners to retain ownership, and attempt to balance the rights of property owners with the duty to secure occupation of empty properties in the public interest. However, the evidence highlighted significant capital outlay with attendant financial risk for LAs and EDMOs were reported to be subject to the same long timeframes as CPOs. Statutory powers were reported to be used as a last resort, with information provision, incentives and encouragement preferred to support owners to voluntarily bring their home back into use.

- **Community action and partnership approaches**

  Community action initiatives and partnerships were found to carry out empty homes work in conjunction with actions to address other social and economic priorities. The case studies reviewed illustrated potential for projects bringing empty homes back into use to contribute to providing skills training and routes into work; reducing homelessness; increasing affordable housing provision; improving energy efficiency of homes; and engaging communities in regeneration. The literature indicated partnerships had the most lasting impact when they brought together housing associations with LAs, private owners and not-for-profit groups with the expertise of EHOs and their equivalents to identify and access multi-agency funding.

  Challenges to these approaches identified in this review centred on the need to overcome different expectations and capacities between the groups involved and the complexities of funding eligibility, as well as tight schedules and budgets. Alignment of the different participants' values towards the common goal of bringing empty homes back into use for community social impact was found to be important to achieve delivery.

Further research

Based on the findings of this evidence review, research on the following topics may help to understand the complexities related to bringing long term empty homes back into use by:

- understanding potential behavioural impacts of planned interventions, such as changes to taxation, as these may have unintended consequences on rates of empty homes

- exploring the practicalities of partnership management to increase the evidence on how shared culture can develop between public, private and third sector groups and accelerate achieving common goals around empty homes work.

8. Selection of case study resources

Community Action on Empty Homes: Using empty homes to regenerate communities
6 demonstration projects discussed in detailed report
Link to Community Action on Empty Homes case studies

Empty homes: council action to tackle empty homes- a practical guide to empty homes
Tanner, Hilary 2013 Local Government Association
Short case studies of English Council initiatives and housing association and voluntary sector partnerships. Note this is dated, but presents a range of approaches in detail.
Link to Local Government Association case studies

50 out-of-the-box solutions to homelessness and housing exclusion
FEANTSA; Fondation Abbé Pierre; Housing Europe 2019
Chapter 2 'Innovation in Construction and Renovation' and Chapter 3 'Activating Vacant Stock and Land' give short summary case studies from Europe, including several good practice examples from the UK
Link to Feantsa case studies

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Appendix I

Glossary

CIC Community Interest Company
A special type of limited company which exists to benefit the community rather than private shareholders

CPO Compulsory Purchase Order
A legal power to purchase land or buildings without the owner's agreement if there is considered to be a strong enough case in the public interest of doing so

EDMO Empty Dwellings Management Order
A discretionary power for LAs in England and Wales to take over management of long-term empty properties in private ownership

EHO Empty Homes Officer
A dedicated member of staff within a local council with responsibility for bringing empty homes back in to use

EHPO Empty Homes Project Officer
The equivalent title for an EHO in Wales

EPC Energy Performance Certificate

Gives a property an energy efficiency rating and is needed whenever a property is built, sold or rented

LA Local Authority
A LA is an elected council with responsibility for providing a range of local services

LHA Local Housing Allowance
A housing benefit for tenants renting from private landlords

RSL Registered Social Landlord
Housing associations providing homes for social rent

SEHP Scottish Empty Homes Partnership
An organisation funded by the Scottish Government and hosted by Shelter Scotland which was formed in 2010 after a review of the private rented sector identified that empty homes can play an important part in meeting Scotland's housing challenges

VAT Value Added Tax
A tax added to most products and services, with some exemptions and rate reductions for specific products and services

social research

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