



Habitat
for Humanity®

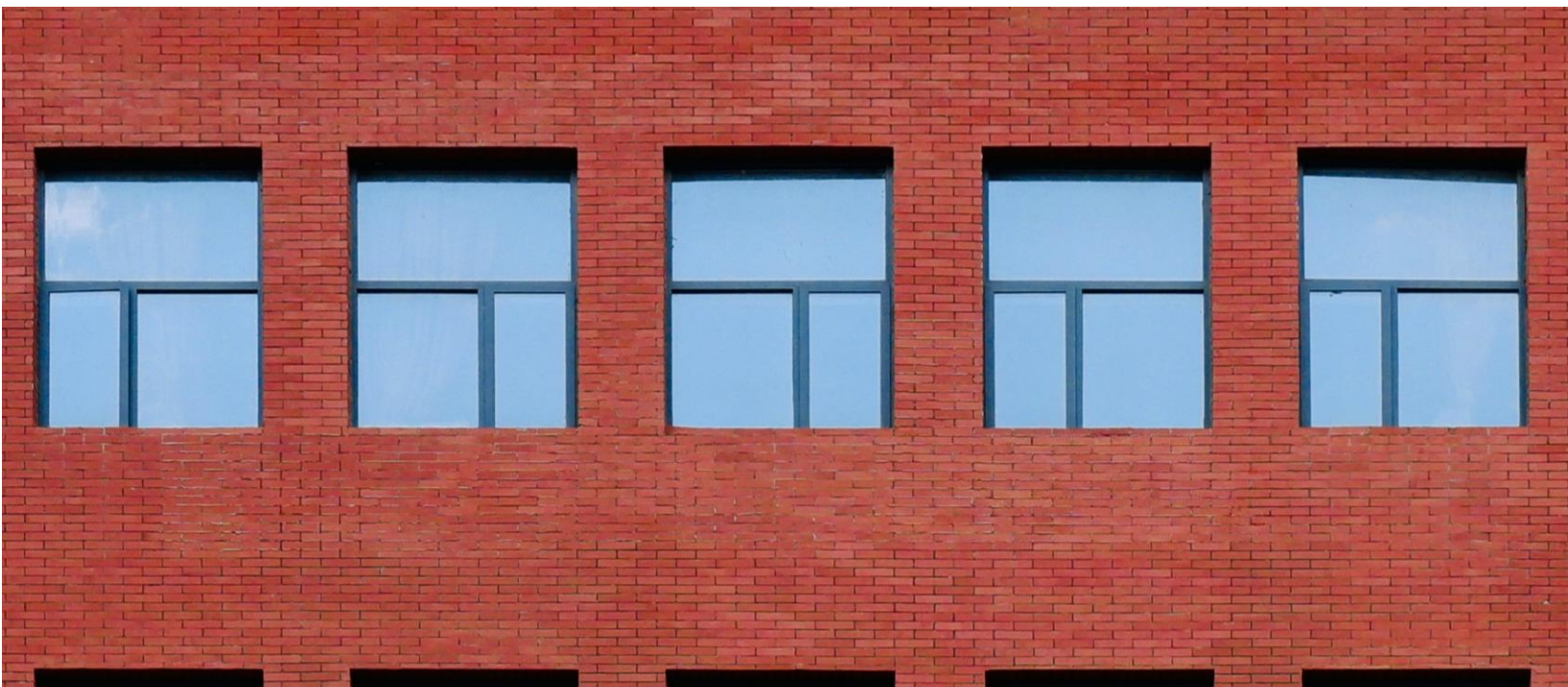
**Empty Spaces
to Homes**

Repurposing Empty Spaces

**Addressing the Housing Crisis Across
England, Scotland and Wales in 2025**

August 2025

habitat.org.uk



Title: Repurposing Empty Spaces: Addressing the Housing Crisis Across England, Wales and Scotland in 2025

Commissioned by: Habitat for Humanity GB

Produced by: The Empty Homes Network

Copyright: Habitat for Humanity GB 2025

Published: August 2025

Habitat for Humanity Great Britain
Habitat for Humanity GB
268 Bath Road
Slough
SL1 4DX

www.habitatforhumanity.org.uk/our-work-in-great-britain

Enquiries: hello@habitatforhumanity.org.uk

Registered company number: 3012626



Empty Spaces to Homes is supported by:



Laudes ———
—— Foundation



Table of contents

04	Foreword
05	Executive Summary
10	Introduction
12	Research Background
21	Statistical Review
35	Geographical Insight: Need, Supply, Opportunity
52	Standout Examples of Repurposed Vacant Spaces
64	Research Summary
66	Recommendations
69	Appendix 1: Resources and References
72	Appendix 2: Research Data



Foreword

The solutions to some of society's most pressing challenges are often hiding in plain sight. Across the UK, underused and vacant buildings represent not just missed opportunities, but untapped potential to build more resilient, inclusive communities.

This belief has shaped the work of the Empty Spaces to Homes Coalition, which has long supported the transformation of dormant spaces into safe, affordable housing.

The latest research builds on groundwork laid in 2021, offering timely insights into how these spaces can be repurposed to help address the housing crisis. The scale of need is stark: as of March 2025, over 131,000 households in England were living in temporary accommodation, including more than 169,000 children. These figures reflect a deeper crisis, millions of families facing unaffordable housing or living in unsuitable homes.

Meanwhile, thousands of empty commercial buildings, often well located and well connected, sit vacant. This report explores how these spaces can be reimaged as part of the solution, while acknowledging the complexities of mobilising them. Many are owned by local authorities grappling with the rising costs of temporary housing.

The case studies featured here illuminate what's possible when organisations with shared purpose and expertise collaborate. We recognise the pressures faced by local authorities, housing associations, and charities, and the difficulty of long-term investment amid urgent demands. That's why cross-sector collaboration is not just valuable, but vital.

The Empty Spaces to Homes Coalition is a network of organisations committed to unlocking the potential of vacant buildings, through research, advocacy, and direct delivery. Whether through policy change or practical implementation, there are many ways to create impact.

This report is more than a reflection. It's a call to action. The opportunity is real and the need is urgent. The path forward lies in working together to turn empty spaces into lasting homes.

The Empty Spaces to Homes Coalition

Executive Summary

Habitat for Humanity Great Britain (HfHGB) works to build stronger communities through innovative housing solutions. Empty Spaces to Homes is our flagship domestic programme focused on harnessing the social, economic and environmental potential of empty non-residential buildings. Through research, advocacy, demonstrator projects and collaboration, we aim to create and scale social and genuinely affordable homes for those in housing need across Great Britain.

This research, conducted by the Empty Homes Network for HfHGB, focuses on the underutilized potential of empty buildings, and particularly those owned by local authorities. Building on research from 2021, we show that the scale of the opportunity has grown for local authorities to take direct action to tackle the housing crisis using assets already in their ownership.

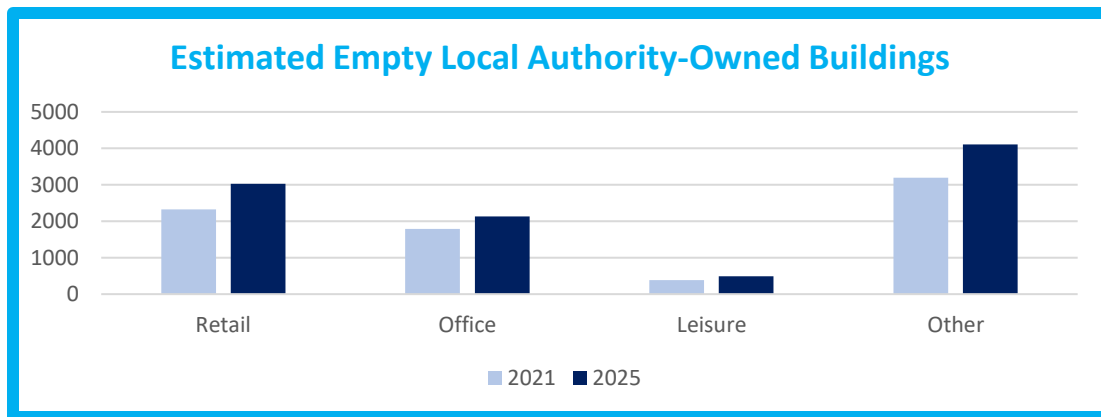
The housing crisis is now more acute than ever. Local authorities face mounting temporary accommodation costs, homelessness has reached record levels, and the delivery of genuinely affordable and social housing has stagnated. In this context, the reuse of empty buildings, and in particular those already in public ownership, offers one of the most immediate and socially beneficial interventions available. This paper aims to equip policymakers, practitioners, and partners with the evidence and insight needed to encourage further progress in this area of work, and to realise that potential.

The research draws on a wide set of national and local datasets, including data on housing need presentations, empty and second home statistics, new-build housing completions and housing need indicators. It also builds in learning from across the country, highlighting where efforts to reuse publicly owned buildings have succeeded, and where barriers remain. The analysis is framed by three key objectives:

- To assess how and where empty buildings, particularly those not previously used for housing, might be repurposed to help meet housing need
- To identify the types of places and conditions where such repurposing is both necessary and achievable
- To support local and national policymakers, in highlighting what can be achieved based on evidence of opportunity, impact, and feasibility

Research Highlights

- Commercial vacancy is rising across the UK: **The estimated number of vacant local authority-owned properties rose from 6,324 to 8,242**, indicating growing volumes of underused public assets, particularly in retail, office, and leisure sectors. With no central system to track their availability, status or potential housing value, buildings that could be transformed into homes are too often sold for private redevelopment, left vacant indefinitely, or demolished.



- The drivers of empty space vary across regions and building types:** In some areas, changes to working patterns post-COVID have left offices underused or obsolete. In others, cuts to public services have led to school closures, the rationalisation of healthcare estates, and the loss of community facilities.
- Opportunities presented by vacant spaces to create housing are increasing: **Over 25,000 new homes could be created across the UK by converting vacant local authority-owned offices and shops**, highlighting the untapped potential for local authorities to take an active lead in tackling the housing crisis.
- All nations are experiencing the trend, albeit differently: Average vacant properties per council increased by 30% in England, 18% in Scotland, and 44% in Wales, revealing **widespread but uneven vacancy pressures**, with Wales seeing notable shifts from retail to office and leisure voids.
- Examples of good practice exist: **Success is usually enabled by strong local political leadership, access to capital funding, and cross-departmental coordination**, often involving housing, estates, planning, and regeneration teams. There are also notable contributions by housing associations and community-led organisations who have the expertise and flexibility to bring disused buildings back into meaningful use. However, across much of the country, a lack of capacity, restrictive finances and competing priorities continue to restrict progress.

- Vacant building maintenance and upkeep are draining public resources: **Councils are incurring significant annual costs to secure and maintain empty premises, alongside the huge cost of temporary accommodation**, making reuse a more efficient investment.
- Beyond local authority-owned assets, in England alone recent data suggests **there are around 175,000 privately owned empty non-residential buildings which may have the potential for over 500,000 homes**.
- The reuse of buildings is not a niche or marginal concern: **In many communities, conversion represents a significant route to increasing affordable housing supply in the short to medium term**. Reuse can also bring wider benefits: revitalising local areas, preserving built heritage, supporting net zero ambitions through carbon savings, and making the most of public-owned land and assets. These advantages are particularly valuable in places where traditional development is limited by land availability, planning conflict, or infrastructure limitations.
- A wide range of building types can and have been repurposed which shows that this is a viable and creative option across the built environment: From police stations, care homes and schools to pubs, shops and dentist surgeries, **a diverse range of buildings are being reused, repurposed, or planned for residential conversion**, showcasing strong potential for flexible conversion.
- Strategic reuse can revitalise high streets: Projects in the South East and Wales, such as Folkestone's Queens House and Swansea's High Street Hub, demonstrate how **residential conversions can also tackle anti-social behaviour, improve footfall, and bring vitality back to town centres** by reactivating long-vacant spaces.
- Councils are already delivering: Across all UK nations, **local authorities are successfully converting their own disused buildings into affordable or supported housing**, showing these schemes are viable, scalable and often deliverable without acquiring new land.
- National leadership and funding are now needed to scale impact: Evidence from Historic England, RCKA Architects, and the Bevan Foundation confirms that **converting council-owned assets into homes is not only possible but impactful**. The challenge now is to build consistent policy frameworks and targeted funding that help more councils bring forward projects currently stalled by planning, risk, financial or viability barriers.



A more joined-up, strategic approach is needed at both local and national levels. Public buildings should not be disposed of without first considering whether they could meet local housing need. Local authorities must be better supported to retain and repurpose these assets, rather than being forced to sell them to meet short-term budget gaps. And new investment models and policy incentives are needed to ensure that repurposing projects, especially those aimed at affordable and supported housing, are viable, scalable, and sustainable.

This paper calls on national government to show leadership in this space. That includes improving data transparency on publicly-owned property, embedding housing reuse into asset management strategies, and creating a long-term funding mechanism to support conversion and retrofit projects. It also calls on local authorities to be more ambitious in identifying, assessing, and acting on the housing potential of their own disused spaces.

Above all, the paper invites a shift in mindset. If we are to meet housing need at scale and at speed, we cannot rely on new build alone. The stock of existing, unused buildings across England, Scotland and Wales is a vital, and yet consistently underused, part of the solution. Many of these buildings already belong to the public. The challenge is not acquiring them, but recognising their value, aligning the right policy tools, and acting strategically to bring them into use.

We must move from a system that demolishes or disposes of public buildings in isolation, to one that sees these assets as part of a living, evolving infrastructure of place. We must think not only about homes that can be built, but about homes that can be created from what we already have. In this way, the underlying theme of the paper; “create homes, rather than build homes”, is not just a provocation, but a policy imperative. This report provides the evidence base, successful examples and case studies, and the practical rationale to support that shift.

Policy Recommendations

- Central government, working with local authorities, the Valuation Office Agency, and other stakeholders, should **develop a standardised national dataset on publicly-owned vacant property**, including duration of vacancy, ownership status, previous use, and location. This data should comprise information of property owned by public bodies such as central government, local authorities, the Fire Service, National Health Service, Ministry of Defence and HMRC.
- We need **a national strategy that treats vacant commercial premises as a cross-cutting policy opportunity** rather than a narrow sectoral issue. This strategy should align housing, planning, economic development, and climate objectives, recognising the potential of commercial reuse to support housing delivery, reduce emissions, and regenerate struggling places.
- England should learn from Scotland and Wales and **embed a place-led framework that enables the reuse of vacant commercial premises for community and housing use**, especially where such reuse supports local need and climate objectives. This would also provide clearer policy justification for local authorities wishing to challenge speculative or inappropriate commercial-to-residential conversions under permitted development rights.

- While existing funding for housing and regeneration is often channelled into newbuild or large-scale infrastructure, **a dedicated programme is needed to unlock the potential of smaller, underused commercial spaces, particularly for social and community-led housing.**
- **Local authorities should be supported to take on a more strategic convenor role** through enhanced planning powers (e.g. productive use of Article 4 directions, local design codes), access to revolving acquisition funds, and the ability to lead or broker cross-sector partnerships with housing associations, developers, and community groups. National government should also invest in training and guidance to help local planning and regeneration teams identify and bring forward viable reuse opportunities within existing commercial stock.
- Habitat for Humanity and its partners should **use the findings of this paper to identify high-potential localities for pilot projects** that explore the adaptive reuse of vacant commercial premises for affordable and social housing.
- Habitat for Humanity and its network should **explore the development of an investment and delivery model tailored to unlocking underused commercial premises.** This might include creating a collaborative framework with housing associations, local authorities, and ethical investors to pool resources, share risk, and support feasibility, acquisition, and conversion costs.



Introduction

In 2021, Habitat for Humanity Great Britain published a major research paper examining the role that underused buildings could play in addressing the growing housing crisis in England, Scotland and Wales. That paper laid the groundwork for a broader understanding of vacancy, not just in terms of long-term empty homes, but across the wide and varied landscape of disused non-residential spaces, many of which had never been used for housing. It highlighted the opportunity to unlock value in existing assets, particularly those held in public ownership, to help meet escalating housing need, and especially in a context of limited new build supply and constrained local authority budgets.

Four years on, the need to build on that analysis has grown in urgency. The housing crisis has deepened across multiple fronts: homelessness and housing insecurity have risen, temporary accommodation placements are at record highs, and social housing availability continues to decline. At the same time, the number of disused and underused buildings has grown, driven largely by changing patterns of use and reduced demand. Despite this, there remains no national strategy for identifying or repurposing these empty non-residential buildings, for residential use.

This paper follows on and builds directly upon the 2021 work. It expands the original research with updated data, deeper place-based analysis, and a sharpened focus on the specific opportunity presented by publicly-owned empty spaces. While long-term empty homes remain part of the picture, this paper continues to highlight the importance and opportunity presented by empty non-residential spaces, recognising their strategic importance and potential within the housing system.

The rationale behind this research is clear: while England, Scotland and Wales continue to face rising levels of housing need, they also possess a substantial volume of physical space that is no longer in use. Much of this space sits within the public estate, owned by councils, government departments, and associated public bodies. These assets, often centrally located and structurally sound, offer a rare opportunity to meet local housing need without the delays, costs and carbon intensity associated with new build development. Yet they are often overlooked or disposed of for commercial redevelopment without any assessment of their potential to contribute to housing supply.

This paper seeks to change that. It asks what role repurposed buildings could play in helping to address housing pressures; where the opportunity is greatest; and what conditions; policy, financial, operational; are required to unlock it. It also examines why so many of these buildings remain unused, even in places where housing need is most acute, and what lessons can be drawn from areas that have successfully brought publicly-owned or commercial buildings back into use as housing.

Specifically, the aims of this research are twofold: To investigate the extent and nature of non-residential vacancy within public ownership, with a particular focus on buildings not previously used for residential purposes; and to explore the relationship between empty spaces, housing need and affordability, identifying where repurposing may offer the greatest impact.

This work is stubborn in the belief that creating homes from what we already have is not only possible, but essential. It responds to growing awareness that solving the housing crisis will require more than new build housing alone. The environmental, financial and spatial limitations of a “build-first” model are becoming increasingly clear. By contrast, repurposing disused public buildings offers a low-carbon, often lower-cost and community-oriented way to meet housing need.

What emerges from the research is both a challenge and a call to action. Despite the growing stock of disused space, repurposing remains under-prioritised in both national and local policy. Buildings are too often lost to speculative redevelopment or allowed to decay indefinitely. Local authorities frequently lack the capacity, funding, or legal frameworks to intervene strategically. Yet where efforts have been made to align housing and asset management goals, the results are clear: new homes can be created quickly and sustainably, often at lower cost than many new build schemes.

The theme of this report “create homes, rather than build homes”, captures this shift in thinking. It reflects a growing understanding that not every solution requires a fresh start. Sometimes, the most powerful responses lie in the buildings we already have; the overlooked, underused, and forgotten spaces that could become homes with the right vision and support.

This paper offers both the evidence and successful examples to realise that vision. It is intended as a practical resource for policymakers, planners, housing providers, and campaigners alike, and anyone working to meet the housing need in a way that is creative, strategic, and sees potential in the real opportunities that already exist in our towns, cities and communities.



Research Background

Rationale

England faces an acute and deepening housing crisis. Rising levels of homelessness, increasing demand for temporary accommodation, and chronic undersupply of genuinely affordable and social housing have left many local authorities struggling to meet even basic housing need. At the same time, a growing number of buildings stand empty, underused, or surplus to operational requirements. These include former offices, care homes, NHS facilities, community centres, schools, and other civic or institutional buildings that, although no longer serving their original function, could be repurposed to provide secure, affordable homes.

This research is driven by the recognition that solving the housing crisis requires not just building new homes, but making better use of the buildings and spaces we already have. While new build housing remains important, it is not always the most viable or timely solution, in the face of financial constraints, land shortages, planning barriers, and environmental imperatives. Repurposing existing structures, especially those already owned by public bodies, offers a faster, lower-carbon, and supported alternative.

Despite this potential, the reuse of empty buildings remains largely underexplored and underutilised. National housing policy continues to focus primarily on new build delivery, while estate management and public asset disposal processes too often prioritise short-term financial return over long-term social value. As a result, buildings that could be converted into much-needed housing are either sold off for commercial redevelopment, left vacant for years, or demolished at significant cost.

This research aims to challenge that status quo. It builds on the Habitat for Humanity 2021 research, which first highlighted the wider opportunity of reusing not only empty homes but also non-residential buildings to meet housing need. This second iteration deepens that analysis, focusing more explicitly on the repurposing of empty spaces and examining how they might be strategically brought back into use to address the housing emergency.

The timing of this research is critical. Local authorities across England are under immense pressure to reduce spending while responding to rising housing demand. At the same time, many are reviewing their public estates, rationalising assets, and disposing of buildings that no longer serve frontline functions. This creates both a challenge and an opportunity: without strategic intervention, valuable buildings may be lost to speculative development or decline. With the right vision and support, they could be transformed into high-quality, affordable homes.

The research also responds to wider policy shifts. The net zero agenda, the growing interest in retrofit and reuse, and the increased focus on place-based regeneration all point to the need for more imaginative, sustainable approaches to housing delivery. Repurposing public buildings sits at the intersection of these goals. Ultimately, this research seeks to support a shift in both policy and practice, from a system focused on building from scratch, to one that also invests in what already exists. By providing a clear evidence base and strategic framework for action, it aims to help national

and local decisionmakers unlock the dormant housing potential of empty spaces, creating homes from existing, along with building new.

Research Aims and Objectives

Building on the foundations laid in 2021, this research represents a significant step forward in understanding how publicly owned vacant properties can be repurposed to tackle the UK's housing crisis and support community-led regeneration. Commissioned by Habitat for Humanity Great Britain and led by the Empty Homes Network, this research is focused on refreshing the data, deepening place-based analysis, and identifying practical pathways for converting underused assets into homes and community infrastructure.

The original study in 2021 estimated that over 7,000 publicly owned commercial buildings across the UK had been vacant for more than 12 months. These findings raised important questions about how public land and property are managed, and how they could be more effectively used to deliver social value. Since then, the national landscape has continued to evolve, shaped by ongoing economic uncertainty, a deepening housing crisis, and continued changes in the use of town centres and high streets. This research aims to assess how these trends have impacted vacancy levels and to explore what has changed in the years since the original report. It adopts a dual approach, combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative stakeholder engagement. It seeks not only to map current vacancy levels, but also to uncover the reasons behind them and the practical steps that could unlock new opportunities.

The study is structured around the following core activities:

- **Data Refresh and Comparative Analysis:** FOI requests have been issued to the same local authorities and public bodies that responded in 2021. The goal is to produce a robust, comparative dataset that shows how vacancy levels have shifted over the past five years, taking into account the longer-term impacts of COVID-19, shifts in public sector service delivery, and changes in local regeneration policy.
- **Regional Focus and Opportunity Identification:** Building on the findings from the first study, the research places particular emphasis on high-priority areas identified in 2021, as well as new and emerging locations where there may be scope for pilot interventions. These include a mix of urban and rural settings, with consideration given to regional inequalities, levels of housing need, and the availability of local partners.
- **Stakeholder Engagement and Feasibility Exploration:** The study includes interviews with local authorities and housing providers to understand the practical enablers and barriers to repurposing empty buildings. It also explores appetite for participation in pilot projects aligned with Habitat for Humanity's mission.
- **Needs Assessments in Selected Locations:** In-depth assessments are being carried out in a range of locations, such as Greater Manchester, Barking & Dagenham, Edinburgh, and Bristol,

to better understand local housing pressures, the condition and type of vacant assets, and the infrastructure required to bring them back into use.

- **Policy and Practice Review:** The research continues to examine the policy environment, with attention to planning, funding, and regulatory changes that have occurred since 2021. It also investigates the alignment between local housing strategies, town centre regeneration efforts, and national funding streams.

The overarching aim of the 2025 project is to build a stronger evidence base and clearer case for the reuse of publicly owned empty buildings as part of a broader strategy to address housing need. Specifically, the research aims to: Update and expand the statistical analysis of public sector vacancy across England, Scotland, and Wales, highlighting patterns, trends, and regional disparities; Identify priority areas for potential pilot projects, informed by both quantitative need (housing demand, deprivation, vacancy density) and qualitative readiness (stakeholder appetite, planning feasibility, funding access); Support replication of successful models, such as those trialled in Barking & Dagenham, by examining what makes these projects work and how they can be adapted elsewhere; Provide actionable recommendations for public bodies, funders, and delivery partners to support the reuse of vacant properties, focusing on practical, place-based solutions that respond to local need; Strengthen Habitat for Humanity's strategic positioning as a key partner in community-led housing regeneration by identifying opportunities for investment, collaboration, and impact.

This study presents a number of timely and strategic opportunities. As public bodies continue to grapple with strained budgets and asset rationalisation, there is a growing need to rethink how public property is used and to align this with broader social goals. The shift towards hybrid working, the closure of underused facilities, and the persistent crisis in affordable housing all present a unique window for action. By revisiting and updating the 2021 findings, this research can offer local authorities and partners clear insight into how the vacancy landscape is shifting, and where untapped potential lies. It also offers an opportunity to influence national conversations about the future of town centres, the role of public land in addressing housing need, and the practical tools needed to deliver change.

The study also explores emerging building types such as former care homes, multiple-unit facilities, and flats above shops, as increasingly important components of the vacancy landscape. These sites often fall outside conventional housing strategies but may offer rich potential if barriers can be overcome.

Housing Need

The UK is facing an escalating social housing crisis, with demand consistently outstripping supply across England, Scotland and Wales. A convergence of factors, including rising homelessness, insufficient social housing stock, long waiting lists, and heavy reliance on temporary accommodation, has created a situation that is both economically unsustainable and socially damaging. Data and commentary from housing experts and advocacy organisations highlight the scale of the issue and its severe consequences for families, local authorities and public services.

According to [Shelter](#), at least 354,000 people are currently homeless in England, with around 279,000 of them living in temporary accommodation. This marks a 14% increase over the past twelve months, underscoring the growing failure to provide stable, affordable homes. Shelter attributes this crisis to decades of underinvestment in social housing and warns that the country is “sleepwalking into a homelessness emergency”. The situation is similarly concerning in Scotland, where the number of people in temporary accommodation has reached a 22-year high, with over 15,000 households now in such settings according to [Inside Housing](#). The Scottish Government has acknowledged the strain on services, particularly as local authorities struggle to secure appropriate placements.

London, as ever, remains an epicentre of the crisis. [Trust for London](#) reports that the capital accounts for 60% of England’s temporary accommodation population. Boroughs are now spending more than £1.7 billion per year on temporary housing, money which could be used more effectively to build permanent homes. The scale of the backlog is enormous. The social housing waiting list in England currently includes over 1.2 million households, and research by JLL suggests this could grow to two million people within the next decade. Even more worrying, their modelling indicates that clearing this list could take more than 20 years at current building rates ([Inside Housing](#)).

In some areas, waiting times are nothing short of astonishing. Some of the most severe pressures on social housing can be seen in London and parts of the South East, where estimated waiting times for social housing have reached extreme levels. Eight of the ten English local authorities with the longest estimated times to clear their housing registers are in London, with some boroughs facing backlogs that could take over a century to address at current rates ([BBC News](#)). Outside London, places like Mansfield and Slough are also facing daunting projections, over 70 years in some cases, underscoring that this is not just a capital city problem, but a sign of a wider, structural failure. Such lengthy delays are symptomatic of broader systemic failings; insufficient stock, lack of strategic investment, and over-reliance on short-term fixes.

Even in less pressured areas, local authorities are unable to meet growing demand. A report from [iHowz](#) highlights that many applicants across the UK are forced into insecure or overcrowded private rentals while they wait for a social home, sometimes for decades. Temporary accommodation, once conceived as a short-term solution, has now become a semi-permanent reality for many families. A deep-dive analysis by [Inside Housing](#) reveals that the economics of the system are broken. Councils often lease homes from private landlords at high rents, pushing local budgets to breaking point. In many cases, housing benefit and central government support fail to cover the full cost, leaving local authorities with significant shortfalls.

But beyond the financial burden lies a human one. Families placed in temporary accommodation often live in unsuitable, overcrowded or unsafe conditions, and are regularly uprooted with little notice. These displacements can be highly disruptive, particularly for children, affecting their education, wellbeing and social development. Despite being labelled “temporary”, these arrangements can last months or even years, leaving families stuck with no clear route to a permanent home.

In an insightful piece for Prospect Magazine, housing is described not only as a supply issue but as a distributional problem ([Prospect](#)). The UK does not lack housing per-se, it lacks housing where it is needed, and at the right price. The housing system increasingly favours homeowners and landlords, while renters find themselves priced out of both private and social options.

Regional imbalances further exacerbate the crisis. While the North of England and parts of Scotland and Wales have underused housing stock, demand is highly concentrated in urban centres such as

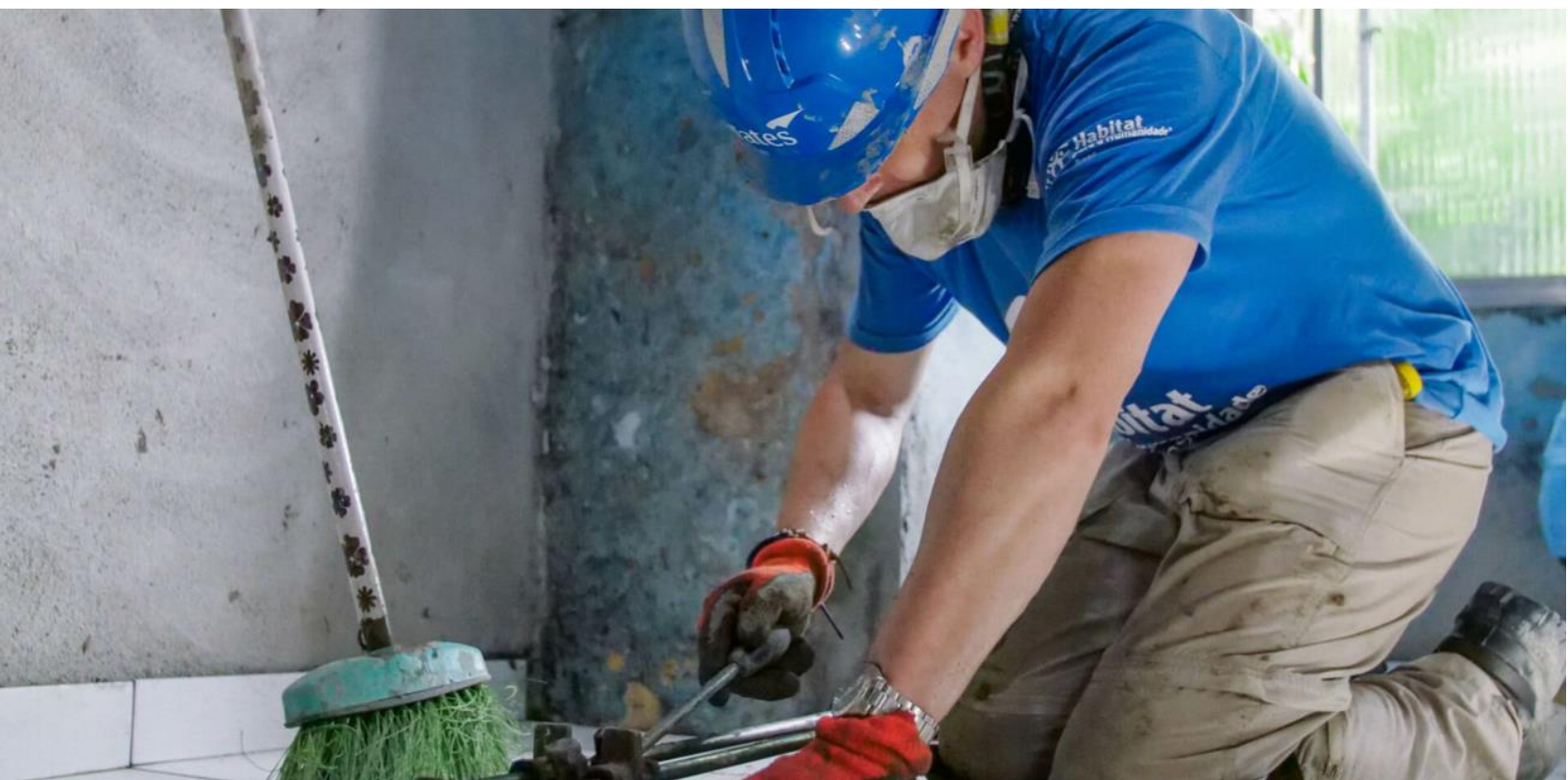
London, Manchester and Birmingham. National housing policy has historically failed to accommodate these local dynamics, often treating housing need as uniform across the country.

Several persistent barriers limit the creation of new social homes: High land prices, especially in cities, make building new homes costly and less attractive to developers; Planning system bottlenecks delay projects and add complexity; Inadequate funding and borrowing powers constrain councils and housing associations; Policy inconsistency between local and national government hampers strategic delivery.

Compounding the issue is the legacy of the Right to Buy policy, which has removed significant volumes of social housing stock without adequate replacement. While some councils have begun buying back former council homes, the process is slow and often costlier than building new ones.

To address the crisis, many have called for significant investment in social housing, with Shelter and others suggesting a target of at least 90,000 new social homes per year. Such an initiative would not only reduce waiting lists but also relieve pressure on temporary accommodation and stabilise private sector rents. A fundamental rethinking of housing as a basic human right, rather than a commodity, is gaining traction. Policy proposals include expanding rent controls, boosting tenant protections, reforming land use laws, and increasing public land availability for social housing development.

Better data, transparency and coordination are also crucial. The housing crisis does not manifest the same way across the UK, and localised strategies, backed by national support, are essential to deliver the right types of homes, in the right places, for those in most need. The demand for social housing in the UK has reached a critical level. With hundreds of thousands living in temporary accommodation, over a million on waiting lists, and local councils financially overstretched, the social contract around housing is under threat. While the causes are complex, the need for bold, coordinated action is clear.



Housing Supply

Social housing supply in the UK is failing to keep pace with demand, contributing to record waiting lists, prolonged use of temporary accommodation, and worsening housing outcomes for some of the country's most vulnerable people. While much of the public discourse centres around the lack of new homes being built, the broader picture also involves underused existing stock, regional inefficiencies, and missed opportunities for adaptation and retrofit. This summary explores the state of the UK's social housing supply, drawing on recent articles and data across England, Scotland and Wales.

Despite over 1.2 million households waiting for social housing across the UK ([iHowz](#)), new construction remains inadequate. While the private sector continues to dominate housing delivery, the rate of new social housing completions has declined sharply since the 1980s and remains well below the estimated 90,000 homes per year needed to meet current demand.

A growing body of evidence suggests that the social housing sector is also grappling with underutilised stock. According to [Inside Housing](#), empty homes in the social sector cost the UK economy £1.6 billion in 2023–24 alone. These vacancies represent a significant cost at a time when thousands of people are waiting for a secure and affordable home.

This issue is not limited to England. A [Scottish Housing Regulator](#) report published in February 2025 shows widespread vacancies across Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), with thousands of empty homes recorded across local authority areas. A related [Scottish Housing News](#) article suggests that the causes of these voids vary, from poor condition and lack of investment to difficulties letting properties in rural areas, but the cumulative effect is reduced supply where it's most needed. Similarly, [Housing Management & Maintenance](#) highlights the “empty home epidemic”, reporting that some regions have void rates of up to 10% in council-owned housing stock. Not only does this represent wasted potential, but it further entrenches the inequality between people on waiting lists and unused properties sitting idle.

With the shift to home working and increased commercial vacancies, office-to-residential conversions are being floated as a partial solution to housing shortages. A [Guardian article](#) reports a resurgence of interest in converting office blocks into homes in London. These schemes, often driven by private developers, have often been controversial due to concerns about quality, space standards, and lack of affordable housing quotas. While these conversions can bring derelict spaces back into use, they often fail to deliver genuinely affordable homes. In many cases, permitted development rights have enabled poor-quality units to be created without the usual planning scrutiny or Section 106 obligations that require social housing contributions.

In contrast, some local authorities are now emphasising retrofit and reuse. [The City of London's "retrofit-first" policy](#) marks a shift in focus away from demolition and new-builds towards sustainability, reuse and retention. While this is largely an environmental initiative, it could have important implications for housing supply, particularly if social landlords adopt similar principles to bring void properties back into use.

The supply crisis plays out differently across the UK's nations and regions. In Wales, [the Bevan Foundation](#) argues that simply building more homes will not resolve the crisis. They highlight that Wales already has a high rate of housing stock per capita, but it is unevenly distributed and often

unaffordable or poorly maintained. As they note, housing solutions must focus not just on quantity but also on tenure, affordability, and suitability.

Meanwhile, Scotland faces its own distinctive challenges. The Scottish Government has committed to delivering more affordable homes, yet persistent stock condition issues, ageing housing infrastructure, and underinvestment have limited progress. Thousands of homes remain empty due to disrepair, with some councils struggling to make voids habitable within reasonable timeframes.

Across the board, policy fragmentation and inconsistent funding have hampered the UK's ability to deliver a coherent supply strategy. Different housing standards, targets and delivery models across the devolved nations make benchmarking and planning difficult. National-level housing budgets have also been criticised for favouring homeownership over social and affordable rent, further limiting public-sector delivery capacity.

Tackling supply issues does not solely mean building new homes. There is growing consensus that better use of existing stock could rapidly ease some pressure. This includes; Bringing long-term voids back into use, through investment in repairs, modernisation, and energy efficiency upgrades; Allocating existing stock more effectively, for example, by supporting downsizing or matching larger homes with overcrowded households; Upgrading empty homes in rural or low-demand areas, using incentives or partnerships with community-led housing groups.

Such measures can often deliver housing more quickly and at lower cost than new-builds. However, they require political will, adequate funding, and clearer guidance and support from central government.

The UK's social housing supply crisis is multi-faceted. While construction of new homes is important, it is only part of the picture. Thousands of properties across the country sit empty or underused, while councils and housing associations struggle to maintain and allocate stock efficiently. Regional disparities, policy complexity, and underinvestment have all contributed to the failure to match supply with need. Improving supply will require a dual strategy: building more genuinely affordable homes and unlocking the potential of existing ones. Retrofit-first policies, reforms to housing allocations, and targeted investment in void management can form part of the solution. But essentially, the issue is political, delivering social housing at scale demands long-term commitment, stable funding, and recognition that housing is a public necessity, not just a private commodity.

Meeting Housing Demand

Across the UK, local authorities are increasingly exploring innovative ways to address housing need by repurposing underused or empty buildings. From converting disused offices and faith buildings to retrofitting heritage sites, councils are adopting both pragmatic and imaginative approaches. However, while many are demonstrating leadership, others have been criticised for sitting on costly vacant assets. Several councils are however taking proactive steps to convert redundant public and private buildings into homes, often with sustainability, community benefit, and affordability at the forefront.

[Croydon Council](#) recently approved plans to provide more temporary housing through acquisition and refurbishment of existing buildings. The council's new approach includes refurbishing former care

homes and converting underused assets into flats, thereby reducing reliance on expensive nightly-paid accommodation and improving outcomes for homeless residents.

The [Bevan Foundation's report](#) highlights the potential of converting unused faith-owned buildings into affordable housing. The report identifies dozens of chapels, churches, and other spaces across Wales that could be transformed into much-needed homes. This approach not only addresses housing need but preserves architectural heritage and reinvigorates local communities. [Historic England](#) has shown how converting historic and vacant buildings into homes can be cost-effective and environmentally sustainable. Their research indicates that these schemes bring economic benefits to communities, reduce carbon emissions compared to demolition and rebuild, and preserve valuable heritage assets. The concept of using empty spaces above shops or repurposing redundant high street retail units has gained traction. [Newstalk](#) and [Peterborough Today](#) report that reactivating these spaces could significantly increase housing output, particularly for single-person and young adult accommodation. Peterborough's relatively low vacancy rate is cited as evidence that proactive town centre management can create both commercial vibrancy and residential opportunities.

In the South East, the [No Use Empty initiative](#) showcases Kent County Council's role in revitalising Queens House in Folkestone, a former office building into 32 high-quality town centre flats. The council worked in partnership with private developers, providing a loan to facilitate the conversion and reduce risk. The scheme has been hailed as a model of effective public-private collaboration. An emerging alternative model is the use of [property guardianship](#), where people live in disused buildings at low cost in exchange for maintaining and securing them. Though not a long-term solution, this approach provides interim housing while avoiding decay and security issues. Councils have supported guardianship in some areas as a transitional use before redevelopment. [Architects and community-led schemes](#) are also showing what's possible when councils think beyond standard development. Projects across London have included transforming car parks and garages into mews-style homes, small-scale infill housing and high-density schemes using modular construction, all on council-owned land or disused plots. While many councils are taking action, others face scrutiny for failing to make better use of the assets at their disposal.

In Warwick, a [disused office block is costing the council £265,000 per year](#) to keep empty. Despite this financial burden, no redevelopment plans have yet been confirmed, prompting criticism from local campaigners. The building could house dozens of people but as of yet remains mothballed. Similarly, in East Lancashire, [councils have spent over £100,000 maintaining unused buildings](#), sparking public outcry over wasted money and the lack of clear housing strategies for such sites.

In Bury, a [derelict former school is being auctioned off](#), despite its potential to be repurposed for social or affordable housing. While the council has cited costs and maintenance challenges, campaigners argue that alternative solutions, such as leasing to housing associations, had not been adequately explored. In Matlock, Derbyshire, a [former council office building was put up for sale](#), with local residents calling for it to be repurposed for housing. The site offers good location and infrastructure for residential use, yet the council's decision to offload it to the open market raised concerns about missed affordable housing opportunities.

Heritage-led regeneration presents an important opportunity, especially in town centres. Research from [Historic England](#) shows that integrating housing into historic settings can strengthen local identity, attract investment, and foster sustainable neighbourhoods. Such schemes are often well-received by residents and benefit from combined public and private sector support. Across the UK, a growing

number of councils are recognising the value of reusing existing buildings to meet urgent housing needs. Examples like Queens House in Folkestone, Croydon's approach to temporary housing, and the conversion of faith buildings demonstrate what's possible through partnership models, adaptive design, and creative leadership. These case studies offer useful templates for replication.

Digital platforms are increasingly aiding this work by helping identify viable sites more efficiently. Tools such as [Demolition Map](#), [Nimbus Maps](#), [Landstack](#), [Searchland](#), [Landcycle](#), and [LandTech](#) provide powerful data-driven insights into ownership, planning constraints, and development potential. Meanwhile, the [Brownfield Land Registers](#) offer a national starting point for unlocking underused land with existing planning status. However, the picture remains uneven. In some areas, councils continue to hold on to underused and expensive assets without clear plans for their reuse. In the context of rising homelessness and deepening housing need, failure to act represents both a social and financial liability.

Unlocking these sites is not just about increasing housing numbers—it's about better public asset management, climate-conscious regeneration, and upholding housing as a basic right. Where councils take a strategic and imaginative lead, the impact is visible. Where they delay, opportunities, and public value, are lost.



Statistical Review

This section presents a detailed statistical analysis of key indicators relating to housing need, supply, and opportunity across England, Scotland, and Wales. Building on the original 2021 study, which identified strategic areas of concern and opportunity, the updated analysis for 2025 draws on the most recent data available to explore emerging trends, shifts in local authority activity, and evolving patterns in the housing landscape. The aim of this section is to provide an evidence-based foundation to support policy recommendations, investment priorities, and strategic targeting of resources, particularly for those seeking to tackle housing affordability, vacancy, and underutilisation across the public estate.

The statistical analysis covers several core themes. First, it examines levels of homelessness and housing need, focusing on key indicators such as main homelessness duty decisions, households accepted as homeless with priority need, and the number of households placed in temporary accommodation. These figures serve as a barometer for understanding the pressure on local housing systems and the scale of unmet need facing vulnerable populations. Differences in how these trends have evolved in each of the three nations will also be considered, as they reflect the broader impact of economic pressures, welfare policy, and devolved housing strategies.

Secondly, the analysis reviews the supply of affordable and social housing, with particular attention to new housing completions by both local authorities and housing associations. By comparing delivery figures from 2021 to 2025, this section will assess the scale of new housing provision and the extent to which national and local targets are being met. The data also highlights areas where no new supply has been recorded, providing insight into regional disparities and potential delivery gaps. This is critical to understanding whether supply is keeping pace with rising demand, and where systemic or local barriers may be inhibiting progress.

The third area of focus are empty homes, both in terms of long-term vacant dwellings and properties recorded as second homes. This includes a detailed review of long-term empty homes as a percentage of the overall housing stock, changes since 2019, and the number of properties subject to the empty homes premium. Local authority-owned empty homes and clergy dwellings are also considered. These figures are important not only for measuring waste within the housing system but also for identifying potential sources of stock that could be brought back into use.

A fourth strand of the analysis is focused on vacant non-residential public properties, including local authority-owned retail, office, leisure, and 'other' use buildings. These properties, often overlooked in traditional housing strategies, represent significant potential for repurposing or redevelopment. By comparing data from 2021 and 2025, this section explores how local authorities are managing surplus assets, and where new opportunities may emerge as patterns of service delivery and urban activity continue to evolve post-pandemic. Together, these four strands form the core of the statistical analysis and collectively provide a detailed view of the state of housing and assets across the UK in 2025.

Housing Demand and Supply

The data from the 2021 and 2025 comparison tables below offers a revealing look at the changing landscape of housing demand and supply across England, Scotland, and Wales. It highlights a growing crisis in homelessness, a sharp rise in the use of temporary accommodation, and a slow response in the supply of social housing, despite increased pressures on local authorities and housing associations. Against a backdrop of escalating house prices, the statistics illustrate a concerning mismatch between the rising need for affordable housing and the systems in place to deliver it. The homelessness and housing supply below includes statistics across all local authorities, not just those subject to an FOI request.

In England, the number of main homelessness duty decisions rose dramatically from 62,490 in 2021 to 94,280 by 2025, a rise of over 50%. This increase suggests a mounting pressure on the housing safety net and reflects the deepening impact of cost-of-living pressures, stagnant incomes, and a chronic undersupply of affordable housing. Within that total, the number of individuals found to be homeless, in priority need, and unintentionally homeless rose from 40,030 to 64,960. These figures indicate that the crisis is not just increasing in scale but also affecting a growing number of vulnerable households.

The number of households in temporary accommodation in England climbed from 98,300 in 2021 to 126,040 in 2025, marking a 28% increase. Compared with 2019 levels, the overall rise is 31.5%, which starkly illustrates how temporary accommodation is becoming a long-term feature of England's housing response, rather than the emergency solution it was originally intended and designed to be.

Despite these mounting pressures, the supply side has not kept pace. While housing association completions saw a modest rise from 32,330 in 2021 to 35,320 in 2025, local authority-led completions remain critically low, albeit improving slightly from 1,810 to 2,850. Notably, the number of local authorities recording zero completions rose dramatically from 39 to 274, an alarming indicator of how many are reliant on registered providers and housing associations to deliver their supply.

At the same time, average house prices in England rose from £262,175 in October 2020 to £290,564 in 2025, representing a 14.36% increase since October 2019. The rising market prices are worsening affordability and making home ownership increasingly out of reach for many households, pushing more people toward a social housing system that is under severe strain.

	2021 v 2025 Statistics	England	
		2021	2025
Homelessness	Total number of main duty decisions	62,490	94,280
	Total homeless + priority need + unintentionally homeless	40,030	64,960
	Households in temporary accommodation (March 2020)	98,300	126,040
	% change since 2019	+12.2%	+31.5%
Housing Supply	Housing Association completions, all types & tenures	32,330	35,320
	Local Authorities, all types & tenures	1,810	2,850
	Number of authorities recording zero completions	39	274
	Average house price October 2020	£262,175	£290,564
	% change from October 2019	+5.09%	+14.36

Scotland presents a slightly different picture, though still marked by growing need and inadequate supply. The number of main homelessness duty decisions rose from 31,335 in 2021 to 40,685 in 2025, with a more modest increase in homelessness acceptances, from 30,145 to 33,619. Unlike England, Scotland does not apply a "priority need" test, meaning all applicants are entitled to temporary accommodation. This broader entitlement contributes to both higher levels of statutory presentations and a more inclusive rehousing duty. The number of households in temporary accommodation rose from 11,665 to 16,330, a 40% increase, and a 33% rise since 2019. These figures highlight Scotland's growing use of temporary housing, though the overall scale remains smaller than in England.

In terms of new housing supply, Scotland saw a drop in housing association completions, from 4,204 in 2021 to 3,378 in 2025. Local authority completions rose slightly from 1,465 to 1,715. However, Scotland recorded a rise in the number of authorities with zero completions, from none in 2021 to 13 in 2025. While still relatively low compared to England, this is a concerning sign of stagnation. Average house prices in Scotland rose from £152,680 to £188,807, an increase of 16.81% since 2019, indicating growing affordability pressures across the private market, even in a country with a historically lower cost base than England.

	2021 v 2025 Statistics	Scotland	
		2021	2025
Homelessness	Total number of main duty decisions	31,335	40,685
	Total homeless + priority need + unintentionally homeless	30,145	33,619
	Households in temporary accommodation (March 2020)	11,665	16,330
	% change since 2019	+6%	+33%
Housing Supply	Housing Association completions, all types & tenures	4,204	3,378
	Local Authorities, all types & tenures	1,465	1,715
	Number of authorities recording zero completions	0	13
	Average house price October 2020	£152,680	£188,807
	% change from October 2019	-2.87%	+16.81%

Wales shows some of the most dramatic relative increases in housing demand. The number of main homelessness decisions almost doubled from 7,731 in 2021 to 13,539 in 2025. Acceptances into homelessness support also doubled, from 3,057 to 6,135. Most notably, the number of households in temporary accommodation nearly tripled, from 2,324 to 6,447, a rise of 65% since 2019. This extraordinary jump suggests an accelerating problem, particularly in the wake of the pandemic and ongoing pressures on the private rental sector. On the supply side, Wales shows modest and mixed results. Housing association completions slightly declined from 1,019 in 2021 to 983 in 2025. Local authority completions, however, rose substantially from just 12 to 168 over the same period, reflecting a positive shift in council-led delivery. Yet, the number of authorities recording zero completions rose from three to 17, signalling that delivery remains highly uneven. Average house prices in Wales slightly dipped, from £209,723 in 2020 to £208,197 in 2025, though this still reflects a 7.52% increase since 2019, indicating continued affordability challenges for low-income households.

	2021 v 2025 Statistics	Wales	
		2021	2025
Homelessness	Total number of main duty decisions	7,731	13,539
	Total homeless + priority need + unintentionally homeless	3,057	6,135
	Households in temporary accommodation (March 2020)	2,324	6,447
	% change since 2019	+4%	+65%
Housing Supply	Housing Association completions, all types & tenures	1,019	983
	Local Authorities, all types & tenures	12	168
	Number of authorities recording zero completions	3	17
	Average house price October 2020	£209,723	£208,197
	% change from October 2019	+8.2%	+7.52%

Overall, the statistics show a consistent story across the three nations: homelessness is rising, the number of households in temporary accommodation is increasing sharply, and the response in terms of new social housing delivery is patchy and insufficient. While some areas, particularly in Wales, have seen encouraging increases in local authority building, the broader picture is one of underinvestment and lack of strategic coordination. The dramatic rise in the number of local authorities reporting zero completions in England is especially stark, and points to systemic challenges in the planning, funding, and prioritisation of affordable housing.

Simultaneously, rising house prices across most regions are exacerbating the crisis, putting further pressure on stretched social housing systems. Without urgent and sustained action to ramp up the delivery of genuinely affordable homes, these trends are likely to worsen, deepening housing insecurity for thousands of individuals and families across the UK.

Empty Homes

The data on empty homes from 2021 and 2025 reveals a shifting and varied picture across England, Scotland, and Wales. While England continues to have the highest absolute number of long-term empty homes, all three nations show diverging trends in both empty home levels and how they are managed, taxed, and recorded.

In England, the total number of long-term empty homes decreased slightly from 278,470 in 2021 to 272,080 in 2025. Despite this modest decline, the figure remains 14.5% higher than in 2019, suggesting that while recent efforts may have slowed the growth, the underlying trend remains concerning. Long-term empty homes accounted for 1.06% of England's total housing stock in 2025,

slightly down from 1.12% in 2021. Perhaps more notably, the number of properties charged an Empty Homes Premium rose sharply, from 69,201 to 119,606, representing a 90% increase from 2019. This indicates a growing use of financial disincentives by local authorities to bring properties back into use.

Scotland, by comparison, saw a more significant decrease in long-term empty homes, from 47,333 in 2021 to 43,538 in 2025. This still however marks a 5.91% increase since 2019, less than half the rate of increase seen in England, and suggests greater success in curbing growth. The percentage of total housing stock classed as long-term empty in Scotland also fell, from 1.88% to 1.6%, indicating progress despite overall numbers remaining high.

2021 v 2025 Statistics	England		Scotland		Wales	
	2021	2025	2021	2025	2021	2025
Total number of long-term empty homes	278,470	272,080	47,333	43,538	24,671	22,558
% change of long-term empty homes from 2019	+17.2%	+14.5%	+13.46%	+5.91%	-3.6%	-13.3%
% of total housing stock considered long-term empty	1.12%	1.06%	1.88%	1.6%	1.7%	1.58%
Properties charged an empty homes Premium	69,201	119,606	-	-	4,601	13,220
% difference from 2019	+9.9%	+90.0%	-	-	+41.7%	+79.7%
Total number of registered 2 nd homes	262,953	279,870	24,466	21,606	24,423	23,967
% change of 2 nd homes from 2019	+4.08%	+10.7%	+0.62%	-12.53%	+0.93%	-0.95%
% of total housing stock considered 2 nd homes	1.06%	1.09%	0.97%	0.79%	1.7%	1.68%
Empty Clergy dwellings	1,121	1,203	105	-	-	-
% change of Empty Clergy Dwellings from October 2019	-1.4%	+5.8%	106	-	-	-
Local Authority-owned empty homes	23,974	33,904	-	11,751	-	-
% change of local authority-owned empty homes from 2019	+3.34%	+29.3%	-	-	-	-

In contrast, Wales has taken a significantly different path. It recorded a reduction in long-term empty homes, from 24,671 in 2021 to 22,558 in 2025. This 13.3% drop since 2019 is the most substantial

percentage fall among the three nations. The share of housing stock considered long-term empty fell from 1.7% to 1.58%.

Interestingly, Wales has seen a major rise in the number of properties charged an Empty Homes Premium, increasing from 4,601 in 2021 to 13,220 in 2025, an uplift of 79.7% from 2019. This sharp increase suggests more assertive policy use of council tax premiums to discourage property underuse.

Second homes present a more complex picture. In England, the number of registered second homes rose from 262,953 to 279,870 between 2021 and 2025, a 10.7% increase since 2019. These now represent 1.09% of the total housing stock. Scotland and Wales, by contrast, show declining trends. Scotland's second homes fell from 24,466 to 21,606, a 12.53% decrease, bringing the percentage of housing stock down to 0.79%. In Wales, second homes dropped slightly from 24,423 to 23,967, reversing a previous upward trend and falling by 0.95% since 2019. However, the percentage of total housing stock remains high at 1.68% in 2025, which is more than double Scotland's proportion.

The data on empty clergy dwellings is limited, though England is the only nation with consistent reporting across both years. It shows a small increase from 1,121 in 2021 to 1,203 in 2025, representing a 5.8% rise since October 2019. Figures for Scotland and Wales are not available for comparison, though Wales previously reported 106 empty clergy homes in 2021.

Finally, the number of local authority-owned empty homes rose substantially in both England and Scotland, while Wales did not report comparative figures for 2025. In England, the total jumped from 23,974 in 2021 to 33,904 in 2025, marking a 29.3% increase since 2019. Scotland recorded 11,751 local authority-owned empty homes in 2025, though comparable data from 2021 is unavailable in both Scotland and Wales.

In summary, the data illustrates diverging national trends. England continues to struggle with the highest absolute numbers and a growing reliance on financial penalties like the Empty Homes Premium to address the issue. Scotland is making headway in reducing both long-term empty homes and second homes, potentially reflecting more proactive housing and planning interventions. Wales shows some of the most progressive results, reducing long-term empty homes significantly and doubling down on using the Empty Homes Premium to tackle the issue, though it continues to grapple with a relatively high proportion of second homes. Overall, the figures underscore the pressing need for tailored, regionally-sensitive responses to empty housing, backed by better data and consistent tracking across all categories.

Vacant Spaces

Between 2021 and 2025, the profile of local authority-owned vacant non-residential spaces across England, Scotland and Wales has shifted in ways that reflect wider economic, service delivery and property management trends. Although the 2025 data draws on a smaller number of local authorities than the 2021 baseline, a comparative analysis using proportional data rather than absolute figures, reveals meaningful and significant trends in the composition of vacant property types. This approach enables a more accurate understanding of the evolving nature of vacancy, independent of sample size variations, and helps to highlight strategic opportunities for reuse and repurposing.

Across all three nations, the proportion of vacant retail space provides a useful indication of changing high street dynamics and local authority responses to shifting commercial patterns. In England, the share of vacant spaces classified as retail increased modestly, rising from 30.7% in 2021 to 33.6% in 2025. This suggests a continued prevalence of underused retail units in local authority asset portfolios, possibly linked to the long-term structural decline of physical retail, accelerated by the pandemic and changing consumer habits.

Scotland shows a more stable pattern in this regard, with retail proportions remaining almost flat: from 18.8% to 19.8% over the same period. This consistency may indicate that Scottish local authorities have maintained a relatively balanced and managed retail property portfolio, or that retail decline in certain areas has been offset by redevelopment or disposal strategies.

In contrast, Wales exhibits a striking shift. The proportion of vacant spaces attributed to retail dropped sharply from 45% in 2021 to 20.9% in 2025. This substantial reduction may point to active efforts by Welsh local authorities to dispose of or repurpose redundant retail stock, particularly in town centres. It may also reflect a broader reclassification of property types, where buildings formerly counted under 'retail' have been reassigned to other categories based on more accurate or current use data. Whatever the cause, the result is a rebalancing of the vacant property profile away from retail.

The picture for office space however is mixed but is equally revealing. In England, the proportion of vacant spaces classed as office use fell from 24.5% in 2021 to 18.7% in 2025. Scotland experienced a similar but smaller decline, from 19.4% to 16.5%. These decreases may be indicative of targeted asset rationalisation strategies, particularly in response to the rise in remote and hybrid working arrangements. Local authorities may be consolidating administrative functions into fewer buildings or disposing of surplus offices entirely.

Wales, however, presents a marked contrast. The proportion of vacant office space increased dramatically, from just 13.1% in 2021 to 48% in 2025. This significant jump may be due to a variety of factors: strategic decisions to vacate and consolidate office premises; economic pressures resulting in reduced occupancy across civic or leased spaces; or simply a more precise classification of building use compared to earlier data. The increase suggests that vacant office space is now the dominant non-residential vacancy type in Welsh local authority portfolios, with considerable implications for reuse strategies. It may also reflect the legacy of pandemic-related working shifts, which continue to influence spatial demand across the public sector.

Perhaps the most notable trend across all three nations is the changing profile of leisure space. In England, the proportion of vacant leisure properties rose from 4.9% to 6.6%, while Scotland saw a modest increase from 6.1% to 6.4%. While these shifts are not dramatic in themselves, they suggest a slow but steady accumulation of vacant leisure facilities, potentially due to long-term underinvestment, changing community needs, or rationalisation of duplicated services (e.g., multiple leisure centres or community halls in close proximity). Wales, however, experienced a particularly steep rise in this category, from 4% in 2021 to 24% in 2025. This sixfold increase highlights a growing area of concern for Welsh local authorities, who may now be managing a surplus of former leisure buildings no longer viable in their original function. It may also represent a reclassification of spaces previously labelled as 'other' or 'community' use. Either way, this presents a significant opportunity for imaginative reuse, particularly in ways that meet local housing or social infrastructure needs.

The 'other' use category remains both the largest and the most variable across the three nations. In England, its share increased from 39.6% to 43%, suggesting that a wide range of non-standard buildings such as depots, storage facilities, or hybrid-use spaces, continue to form a significant part of the vacant estate. In Scotland, the proportion of 'other' vacant properties increased more dramatically, from 55.5% to 57.1%, reinforcing the dominance of non-commercial and non-office assets in their

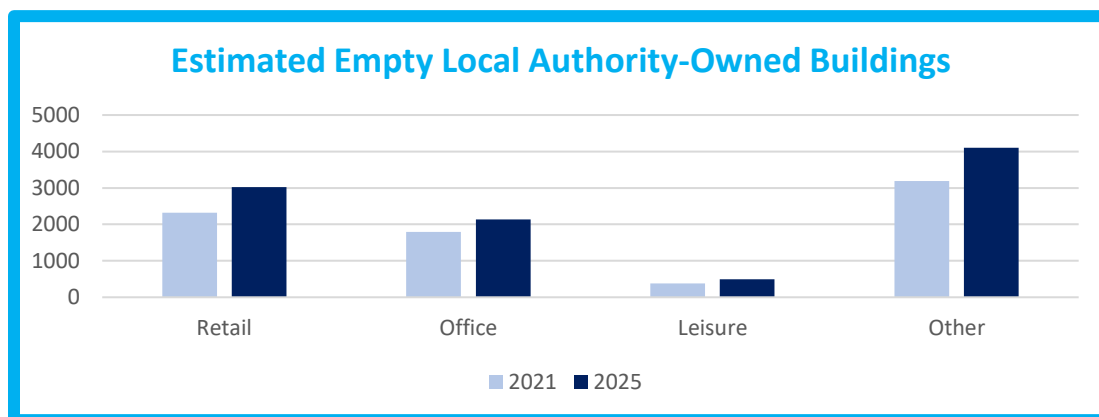
vacant stock. This could reflect rural property profiles, smaller commercial centres, or legacy buildings held for operational or heritage reasons.

2021 v 2025 Statistics	England		Scotland		Wales	
	2021	2025	2021	2025	2021	2025
% of total vacant spaces classed as retail space	30.7%	33.6%	18.8%	19.8%	45%	20.9%
% of total vacant spaces classed as office space	24.5%	18.7%	19.4%	16.5%	13.1%	48.0%
% of total vacant spaces classed as leisure space	4.9%	6.6%	6.1%	6.4%	4%	24.0%
% of total vacant spaces classed as other use space	39.6%	43%	55.5%	57.1%	36.8%	6.9%
Estimated total number of local authority-owned vacant properties	6,324	8,242	942	1,120	447	572
Estimated total number of vacant retail spaces	1,944	2,527	177	209	201	289
Estimated total number of vacant office spaces	1,549	2,013	182	215	58	84
Estimated total number of vacant leisure spaces	309	401	57	67	17	24
Estimate total number of other vacant spaces	2,504	3,255	522	615	164	236

Conversely, Wales saw a sharp reduction in this category, from 36.8% to just 6.9%. This may be due to a refined classification approach or indicate a concerted effort to dispose of or redevelop miscellaneous assets that did not align with clear strategic priorities. Taken together, these shifts suggest a gradual evolution in how local authorities hold and classify vacant non-residential properties. The overall trend is one of diversification: away from a concentration in retail and ‘other’ uses, and towards a broader spread including leisure and office spaces. While the exact drivers of this diversification will vary by region and council, they are likely to include financial pressures, organisational restructuring, changes in public service delivery models, and the effects of evolving community demand.

Crucially, the use of proportional data here reveals that, even where the overall number of properties in the sample has changed, the types of spaces remaining vacant are undergoing a clear and meaningful transformation. Local authorities are not simply managing a shrinking or expanding estate, they are grappling with a shift in the kinds of buildings being left empty. This demands equally tailored and innovative reuse strategies. For example, vacant office spaces may lend themselves to co-working, start-up incubators or civic hubs. Former leisure buildings might be repurposed for community housing or health and wellbeing services. Meanwhile, underused retail spaces continue to offer potential for residential conversion, cultural use, or pop-up shops, particularly in high streets facing regeneration pressures.

In conclusion, the changes between 2021 and 2025 reflect more than just numerical variation. They show shifting land and property dynamics within the public estate, one that local authorities will need to address through informed, specific asset strategies, and with an eye towards sustainable reuse that supports both local needs and national priorities.



Place by Place Comparison

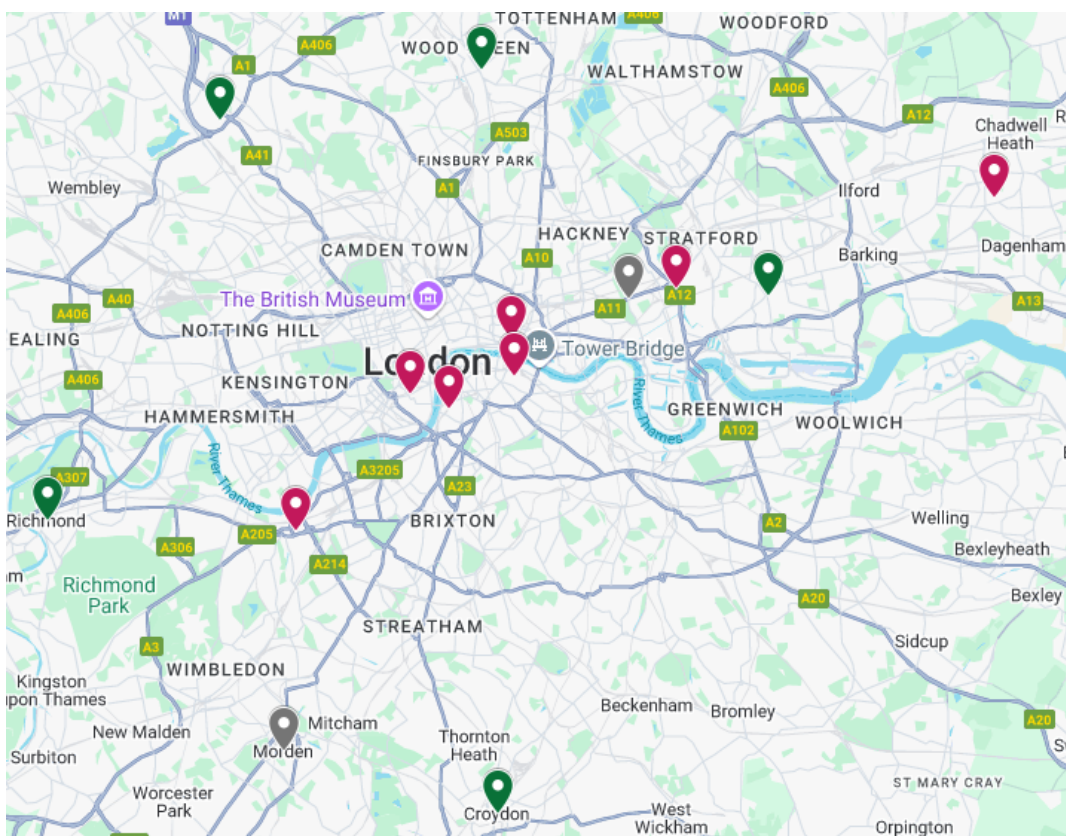
The 2025 figures for local authority-owned vacant properties in England highlight a varied and dynamic landscape compared to 2021. While some areas have made significant progress in reducing vacant spaces, others have seen considerable increases, particularly in office and 'other' use categories, creating a mixed picture of both challenge and opportunity. Full details of the research results for individual places can be found in Appendix 2.

Among the most striking changes is the situation in Derby, where the total number of vacant properties plummeted from 173 in 2021 to just 26 in 2025, a remarkable reduction of 147 spaces, driven by major falls in both retail and office categories. Similarly, Leeds saw a dramatic decline of 97 vacant properties, with notable reductions in retail (down 33) and 'other' uses (down 40). While these reductions are positive in terms of lowering overall vacancy levels and suggest progress in asset disposal, occupation, or repurposing, they also indicate a shrinking pool of opportunities for intervention. This potentially reduces the scope for initiatives such as those led by Habitat for Humanity to have a meaningful impact in these areas.

Conversely, Coventry experienced one of the most substantial increases, rising from 25 to 82 vacant properties, an increase of 57, largely driven by a 47-property rise in the 'other' category and an 8-property increase in office vacancies. Gateshead also saw a significant net increase in the total number of vacant properties, increasing by 48 to 103, with internal shifts including a rise of 11 in retail vacancies and a 32-property surge in 'other' use spaces. Doncaster, Lambeth, and Luton also saw modest increases, primarily in retail but with noticeable gains in the 'other' categories. Sheffield and Southampton similarly reported rises in vacancy numbers, with increases of 64 and 61 respectively. Sheffield experienced the largest rise in office vacancies (up 17), while Southampton saw the second largest single increase in 'other' vacancies (up 40).

The 'office' category in particular has shifted significantly. Luton recorded a 15-property increase in office vacancies—the second highest across the dataset—mirroring similar rises in Sheffield. In contrast, Derby and Leeds registered notable reductions in office vacancies, down 75 and 21 respectively. While increasing vacancy numbers may be seen as a negative outcome, they also create expanded opportunities for intervention, making these areas potentially more valuable for targeted action. With this in mind, the data should be used not as a measure of how effective local authorities have been in addressing vacant spaces, but as a benchmark for assessing the availability of opportunities for reuse or redevelopment in a given geographical area.

Mapping the Greater London authorities surveyed illustrates an interesting pattern across the city region. The data shows that more central London boroughs have seen the number of empty buildings in their ownership increase since 2021, indicated by red pins. Outer London boroughs however have in the main seen their stock of empty buildings decrease, indicated by green pins.



This pattern is only partly echoed in Greater Manchester. Of the three boroughs surveyed from that region, the central Manchester borough showed a similar pattern to the central London boroughs, with an increase of 10 empty buildings to 49. The outer boroughs of Oldham and Rochdale meanwhile showed different results, with Rochdale's stock decreasing marginally from 5 to 4 buildings, and Oldham's increasing from 7 to 9. This is likely due to Rochdale being ahead of Oldham in its town centre regeneration journey.

Some authorities saw almost no change: Bristol, Tower Hamlets and Peterborough all showed net changes of fewer than five properties. Meanwhile, some smaller authorities like Dover and Merton

remained consistently low in terms of vacant property counts. Overall, the English data paints a picture of regional divergence. Some authorities have succeeded in reducing surplus assets, while others now face growing vacancy, especially in the wake of ongoing shifts in retail demand and office usage.

The 2025 figures for Scotland and Wales reveal a mix of progress and emerging challenges in the management of local authority-owned vacant spaces. Compared with the 2021 baseline, patterns of change differ significantly across the two nations, particularly in the composition of vacant property types.

In Scotland, the City of Edinburgh stands out for its dramatic reduction in total vacant properties, from 114 in 2021 to just 58 in 2025. This 56-property decrease is largely due to a 55-property fall in the 'other' category. Fife and South Lanarkshire also made substantial reductions in vacant properties, down 29 and 20 respectively. In both cases, this was primarily due to declines in office and 'other' uses.

Conversely, Aberdeen recorded a significant increase in total vacant properties, rising from 39 to 58, largely due to a 20-property increase in 'other' use spaces. Stirling also experienced growth, with total vacant properties rising by 12, primarily through increases in leisure (up 7) and office (up 1). The Highlands recorded a modest increase of 13, despite a drop in office vacancies, due to a 23-property jump in the 'other' category.

Wales shows even more pronounced shifts. Neath Port Talbot experienced a dramatic increase in vacant properties, more than tripling from 29 in 2021 to 89 in 2025, an overall rise of 60. This was driven by a substantial increase of 52 in office vacancies and 28 in leisure. By contrast, Swansea reduced its total number of vacant properties from 16 to 8, halving its vacancy count across categories.

Merthyr Tydfil saw one of the largest retail increases across the two nations, rising from 1 to 13, while Cardiff reported the second highest rise in office vacancies in Wales, up by 7. City-level variation is stark: Cardiff recorded a modest overall decrease of 2, while the City of Edinburgh recorded one of the sharpest reductions across the UK.

The broader trend in both Scotland and Wales is a reduction in 'other' category vacancies and a rising concentration of office and leisure spaces remaining empty. This may reflect the ongoing decline in traditional public service buildings and underuse of community or recreational assets post-pandemic. Collectively, the data illustrates that while some local authorities are successfully reducing vacant space, others are experiencing new surpluses, highlighting the need for adaptive reuse strategies tailored to local property types and economic conditions.

Statistical Conclusions

Beyond the residential sector, the analysis also highlights a large and underutilised stock of publicly owned non-residential buildings across the UK. These include vacant offices, retail units, leisure spaces, and a range of other property types. Although some reductions have been observed in the number of empty shops and office spaces held by local authorities since 2021, they continue to account for a significant portion of the public estate that lies dormant. This presents both a challenge

and an opportunity: a challenge in terms of wasted space and ongoing maintenance costs, and an opportunity to address housing need through reuse and adaptation.

In many areas, the largest share of these vacant non-residential properties falls into the category of 'other', a broad designation that includes depots, day centres, community hubs, civic buildings, and other forms of public infrastructure. While these are often among the most complex assets to repurpose due to their design, layout, or service legacy, they also hold considerable potential for imaginative reuse. Community-led housing, supported accommodation, or mixed-use regeneration schemes could all emerge from more proactive engagement with these spaces, provided that sufficient support, funding, and flexibility is made available.

In comparing the potential that these numbers could have in terms of their conversion rates to residential accommodation, this study has replicated the methodology first used in the 2021 report, itself based on research carried out for the London Borough of Enfield. The 2021 Empty Spaces to Homes research assessed the potential outcomes of office and retail-to-residential conversions. It found that, on average, office conversions yielded 9 residential units per scheme, while retail conversions yielded around 1.5.

Although these figures represent an average and should not be seen as universally applicable, they provide a useful benchmark for understanding the potential of different types of non-residential space. Applying the same conversion ratios to this year's data suggests that in 2025, there is the potential to deliver approximately 25,344 new accommodation units through the conversion of local authority-owned office and retail space across England, Scotland, and Wales. This figure represents a substantial increase on the 19,500 units estimated using the same approach in 2021, reflecting both changes in vacancy levels, and the scale of opportunity presented by such vacancy.

Of the total projected for 2025, approximately 20,808 units could be delivered through the conversion of vacant office space, and a further 4,536 units through retail space. By nation, England accounts for the largest share with around 21,907 potential units, followed by 2,248 in Scotland and 1,189 in Wales. While not all of these sites will be suitable or available for conversion, the figures point to a considerable opportunity to increase housing supply by using what already exists within the public estate.

This form of adaptive reuse has a number of advantages. It is often faster and less resource-intensive than new build, avoids the political and logistical challenges associated with identifying new development land, and can bring new life to underused or declining parts of town centres. Many vacant offices and shops are located in high-accessibility areas, close to public transport and amenities, making them particularly well-suited to new forms of urban living. In addition, the reuse of existing structures supports environmental sustainability goals by reducing demolition waste and embodied carbon.

The opportunity for conversion is not limited to public assets. Alongside local authority-owned property, there is a substantial volume of empty non-residential space in private ownership. In England alone, recent data suggests there are around 175,000 privately owned empty non-residential buildings, a figure that has remained persistently high over recent years, and only marginally higher than the 172,000 reported in the 2021 research. These buildings include vacant shops, offices, industrial units, and other commercial premises, many of which are located in areas of acute housing need. Engaging with private owners presents a more complex challenge, but it is one that should not be ignored. With the right policy levers such as targeted grants, low-interest loans, changes to VAT rules,

or enhanced powers for compulsory purchase, some of these properties could be brought back into productive use. Meanwhile, better data-sharing and property intelligence could support local authorities in identifying suitable opportunities and engaging with owners at an earlier stage.

More broadly, the repurposing of empty buildings should be seen not just as a housing strategy, but as a place-making strategy. The adaptive reuse of non-residential properties can help support wider regeneration goals, revitalise local high streets, and contribute to the development of mixed-use communities that integrate housing with employment, culture, and social infrastructure. Done well, this can have a transformative effect, not just in providing homes, but fostering greater resilience, cohesion, and vibrancy within communities.

However, for this potential to be realised, systemic barriers must be addressed. Too often, the process of converting surplus buildings is held back by inflexible planning policies, limited revenue funding, or the absence of a clear strategic framework for asset reuse. Local authorities may lack the capacity to act proactively, particularly where ownership is fragmented or where complex legal or logistical issues are involved. In such cases, regional or national coordination could help unlock stalled projects and bring in specialist expertise.

In conclusion, this year's analysis reinforces the case for a more strategic approach to the use of non-residential space. The estimated 25,000-plus homes that could be delivered through office and retail conversions represent a vital opportunity to expand housing supply at a time of growing need. When combined with the potential offered by privately owned vacant properties, the scale of underused space becomes even more striking. As pressures on the housing system continue to mount, turning these empty buildings into places to live should become a central pillar of housing and regeneration policy across the UK.



Geographical Insight: Need, Supply, Opportunity

Areas of Study and Rationale

This section outlines the rationale for selecting the areas explored throughout the research, focusing on the intersection of housing need, supply challenges, and the opportunity presented by vacant or underused buildings. The goal is to inform where future investment, innovation, and pilot projects could most effectively be focused to tackle the housing crisis, particularly through reuse and regeneration.

The areas selected represent a cross-section of the UK's diverse housing landscape. Together, they offer insight into the challenges faced by urban, rural, coastal, and post-industrial communities, while also highlighting the varied potential for intervention through strategic reuse of existing assets.

To help prioritise locations where investment could have the greatest impact, the research draws on data from the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and their equivalents in devolved nations. The IMD is a widely recognised measure that ranks small geographical areas by levels of deprivation across multiple domains, including income, employment, health, education, housing, crime, and access to services. It offers a framework for identifying places where housing need is compounded by broader social and economic challenges. By aligning this data with insight into building vacancy, disused assets, and the capacity of local partners, the project seeks to highlight places where the right interventions could deliver both homes and wider social value. These are often locations where the mainstream housing market has failed to meet need, but where existing community networks, local authority interest, and policy alignment make reuse-based solutions viable.

This methodology also ensures that the focus is not only on crisis response, but on strategic investment. For example, in high-demand urban areas like parts of London and Cardiff, reuse can help to unlock centrally located housing close to jobs and services. In rural and coastal areas such as Cornwall, or Argyll & Bute in Scotland, reuse may offer a lifeline to communities struggling with depopulation, second-home ownership, and the loss of public infrastructure.

Furthermore, the inclusion of areas like Wigan, Barnsley and Oldham highlights places where civic leadership, local authority asset reviews, or community organisations are already engaging with the question of how to bring unused buildings back into beneficial use. These examples offer a foundation on which pilot projects can be built, testing new models of funding, delivery, and community engagement.

In identifying and analysing these areas, the research also draws on wider policy frameworks that support or hinder progress, from planning and fiscal reform to regeneration funding and retrofit strategies. This helps build a picture not just of where the need is greatest, but where the conditions for success are strongest. In summary, this place-based approach enables a more targeted and

equitable view of housing innovation. By mapping need, supply, and opportunity against deprivation data and local context, the research identifies promising locations for future investment.

London

London faces some of the most acute housing challenges in the UK, where high demand for affordable and social housing collides with limited supply, complex land ownership, and stark inequalities. As one of the most economically powerful yet spatially unequal regions, London offers both a critical need and a compelling opportunity to tackle housing shortages in creative and socially responsible ways.

Multiple indices of deprivation show that boroughs such as Lewisham, Barking & Dagenham, Newham, and Croydon remain among the most deprived in London. In these areas, housing costs far outstrip local wages, overcrowding is common, and waiting lists for social housing grow ever longer. Barking & Dagenham, for instance, has one of the highest proportions of low-income households and a younger demographic heavily reliant on public housing. Similarly, Newham faces a significant housing shortfall, with thousands of households living in temporary accommodation.

In boroughs such as Lewisham and Lambeth, deprivation intersects with a growing cohort of people in unstable private rented housing. The demand is not simply for more homes, but for genuinely affordable homes that offer security of tenure, quality, and connection to community and opportunity. These needs are sharpened in the wake of the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis, which have disproportionately affected those already living on the margins.

Despite years of effort, the supply of social and affordable homes in London remains woefully inadequate. Private sector development continues to dominate housing delivery, often falling short on affordable housing targets. Furthermore, the existing stock of social homes has been steadily eroded through Right to Buy, disrepair, and the failure to replace homes lost through demolition and regeneration schemes.

The imbalance is stark: while boroughs such as Wandsworth and Westminster host some of the highest land values in the country, they also include pockets of intense deprivation and unmet housing need. In Westminster, for instance, housing pressures have contributed to a deeply divided city, one in which luxury development thrives adjacent to areas of severe overcrowding and housing insecurity.

The situation is compounded by the fact that much of London's available land is already built upon. The challenge, therefore, lies not simply in building more, but in using what already exists more wisely.

Against this backdrop, London holds untapped potential in the form of vacant and underused publicly owned buildings, many of which are well located, structurally sound, and capable of being repurposed for housing. Across boroughs such as Lewisham, Croydon, and Havering, local authorities and community partners are beginning to explore how old civic buildings, schools, offices and health facilities can be converted into homes that meet real needs.

The “Don’t Waste Buildings” campaign and initiatives like Habitat for Humanity’s Restore Hub in Romford are leading the way in showing how social value can be created through creative reuse. These projects align with the principle of creating homes rather than just building them, adapting existing structures in ways that embed environmental sustainability, retain heritage, and foster community inclusion.

Retrofit-first strategies also respond to the urgent need to decarbonise the built environment. A well-developed Corporate Retrofit Strategy, as championed by boroughs like Lewisham, can support both housing creation and climate action. It also opens up new avenues for skills training and employment through partnerships with organisations like the Construction Youth Trust and Green Building Hubs.

One of the critical barriers to delivering affordable homes through reuse is the traditional model of viability, which prioritises financial return over social value. By removing profit as the primary driver, local authorities and public landowners can unlock more buildings for social benefit. This approach requires a shift in how we appraise schemes, valuing long-term outcomes such as secure tenancies, health and wellbeing, and economic participation.

Public and philanthropic investment, including through the Social Housing Fund, can be leveraged to support conversions and retrofits that may not stack up on commercial terms but deliver profound public benefit. Moreover, building in upskilling workshops and local employment during retrofit works can amplify the social impact, particularly in areas of high youth unemployment.

London is a city of contrasts, of immense wealth and entrenched deprivation, of iconic skylines and invisible homelessness. The housing crisis cannot be solved through new development alone. By focusing on the reuse of vacant publicly owned buildings in areas of highest need, London can make real progress in meeting housing demand sustainably and equitably.

The opportunity lies not only in bricks and mortar but in systems change, integrating retrofit strategies with skills development, reframing viability, and empowering communities. With coordinated effort and bold leadership, especially in boroughs already open to innovation like Lewisham, Lambeth and Newham, the capital can become a beacon of housing-led renewal, one that truly doesn’t waste buildings.



South East

The South East of England presents a similarly complex housing landscape. While often associated with relative affluence, this region contains some of the country's most entrenched pockets of deprivation, especially along the coastal belt and in parts of Kent and East Sussex. The South East also faces considerable housing pressures, with high house prices and private rents far exceeding local incomes, creating a pressing need for genuinely affordable and secure homes.

Despite the region's economic strength, the multiple indices of deprivation highlight acute disparities. Towns such as Hastings, Thanet, and Dover rank among the most deprived in the country, particularly in domains related to housing, employment, and health. Hastings, for example, has long struggled with a legacy of poor-quality private rented housing, high rates of economic inactivity, and limited social housing stock.

In Kent, coastal communities like Sheerness, Margate and Folkestone experience similar challenges, including rising homelessness, youth exclusion, and overstretched local services. These areas have some of the highest demand for social housing but face ongoing difficulties in attracting investment for new supply. A specific and growing need lies in transitional or move-on accommodation for vulnerable groups, including young people at risk of homelessness. The Friends Meeting House project in Tunbridge Wells, transforming a Quaker Meeting House into shared flats for nine young people, is an example of how tailored, small-scale solutions can fill critical gaps in the system.

Across much of the South East, housing delivery is dominated by market-led development. New homes are often unaffordable to local residents, with planning again failing to secure enough affordable units to meet need. In many towns, available land is constrained, and development activity is concentrated in less deprived areas, further entrenching spatial inequality. Where social homes are delivered, they are often outstripped by the number of households entering need each year. A policy and practical gap persists between the need for affordable homes and the tools local councils have to provide them. Yet innovative reuse initiatives can help bridge this divide.

There is growing recognition that the answer to the housing crisis lies not only in building more, but in doing more with what already exists. In this context, the South East holds significant promise, particularly through schemes like No Use Empty: Kent. This long-standing initiative, led by Kent County Council, helps bring empty homes and buildings back into use, providing low-interest loans and advice to owners, and actively working with developers and housing associations to unlock stalled or derelict properties.

The Quaker-led project in Tunbridge Wells stands as a model for what can be achieved through partnership, local knowledge, and a focus on social value. With support from Habitat for Humanity, West Kent YMCA and the Borough Council, this scheme combined charitable fundraising, public funding, and expert input to transform a disused religious building into meaningful housing for young people.

This kind of initiative underscores the importance of cross-sector collaboration and flexibility. While large-scale development is often slow and costly, the reuse of existing buildings, particularly those already in public or charitable ownership, offers a faster, more sustainable route to delivery.

The reuse of public buildings also aligns closely with the national focus on decarbonisation and skills development. Retrofitting rather than demolishing and rebuilding helps reduce embodied carbon and waste. Furthermore, these projects can serve as practical training grounds for local tradespeople and apprentices, supporting broader regeneration aims. By integrating upskilling workshops and vocational programmes, particularly in deprived areas, reuse projects can act as catalysts for economic inclusion.

This is especially pertinent in the South East, where many towns suffer from low levels of educational attainment and skills shortages in the construction and green economy sectors.

Local authorities could do more to prioritise the social value of such projects, not just in the homes they produce, but in the jobs, services, and cohesion they foster. Aligning reuse strategies with broader objectives around climate action, youth employment, and community resilience offers a compelling model for place-based renewal.

A key barrier remains the conventional viability test, which discounts schemes that cannot turn a profit on commercial terms. However, in many South East towns, where land values are lower and deprivation higher, the social return on investment from repurposing public buildings is significant. What's needed is a shift in local and central government approaches to funding and delivery, placing long-term wellbeing, stability and community health at the heart of viability assessments.

Philanthropic and blended funding models, such as those used in the Tunbridge Wells scheme, offer a promising route forward. Likewise, empowering community-led housing and social landlords to take on underused sites can result in more appropriate, better loved, and longer-lasting outcomes.

While not always perceived as a region in housing crisis, the South East clearly faces major housing challenges, particularly for low-income residents in coastal and rural areas. By taking a creative, partnership-led approach to underused public assets, the region can forge a path that is not only pragmatic but principled. Rather than waiting for large-scale market solutions, local authorities, housing charities, and community organisations can lead the way in showing what's possible. From Hastings to Tunbridge Wells and beyond, the reuse of vacant buildings could become a cornerstone of the region's housing response.



South West

The South West of England, known for its rural beauty, historic cities, and coastal charm, also faces its own housing challenges. These are often obscured by the region's reputation for lifestyle migration and second home ownership, yet behind the postcard image lies a housing system under growing strain. Pockets of acute deprivation, rising homelessness, and a limited affordable housing supply make a compelling case for new approaches.

The multiple indices of deprivation reveal areas within the South West facing deep-rooted socioeconomic issues. Bristol, for example, while an economic hub, contains stark inequalities between neighbourhoods. Southmead and Hartcliffe rank among the most deprived areas in England, with elevated levels of child poverty, poor health outcomes, and housing insecurity. Similarly, parts of Plymouth, Torbay, and Cornwall face high levels of deprivation, driven by seasonal economies, low wages, and a shortage of secure, affordable housing.

In rural Cornwall and Devon, isolation adds complexity to housing need. Young people are increasingly priced out of their communities, while older residents face a lack of appropriate, accessible housing. In places like Gorran Churchtown, the decline of local services and amenities compounds the challenge, making housing interventions both urgent and place-sensitive. The result is a fractured housing picture where high second-home ownership and tourism coexist with growing homelessness, hidden overcrowding, and shrinking social housing stock.

Supply across the South West is both insufficient and uneven. High land values in places like Bristol and Bath constrain social housing development, while the dominance of the private market leads to inflated prices and exclusionary outcomes. Rural and coastal areas, meanwhile, face distinct difficulties in attracting developers and securing investment for new schemes. Much of the existing housing stock is older, poorly insulated, and ill-suited to modern needs.

In many parts of the region, local authorities have limited access to suitable land and face financial constraints in acquiring or developing it. These challenges demand alternative models of delivery that make better use of existing assets while supporting local leadership and long-term stewardship. The South West is however home to a number of innovative reuse projects that demonstrate the potential of repurposing vacant buildings for affordable housing.

One such example is the School House project in Gorran Churchtown, Cornwall. Originally a school and community room, the building was converted into three one-bedroom flats by the Diocese of Truro, with later refurbishment and management taken on by the Gorran Community Land Trust and Cornwall Rural Housing Association.

This £340,000 project, funded through a combination of grants, loans from ethical lenders such as Triodos Bank, and local investment, demonstrates the power of local partnerships and layered funding. The result is a set of well-integrated, affordable homes in a rural community, protecting a key heritage asset and meeting urgent need.

Elsewhere, schemes like Hotels to Homes in Torbay and the work of Plymouth Access to Housing (PATH) show how otherwise redundant buildings can be brought into residential use quickly and cost-effectively. The reuse of hospitality and commercial properties, often centrally located and structurally

sound, offers a viable route to increasing housing stock without the delays and carbon costs associated with new builds. These initiatives also illustrate how community-led organisations and social landlords can act more flexibly and responsively than large developers, adapting to local needs and securing greater public trust.

As with other regions, the reuse of buildings in the South West offers opportunities beyond housing delivery. Retrofit-first approaches can play a vital role in reducing carbon emissions and supporting climate goals, especially critical in coastal areas vulnerable to environmental change. When paired with training programmes and partnerships with local colleges and skills providers, reuse schemes can generate local employment, support upskilling, and contribute to economic resilience. This is particularly relevant in towns affected by the decline of traditional industries and seasonal employment patterns. Embedding this kind of broader social value into housing projects helps to ensure they are not only viable in financial terms, but also effective in promoting long-term community wellbeing and sustainability.

A consistent theme across the South West is the importance of blended funding and local authority support. In rural areas, grant funding often needs to be combined with loans, philanthropy, and community fundraising to bring projects to life. Local authorities, even where financially constrained, can support these efforts through land release, planning flexibility, and alignment with broader strategic priorities such as homelessness prevention and net zero targets.

Government support for social and community-led housing, particularly in the form of revolving loan funds, retrofit incentives, and asset transfer frameworks, could significantly accelerate this work. Unlocking the housing potential of vacant buildings will require not only technical guidance, but also political and financial will.

The South West is a region rich in opportunity, but facing profound housing challenges that conventional development models have failed to address. The repurposing of underused public and community buildings offers a credible, scalable response, and one that values people, place, and sustainability in equal measure.

From Cornwall to Bristol and across coastal and rural districts, examples already exist that show what can be achieved when communities, charities, councils and ethical lenders work together.



The Midlands

The Midlands, comprising both the East and West subregions, is an economic and geographical heartland of England. However, it is also a region marked by significant housing need, deep-rooted deprivation in certain urban areas, and increasing pressure on both housing and support services. Alongside its growing urban populations and ageing housing stock, the Midlands is home to numerous empty or underused public buildings, representing both a challenge and a substantial opportunity. The multiple indices of deprivation identify several Midlands cities as having some of the highest concentrations of need in the country. Birmingham, Coventry, Leicester, and parts of Derby and Walsall exhibit high levels of housing deprivation, unemployment, and health inequality. In Birmingham, over 20,000 households are on the council's housing register, while Coventry's 2024 Homelessness Review paints a sobering picture of increasing demand, reduced affordability, and widening health and housing inequalities.

The challenge is compounded by demographic shifts, including younger populations in urban areas, rising in-work poverty, and a growing number of households affected by welfare reform. In response, there is an increasing demand for smaller, affordable units that meet the needs of downsizers, single parents, and vulnerable individuals.

Despite investment through national programmes such as the Affordable Homes Programme, new social and affordable housing supply across the Midlands has not kept pace with demand. Local authorities continue to face barriers in accessing land, securing funding, and navigating complex planning and heritage restrictions.

In cities like Leicester and Coventry, housing delivery has often focused on market-rate and student accommodation, leaving a gap in provision for families and older people. There is also a mismatch between the type of housing being built and the types of households in need. Affordable options for those affected by homelessness or housing benefit restrictions remain scarce. Nonetheless, local authorities are beginning to explore more creative approaches to delivery, including bringing redundant public assets back into use.

The Midlands is home to several promising reuse projects that show the potential of adapting empty or underused buildings to meet housing need. One of the most ambitious current schemes is Hospital Close in Leicester, where 23 former hospital staff buildings are set to be transformed into 135 new affordable council homes. Led by Leicester City Council, the £17 million project is being funded through a combination of Right to Buy receipts and borrowing, providing a significant boost to local supply without relying on new land acquisition.

In Langley Mill, Amber Valley, a disused pub was converted into six affordable housing units with commercial space on the ground floor, demonstrating how heritage or locally significant buildings can be retained while meeting contemporary housing needs. Supported by the Empty Homes Programme and delivered by Amber Valley Borough Council in partnership with Futures Housing Group, this project shows how even small-scale schemes can contribute to local supply in meaningful ways.

Another noteworthy example, while geographically just outside the Midlands boundary, offers strong lessons in adaptive reuse: the former maltings in Bury St Edmunds, once a furniture store, was turned into 35 one- and two-bedroom homes aimed at residents affected by the bedroom tax. Funded

through a mix of capital reserves, private finance, and the Affordable Homes Programme, this project prioritised both heritage and social equity. These initiatives underscore how reuse can align with broader policy goals, addressing housing need while preserving local identity and fostering economic regeneration.

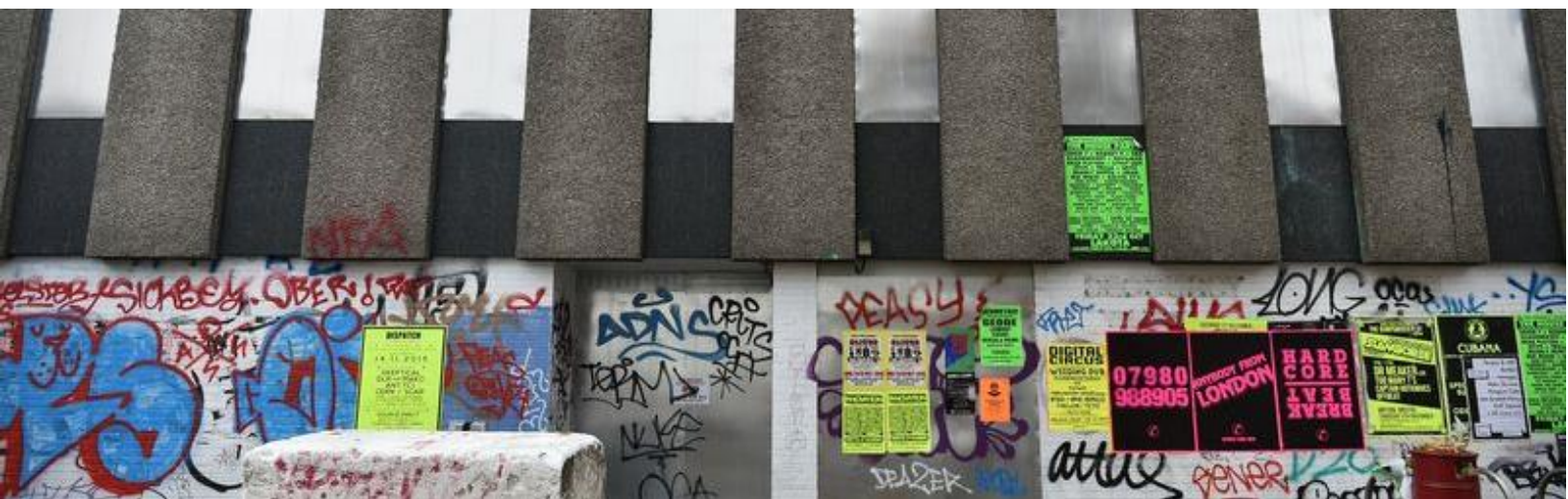
What stands out in the Midlands context is the increasing willingness of councils and housing associations to use flexible funding models. Many of the successful reuse schemes are backed by partnerships that blend grant funding, council investment, and borrowing from ethical lenders or private sources. Community involvement also plays a key role. Whether through Community Land Trusts, co-design processes, or local employment during retrofit works, these schemes embed social value into the heart of housing delivery. For example, Havebury Housing Partnership's involvement in the Bury St Edmunds maltings project placed community need at the centre, ensuring the homes were tailored for downsizers and those most affected by welfare reform.

By taking a place-based approach that builds on local assets and needs, councils across the Midlands can generate lasting benefits for residents, particularly if these efforts are embedded in broader housing and regeneration strategies.

Coventry's 2024 Homelessness Review and wider tools like The Local Government Association's LG Inform's themed housing reports reveal a growing appetite for data-led decision-making. As councils look to assess their full public asset portfolios, data on vacancy, land use, and heritage restrictions can help prioritise reuse opportunities. Strategic frameworks that align reuse with homelessness prevention, employment, health, and sustainability targets can further maximise outcomes.

However, planning frameworks and building standards (especially for listed buildings) remain a barrier in some areas. A consistent regional or sub-regional approach to retrofitting, supported by flexible funding pots and planning guidance, could accelerate progress.

The Midlands' housing challenge is rooted in long-term economic, structural, and social shifts, but so too is its potential. Across Leicester, Birmingham, Derby, Coventry and beyond, the reuse of empty public and commercial buildings offers a viable and scalable way to meet housing need. Through collaboration, creativity, and community-centred design, these projects not only deliver new homes but reshape how we think about viability, value, and urban resilience.



North West

The North West of England faces some of the most entrenched housing challenges in the UK. Despite significant regeneration investment over recent decades, many communities continue to live with the effects of economic transition, poor housing quality, and inequality. The region includes areas of deep deprivation, where housing need is acute and affordable supply insufficient. However, with a large stock of underused public buildings and growing interest in repurposing, the North West is also well-positioned to pioneer practical solutions to the housing crisis.

The IMD consistently place areas across Greater Manchester, Liverpool, and parts of Cumbria and Lancashire among the most deprived in England. Liverpool and Manchester both exhibit high levels of housing deprivation, linked with long waiting lists, insecure private renting, and growing demand from groups such as young adults, asylum seekers, and low-income families.

In Whitehaven and surrounding areas of Cumberland, there is a growing need for flexible accommodation solutions for younger workers, especially those linked to major employers like Sellafield, whose graduate trainees increasingly require one-bedroom or shared housing. Meanwhile, in boroughs like Wigan and Oldham, there is pressure to provide smaller, affordable units for single adults and older people, alongside housing that supports long-term community health and cohesion. This multifaceted need reflects the evolving social fabric of the region and highlights the need of delivering housing solutions that are not solely market-driven.

Although housebuilding across the North West has increased in recent years, supply remains unbalanced. Many developments skew towards market-rate housing or luxury apartments in city centres, failing to meet the demand for genuinely affordable and socially rented homes. Several local authorities have identified the need to expand their role as housing providers or enablers, but face constraints related to land, funding, and planning barriers. For example, efforts to redevelop historic or heritage buildings such as Woodbank Hall or Thurstington Lodge in Stockport have been delayed by conservation constraints and EPC requirements. In Carlisle, the disused Bitts Park Lodge has been highlighted as an opportunity yet remains stagnant due to feasibility and planning concerns.

Elsewhere, councils like Oldham and Manchester are reviewing their entire public asset portfolios to identify underused sites with housing potential. However, realising this potential requires coordinated action, accessible funding, and partnerships that extend beyond traditional developer-led approaches.

Across the North West, a growing number of schemes demonstrate how creative reuse of buildings can address housing need while making better use of existing resources. One standout example is Station Mews in Allerton, Liverpool, where a former fire and police station has been transformed into a mixed scheme of shared ownership and affordable rented homes, including 40 units specifically for over-55s. Delivered by Torus Housing Association, this £8 million scheme was partly grant-funded by Homes England via JV North, showing how targeted investment can unlock underused sites for social good.

Another example is Whitby Road in Ellesmere Port, where a former shop was converted into four one-bedroom flats and two studio apartments, alongside space for a local charity and credit union. This community-focused project was supported by Cheshire West and Chester Council, using Section 106

and grant funding, and led by Access 2 Training & Employment (A2T), who cleverly leased the building during works to reduce up-front costs.

In Wigan and Greater Manchester, organisations like The Brick and For Tyldesley CIC are collaborating with local authorities and Transport for Greater Manchester to repurpose former employment or transport infrastructure into housing and community space. Office-to-hostel conversions and shared accommodation for asylum seekers are also underway, indicating a willingness to respond to specific, time-sensitive needs through adaptive reuse.

The Article 4 Directive in Manchester, which restricts permitted development rights for converting commercial buildings to residential use, signals a growing awareness of the need to shape conversions in a way that prioritises quality and community outcomes.

A key strength in the North West is the presence of well-established partnerships between councils, housing associations, and community groups. These partnerships are increasingly focused on the "Place Principle", an approach that aligns planning, housing, and regeneration around the lived experience and needs of residents. Oldham's work with Homes England and the English Cities Fund to promote town centre living is a prime example of strategic alignment. By incorporating homes into retail and civic redevelopment, such as through the reuse of York House, the council is helping reshape the town.

Several authorities are also now undertaking asset management assessments to map unused or underused buildings across their estates. These exercises, when backed by political will and practical funding mechanisms, offer a pathway to significantly increase affordable housing stock without acquiring new land. The North West's housing challenge is complex, shaped by a legacy of industrial decline, rising demand, and systemic underinvestment. Yet it is also a region of huge opportunity, rich in community energy, with a substantial built estate that can be harnessed for housing renewal.

By focusing on the adaptive reuse of public buildings and embedding partnerships, sustainability, and social value into delivery models, the North West can provide a benchmark in redefining how homes are created from existing spaces.



North East

The North East of England has a long history of industrial transformation, civic ambition, and community resilience. Today, it faces a dual housing challenge: persistent deprivation and underinvestment in some areas, alongside significant potential in the form of underused buildings and community-led innovation. With projects in places like Durham, Barnsley, Kirklees and Hull demonstrating the value of reuse, the region is well-placed to scale up efforts to convert surplus and vacant buildings into much-needed homes.

Across the North East, housing need remains acute. The indices of multiple deprivation consistently rank areas of County Durham, Hull, and Kirklees among the most disadvantaged in England, particularly in the domains of income, employment, and housing.

In Durham, areas like Gilesgate experience high levels of housing stress, with local people often priced out of new developments or stuck in poor-quality private rental accommodation. The same is true in Hull, where economic vulnerability and housing demand intersect, especially among single adults, older tenants, and low-income families.

In Barnsley and parts of Kirklees (including Huddersfield), the transition from an industrial economy has left behind pockets of deep social inequality and housing undersupply, particularly in smaller, affordable, and supported homes for residents facing social or economic exclusion. As cost-of-living pressures increase and homelessness grows, the urgency of delivering secure, affordable housing continues to mount.

Although the North East benefits from relatively lower land values than other regions, the supply of affordable and social housing has not kept pace with need. Many local authorities face financial and structural constraints that limit their ability to build new homes or invest in small-scale infill schemes. Traditional development routes often overlook the kind of compact, adaptable housing that many local communities require. Moreover, planning policies and viability assessments can favour private schemes that fail to deliver the quantity or quality of affordable homes needed. Despite these challenges, a number of successful schemes across the region show what can be achieved through targeted investment, community partnerships, and creative reuse.

Several case studies in the North East demonstrate the effectiveness of converting redundant buildings into high-quality, affordable homes. One example is Hudson House in Gilesgate, Durham, a former pub that was later used as office space. In 2017, it was converted into four one-bedroom self-contained flats for affordable rent, providing secure housing for local people. Delivered by the community-focused organisation DASH and funded by Durham County Council and Homes England, the scheme is a model of place-sensitive, affordable delivery.

In Hull, Queens House, once a Job Centre, was transformed into 16 affordable flats (a mix of studios, one-beds, and two-beds) by the Goodwin Development Trust. With support from the Empty Homes Programme, the scheme successfully brought a redundant building back into use in the heart of the city, while adding to the stock of low-cost, secure housing.

Barnsley provides further examples of this reuse approach. Joseph Locke House, a former Inland Revenue building, and 18 Regent Street (formerly commercial premises) were sold for housing-led

redevelopment, contributing to a wider town centre renewal agenda. Kirklees Council, which includes Huddersfield, is also exploring how to work with charities and third-sector partners to scale up delivery, with reference to sites like Warwick Mill. These case studies highlight the adaptability of civic and commercial buildings and the value of focusing on small and medium-sized reuse projects, particularly in town centres and edge-of-centre areas.

A key strength of the North East's reuse landscape lies in its community-led ethos. Organisations such as DASH and Goodwin Development Trust operate with a deep understanding of local need, tailoring solutions to real people rather than market assumptions. This model can be further strengthened through partnership working between councils, charities, social landlords, and funders. The ability to lease buildings during renovation (as seen in similar projects elsewhere) also reduces up-front costs, helping organisations access loans or mortgages based on increased post-conversion value.

There is potential for more local authorities in the region to assess their full asset portfolios, identifying disused offices, health centres, libraries and shops that could be converted into affordable housing, especially where this would support wider regeneration, community safety, and wellbeing.

The success of reuse schemes in the North East has often depended on targeted funding, such as the former Empty Homes Programme or grant support from Homes England. Moving forward, a new generation of funds, possibly aligned with the Levelling Up agenda, could play a vital role in supporting conversion schemes that meet social goals but fall outside traditional developer viability models.

Planning policy and asset disposal strategies also need to be aligned with reuse ambitions. For example, councils could introduce local disposal frameworks that prioritise social value, enabling trusted partners to acquire redundant public assets for housing. Tax reform, especially around VAT on conversions, remains a key lever to incentivise reuse.

Efforts to encourage "Town Centre Living" across the region, especially in places like Barnsley and Huddersfield, also align with national policy moves to breathe life into high streets and make use of redundant commercial space.

The North East faces persistent housing pressures, but also holds real opportunity in the form of its vacant buildings, publicly-owned assets, and community-led capacity. With targeted support, strong partnerships, and reform to planning and funding systems, the region can scale up reuse-led housing delivery and revitalise communities in the process. From Durham to Hull and Barnsley to Huddersfield, these projects demonstrate that housing transformation doesn't always require new land or large-scale development.



Scotland

Scotland faces a unique combination of housing pressures and policy opportunities. While housing need varies across rural, urban, and island communities, there is a shared urgency in delivering affordable and social homes in ways that support long-term regeneration, community resilience, and climate targets.

The housing need across Scotland is nuanced and often highly localised. Urban centres like Edinburgh experience intense demand, especially from younger renters, students, and key workers, with average house prices and private rents well above national averages. Meanwhile, more rural and island areas such as Argyll & Bute face their own challenges, particularly in retaining workers and meeting demand for small, affordable units.

Argyll & Bute is a case in point: a lower-quartile salary area where key worker accommodation has become a top priority. Projects supported through the Affordable Housing Supply Programme, including the reuse of former police stations and civic buildings for "stepping stone" accommodation, highlight how even small-scale reuse can support retention and recruitment in vital public services.

The most recent Scottish census and housing statistics on empty homes reveal that while urban need is greatest in terms of volume, vacancy rates in remote and island areas are often disproportionately high, especially in upper-floor flats and town centre properties. This disparity underlines the need for flexible, place-based housing strategies.

While Scotland has made notable progress in delivering new social housing in recent years, particularly through its Affordable Housing Supply Programme, there remains a mismatch between what is being built and what is needed. Large-scale private developments dominate the pipeline in cities, often failing to deliver on affordable quotas or meet the demand for smaller, more flexible homes in central locations. At the same time, housing associations and local authorities frequently struggle to bring forward small-scale, infill, or reuse schemes due to high conversion costs, complex planning rules, and limited financial incentives. The lack of permitted development rights in Scotland adds another layer of complexity, though it is currently under review with a focus on protecting place, services, and infrastructure.

In areas like Fife and Dumfries, town centre decline has left many vacant properties above shops or within disused commercial buildings, but the cost of conversion, heritage status, or infrastructure constraints often act as barriers to reuse. Fiscal mechanisms, particularly VAT on conversions and Council Tax rules, can disincentivise action, leading to long-term vacancy despite urgent need. Scotland is however leading the way in integrating housing with broader regeneration through frameworks such as the Town Centre First Principle and the Place Principle. These strategies prioritise housing as a key component of town centre revival, recognising its role in sustaining services, supporting wellbeing, and reducing carbon footprints by placing people close to amenities and transport.

The Scottish Futures Trust and Scottish Towns Partnership are supporting multi-use redevelopment through masterplan consent areas, which simplify planning processes for complex, mixed-use regeneration. Recent initiatives, such as the church and library conversions in Inverness, to

the [Midsteple Quarter](#) community buyout in Dumfries, demonstrate the appetite for turning civic and commercial assets into homes.

Pilot projects like Aberdeen's Vacant Shops Academy show the potential to repurpose ground-floor units into housing or hybrid uses. In Glasgow and Kirkwall, flats above shops are being brought back into residential use with varying degrees of success, highlighting both the opportunity and the structural barriers that remain.

Compulsory Sale Orders, fiscal reform (including VAT changes and Council Tax incentives), and the reintroduction of targeted refurbishment allowances like the Business Premises Refurbishment Allowance (BPRA) have all been proposed as ways to stimulate more activity in this space. One of the major hurdles for housing associations and councils across Scotland is financial viability, especially when dealing with heritage buildings or remote infrastructure. Without access to low-cost finance or grant funding, many worthwhile reuse schemes are simply unaffordable. As such, reform to tax treatment and investment mechanisms is essential to enable local delivery at scale.

A key feature of the Scottish approach is its commitment to long-term, place-based planning. The National Planning Framework encourages councils to consider reuse in their housing strategies, but more could be done to link housing and regeneration funding pots, align infrastructure with reuse opportunities, and build skills and capacity within smaller councils and housing associations. The demographic shift toward people of all ages seeking town centre living, whether to downsize, reduce car dependency, or connect with community, means that demand for converted flats and smaller units is likely to rise. Scotland's policy frameworks are well-placed to support this, but require practical tools, fiscal support, and legislative reforms to unlock their full potential.

Scotland's unique planning and policy landscape offers a strong foundation for unlocking housing potential through the reuse of vacant buildings. From island police stations and empty shops to redundant churches and civic blocks, the country is rich in underused assets that could meet the pressing housing needs of its diverse communities.

With further reforms to planning, taxation, and funding mechanisms, especially to support small-scale delivery, Scotland can demonstrate how town centre living, environmental sustainability, and social equity can be achieved through creative reuse. By putting place and people first, it is possible to transform vacancy into vibrancy, one building at a time.



Wales

Wales faces a housing challenge that is both national in scale and deeply local in character. From the urban centres of Cardiff and Swansea to rural counties like Carmarthenshire, communities across Wales are grappling with rising housing demand, affordability pressures, and the limitations of current supply models. Yet Wales also stands out for its strong national policy frameworks, particularly in regeneration, placemaking, and community wealth building. With growing numbers of vacant or underused buildings, there is a real opportunity to align policy with practice, turning disused spaces into much-needed homes.

The indices of multiple deprivation show that many Welsh communities continue to experience significant socioeconomic challenges. Inner-city Cardiff, parts of Swansea, the Valleys, and rural west Wales all include areas among the most deprived in the UK. These areas are characterised by low income, poor health, unemployment, and housing insecurity.

In Carmarthenshire, a combination of ageing housing stock, rural poverty, and limited public transport infrastructure creates a housing environment marked by hidden need. In Cardiff, the capital city, rapid population growth and economic polarisation have placed enormous pressure on the housing system, especially for young adults, people from minority backgrounds, and lower-income working families. Waiting lists for social housing remain long, and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, combined with limited affordable options in both urban and rural areas, continues to deepen housing stress. Meanwhile, homelessness and temporary accommodation use have risen across Welsh local authorities, reinforcing the urgency of diversifying and accelerating housing solutions.

Although the Welsh Government has committed to delivering 20,000 new low-carbon social homes for rent by 2026, delivery remains uneven, and the mismatch between supply and demand persists. Many developments are constrained by land availability, planning regulations, and funding complexity. One distinct feature of the Welsh context is the limited availability of permitted development rights, particularly for converting commercial or civic buildings into homes. As a result, Wales has introduced Local Development Orders (LDOs) in some areas, allowing specific categories of development or reuse to proceed more easily, but uptake has been patchy and varies between local authorities.

Housing associations and local councils continue to be the primary drivers of affordable housing, but they face challenges in unlocking smaller or more complex sites, particularly empty buildings in town centres or rural communities. These often fall outside mainstream development models yet hold significant potential if the right policy levers and funding can be aligned.

Wales is well-positioned to lead in the area of sustainable housing reuse. National policies such as Transforming Towns Placemaking Grants, the Welsh Government Town Centre Regeneration Fund, and Building Better Places all promote the adaptive reuse of existing buildings as part of a broader strategy to revitalise urban and rural centres. These initiatives prioritise housing, wellbeing, and placemaking, not just economic growth.

The proposed creation of mixed-use hubs such as the new arts centre in Swansea city centre (supported by £780,000 in Welsh Government funding) is an example of how regeneration funds are being used to repurpose underutilised assets for broader community benefit. While not housing-led,

projects like these show the infrastructure is in place to deliver similar schemes focused on homes, especially in town centres suffering from empty retail units and underused civic buildings.

Furthermore, the “Town Centre First” principle embedded in Welsh planning guidance encourages housing-led development in central locations, where services, transport, and amenities can support community sustainability and reduce car dependency. This framework offers a clear rationale for converting upper floors of commercial buildings, redundant public offices, or disused health and education buildings into affordable homes.

Despite strong policy intent, several barriers continue to impede the reuse of empty buildings for housing. Planning complexity remains a significant hurdle, especially in areas where buildings are listed or require expensive retrofitting to meet new standards. Without permitted development rights, small-scale schemes must often undergo full planning procedures, even when the proposed reuse clearly aligns with local and national objectives.

Viability is another challenge, particularly for schemes led by housing associations or local authorities. Conversion projects often come with unpredictable costs, linked to heritage, structural issues, or utilities, which can deter investment unless offset by targeted funding or tax relief. There is growing support for fiscal reforms, including changes to VAT treatment for conversions and more flexible use of regeneration funding for housing delivery.

Greater use of Local Development Orders, paired with targeted capital investment from Transforming Towns or a future Wales-wide reuse fund, could help unlock hundreds of dormant assets for affordable housing. There is also scope for community-led housing initiatives, supported through Co-operative Housing in Wales or local Community Land Trusts, to play a greater role in bringing smaller or unusual buildings into social use.

Wales has the policy foundations to become a UK leader in sustainable, reuse-led housing delivery. From Cardiff to Carmarthenshire, the need for affordable and secure homes continues to grow, yet so too does the inventory of empty or underused buildings with the potential to meet that need. By aligning strong national frameworks with flexible local delivery tools, and by investing in small-scale, high-impact projects, Wales can turn a structural challenge into an opportunity for innovation and inclusion. With the right support, both financial and regulatory, the country can transform vacancy into viability and ensure that housing not only meets need but strengthens place, community, and the economy.



Standout Examples of Repurposed Vacant Spaces

Across the UK, there is growing recognition that solving the housing crisis will require not only new development but also more creative and efficient use of the buildings we already have. In town centres, suburbs, and rural communities alike, vacant commercial properties, ranging from disused shops and empty offices to former police stations and redundant public sector buildings, are being reimagined as homes. These spaces, once overlooked or written off as obsolete, are proving to be vital assets in delivering affordable, supported, and social housing where it is most needed.

This section brings together case studies from all parts of the UK, illustrating how a wide range of local authorities, housing associations, charities, and community organisations are leading the way in repurposing empty buildings. Whether in the heart of London or in more remote areas like the Isle of Islay, these examples demonstrate that vacant space can be successfully transformed into safe, secure, and high-quality homes, often more quickly and sustainably than new builds.

The projects featured in this research show that local leadership and partnership working are key. Councils are playing a pivotal role, not only through direct delivery but also by using their planning powers, funding streams, and local knowledge to support innovative reuse. In areas such as Argyll & Bute, Bristol, Kent, and Stockport, authorities have identified unused buildings within their estates or supported private owners in unlocking properties that have sat dormant for years. In many cases, these buildings are in central locations, close to amenities and services, making them well-suited to housing people with greater support needs, or those who would benefit from improved access to jobs, transport, and care.

What these case studies also reveal is the flexibility of building reuse. The examples span a wide range of building types and housing outcomes, from shared supported housing for young people and former rough sleepers, to self-contained flats for key workers and families in temporary accommodation. Conversions have taken place in former churches, pubs, police stations, schools, care homes, and above high street shops. Some schemes are small-scale and locally led; others form part of wider regeneration or town centre strategies. Yet all have delivered tangible housing outcomes, often in places where conventional development may not have been viable or welcomed.

In addition to providing housing, these projects bring wider benefits: reviving underused buildings, reducing anti-social behaviour, preserving heritage, cutting carbon emissions through retrofit, and supporting local skills and employment. Importantly, they also offer value for money, particularly when compared to the long-term costs of homelessness, temporary accommodation, or public buildings standing empty.

The case studies included here are not presented as one-size-fits-all solutions. Rather, they are practical illustrations of what is possible when local ambition, community need, and property opportunity are brought together. They reflect the diversity of need across the UK, but also the shared challenges, and shared solutions, that link rural and urban areas, north and south, city centres and small towns. Ultimately, this section demonstrates that with the right leadership, collaboration, and funding, vacant buildings can be transformed into a key part of the housing solution. They are not just

empty shells, but places of potential, waiting to be brought back to life, and back into the service of their communities.

London

London faces an ongoing housing crisis, with a pressing need for affordable and social housing. One innovative solution has been the conversion of underused commercial properties into residential units. Below are notable examples demonstrating how such transformations can address housing shortages while revitalising communities.

Zodiac House, West Croydon: Originally a 1960s office building, Zodiac House had remained vacant for three decades. In a collaborative effort between Croydon Council, Common Projects, and Mitheridge Capital Management, the building was refurbished to provide 73 self-contained flats for temporary accommodation. The flats, comprising one, two, and three-bedroom units, are managed by the council and come fully furnished, including essential appliances and a 24-hour concierge service. The project not only addresses the urgent need for temporary housing but also exemplifies sustainable redevelopment by repurposing existing structures.

Woodward Road, Barking & Dagenham: In Barking and Dagenham, a long-vacant commercial property was transformed into affordable housing for young care leavers. Habitat for Humanity Great Britain, in partnership with the local council, converted the building into a four-bedroom shared flat, each room featuring en-suite facilities. The communal areas were furnished with upcycled materials, providing a supportive environment for young individuals transitioning to independent living.

Vantage Point (formerly Archway Tower), Islington: Archway Tower, a 17-storey office building constructed in the 1960s, underwent significant refurbishment to become Vantage Point, a residential complex offering 118 rental units. The transformation included re-cladding and interior redesign, demonstrating the potential of converting an outdated office block into modern living space.

Delta Point, Croydon: Delta Point, a prominent office building in Croydon town centre, was converted into 348 new homes. This large-scale project showcases how substantial office spaces can be adapted to provide a significant number of residential units, addressing housing demands in urban areas.

Barnet House, Whetstone: Barnet House, a 12-storey office block, was proposed for conversion into 254 residential flats. However, the planning application was rejected by the Mayor of London due to concerns over the lack of affordable housing provision. This case underscores the importance of integrating affordability into redevelopment plans to meet community needs.

Irene House, Balham: Irene House, a 1940s office block in Balham, was repurposed into residential apartments. The refurbishment included modern amenities while retaining the building's historical character. This project illustrates how obsolete office spaces can be effectively converted into housing, contributing to the alleviation of London's housing shortage.

These case studies highlight the potential of repurposing commercial properties to address London's housing challenges. Successful conversions not only provide much-needed affordable and social housing but also contribute to sustainable urban development by utilising existing structures. As the

city continues to seek solutions to its housing crisis, such innovative approaches offer valuable insights into effective and sustainable housing strategies.

The Midlands

Across the Midlands, a growing number of local authorities and housing partners are converting vacant or underused commercial properties into social or affordable housing. These projects highlight how empty buildings, ranging from former hospitals and police stations to pubs and office blocks, can play a vital role in meeting housing needs while reducing waste and preserving place identity.

New Chace Avenue, Coventry: Coventry City Council recently completed the conversion of a disused police accommodation block next to Chace Avenue Police Station in Willenhall into a supported temporary accommodation facility. The scheme provides 34 self-contained rooms for single people experiencing homelessness, many of whom are referred via statutory homelessness duties. Residents include individuals fleeing domestic abuse, former members of the armed forces, and rough sleepers. The building includes shared kitchens, drop-down office space for support workers, and is staffed 24/7. The refurbishment was carried out collaboratively by the council's facilities and housing teams. This conversion reduces reliance on bed-and-breakfast accommodation and improves standards for residents, while also ensuring ongoing management by a dedicated temporary accommodation team. The scheme aligns closely with Coventry's Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy and demonstrates how public buildings can be quickly and effectively repurposed to meet urgent housing need.

Hospital Close, Leicester: Leicester City Council is leading a major redevelopment project at Hospital Close, a site consisting of 23 former hospital staff buildings. The council plans to convert the buildings into 135 affordable council homes, helping to address long-standing housing demand in the city. The scheme is being delivered with a £17 million investment, funded through a combination of Right to Buy receipts and council borrowing. The project has been framed as a critical part of Leicester's effort to expand its stock of social and affordable housing without acquiring new land. It also serves as a model for utilising NHS estate in partnership with local authorities to meet wider public benefit.

Langley Mill, Amber Valley: In Langley Mill, Amber Valley Borough Council and Futures Housing Group repurposed a disused pub into six affordable housing units, with commercial premises retained on the ground floor. The scheme was supported by a £42,000 grant from the Homes and Communities Agency's Empty Homes Programme. The project successfully blended heritage conservation with housing need and serves as an example of how small-scale commercial buildings in village and town settings can be transformed to provide community benefit, support the local economy, and help ease housing pressures.

Warwick: Redundant Office Building Awaiting Housing-Led Repurposing: A disused council-owned office block in Warwick has been identified as a potential site for future housing-led redevelopment. The building is currently costing the local authority around £265,000 per year in upkeep and lost opportunity. Public discussion and scrutiny have increasingly called for the space to be transformed into social or affordable homes, reflecting a wider trend of asset rationalisation and community-led development across the region. Although still at the planning stage, Warwick's case

demonstrates the growing recognition that long-term vacant public buildings represent both a financial liability and a missed opportunity when not aligned with local housing strategies.

South West

The South West of England is home to a range of innovative conversion projects that demonstrate the potential of repurposing commercial buildings into much-needed housing, particularly for social and affordable purposes. Bristol, Plymouth and Torbay stand out for their proactive approaches, each responding to specific local needs while utilising a variety of funding and partnership models.

Bristol City Council: Local Authority-led Innovation and Strategic Use of Assets: Bristol City Council has demonstrated strong leadership in repurposing its own assets and supporting conversions by other stakeholders. Several examples show how redundant commercial or public buildings have been turned into supported and specialised housing (SSH). These include: A former high-dependency assessment unit, now earmarked for use as specialist supported housing; A former children's centre, which will also be repurposed to provide SSH; A disused care home, set to be converted to meet specific housing needs; and a former community centre, similarly being repurposed for SSH delivery. In the private sector, a former probation centre is now being renovated into five SSH units. This cross-sector approach, incorporating both local authority assets and privately owned buildings, highlights a broad and flexible strategy to meet complex housing needs in the city.

Additionally, Goram Homes, plays a pivotal role in larger-scale pipeline projects. One example includes a large warehouse under consideration for residential conversion. These schemes are often integrated into wider regeneration or planning frameworks, maximising land value while contributing to social impact.

St. Goran Community Land Trust (Cornwall): Rural Community-Led Reuse: Further afield in Goran Churchtown, Cornwall, a former schoolhouse and associated school rooms were converted into affordable housing by the Diocese of Truro, in partnership with the St. Goran Community Land Trust. The original building was transformed into three one-bedroom flats. This project was managed by the Cornwall Rural Housing Association and funded through a blend of an interest-free loan from a local business, a loan from Triodos Bank, and charitable grants. Although small in scale, this project is significant in its demonstration of how rural buildings, even those with former educational or ecclesiastical functions, can be adapted to help meet local housing needs in a financially viable and community-sensitive manner South West.

Plymouth: PATH and Adaptive Temporary Use: Plymouth Access to Housing (PATH) has made strides in delivering temporary accommodation through the conversion of non-residential buildings. While detailed project-level examples are limited, PATH is frequently referenced as a model for adaptive reuse, particularly in emergency accommodation scenarios.

Their approach typically includes converting unused public or commercial buildings into interim or semi-permanent homes, ensuring that vulnerable groups are not left behind in periods of acute housing pressure. This aligns with wider strategic objectives to reduce dependence on hotel accommodation and ensure local support structures are in place.

Torbay: Hotels to Homes: In Torbay, one of the most prominent initiatives involves the conversion of hotels into residential accommodation. Driven partly by the seasonal and economic instability of the tourism sector, the 'Hotels to Homes' programme recognises the redundancy of certain hotel assets and repurposes them into social housing.

This model not only brings empty or underused buildings back into productive use, but also helps address the pressing local need for affordable and supported accommodation. The conversions typically retain key facilities like en-suites and shared kitchens, making them relatively straightforward and cost-effective to reconfigure into residential standards.

Across the South West, a range of funding streams support these conversions. These include Homes England grants, charitable contributions, and innovative community financing models such as interest-free local loans. The use of vacant commercial property grant schemes, such as Bristol's own high street recovery programme, also plays a role in catalysing private sector engagement.

Overall, the case studies from the South West illustrate a dynamic and locally responsive approach to tackling the housing crisis. Through a mix of community-led initiatives, local authority strategies, and private sector involvement, these examples demonstrate that commercial property conversions can significantly contribute to increasing the supply of affordable and supported housing in diverse settings.

South East

Across the South East of England, particularly in Kent and Sussex, a growing number of innovative projects have transformed empty commercial buildings into affordable, supported, and emergency housing. These conversions not only address local housing need but also play a significant role in revitalising high streets, deterring anti-social behaviour, and reducing the burden on local services.

Queens House, Folkestone: No Use Empty (Kent): Queens House in Folkestone is one of the best-known projects delivered under the No Use Empty: Kent initiative. Originally a large commercial property, the building had been vacant for several years before being acquired and converted into 32 self-contained flats. The scheme included significant refurbishment work and was supported by a loan from Kent County Council's flagship programme. The refurbished will soon provide secure, energy-efficient accommodation, helping to ease pressure on the local housing system. It stands as a strong example of how financial support and local authority backing can help bring challenging and under utilised properties back into meaningful use

Disused Shop and Flat, Arun District: Emergency Accommodation: A commercial shop unit in Arun, with a disused two-bedroom flat above, had sat empty and deteriorating for over five years. The property attracted squatters and was a hotspot for anti-social behaviour. With the intervention of Arun District Council's Empty Homes Officer, legal action enabled access, and an Improvement Notice was served. The property was eventually sold, and the new owners undertook extensive refurbishment. As a result, both the flat and shop were transformed into much-needed emergency accommodation. This project not only added new housing but also improved the streetscape and reduced community safety concerns.

Abandoned Care Home, Arun District: 30+ Units for Temporary Use: Another Arun case involved a large, disused care home that had been left derelict for years. The building had become a magnet for trespassers, fly-tipping, fires, and required significant intervention by multiple council departments. After a long-awaited sale, the new owner carried out major works to convert the building into over 30 units of shared housing. The result was a secure, managed site used for both emergency and temporary accommodation. The scale of the project, and the prior cost of inaction to local services, demonstrates the case for proactive council-led intervention in reuse opportunities.

Strategic Model: No Use Empty (Kent): Kent County Council's No Use Empty initiative is the longest-running empty property loan scheme in the UK. Since its inception in 2005, it has helped bring over 7,000 homes back into use through loans and support for refurbishment and redevelopment. The programme now extends to commercial property, supporting projects like Queens House and other office-to-housing conversions across Kent towns including Dover, Margate, and Ashford. The model combines low-interest loans, risk-sharing, and strong relationships between councils and property owners to overcome viability barriers that often block private investment.

The case studies from the South East clearly show that with the right tools, commercial properties—shops, care homes, flats above shops, and offices, can be transformed into valuable housing. Programmes like No Use Empty and local authority action in Arun provide blueprints for success: combining financial support, enforcement powers, and strong partnerships to turn eyesores into homes. As housing demand rises and town centres evolve, these models will be vital in unlocking supply where it is most needed.

North East

The North East of England has faced a prolonged period of housing and economic pressure. Across the region, local authorities and partners are increasingly recognising the value of converting vacant commercial and public buildings into social housing, supported accommodation, or affordable flats.

Queens House, Barnsley: From Care Home to Supported Housing for Rough Sleepers: Originally a privately owned care home, Queens House was purchased by Barnsley Council in April 2021 in response to the government's 'Everyone In' initiative, which sought to move rough sleepers off the streets during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognising a gap in local provision for individuals with complex needs, the council developed a business case and secured funding for its acquisition and refurbishment. A comprehensive renovation programme followed, and the first residents moved in by July 2022. The building now provides much-needed temporary accommodation, complete with structured assessments and multi-agency support plans. It has become a cornerstone in Barnsley's strategy to make rough sleeping "rare, brief and non-recurring," offering stability and tailored support to some of the most vulnerable people in the borough.

Joseph Locke House, Barnsley: HMRC Offices Converted into 96 Apartments: Formerly owned and used by HM Revenue & Customs, Joseph Locke House was a large government office base in central Barnsley. Following disposal, the building was acquired by a private owner and converted into 96 residential apartments. While not explicitly social housing, this development demonstrates the potential of redundant public office buildings to be transformed into high-density urban housing. Its scale and location have helped bring residents back into the town centre, supporting local businesses

and aligning with broader regeneration strategies. The project also illustrates how former government assets can be used creatively to meet housing demand when paired with a willing developer and a supportive planning framework.

Regent Street, Barnsley: From Council Office to 40 New Homes: 18 Regent Street, once a council office building, is currently undergoing conversion into 40 residential units, 21 one-bed and 19 two-bed apartments, under the new name “Regent’s Point.” Led by Homes by Holmes, the development reflects a growing trend of reusing municipally owned office blocks that are no longer fit for their original purpose. While being delivered by a private company, the project exemplifies how councils can support housing delivery by releasing underutilised property assets for residential use, particularly in central urban locations. This also contributes to local aims around sustainable development and the revitalisation of town centres through increased footfall and local residency.

Hudson House, Durham: From Pub to Affordable Flats: Located in Gilesgate, Durham, Hudson House was originally a pub, later converted into office space, and ultimately transformed into four one-bedroom self-contained flats. The flats were developed specifically as affordable rental homes for local people, with funding and delivery led by DASH (a community housing provider), in partnership with Durham County Council and Homes England. This compact scheme illustrates how even small commercial premises can contribute meaningfully to addressing housing need. The use of local partnerships, community-driven leadership, and targeted investment demonstrates a replicable model for other small towns in the region.

North West

Across the North West, a growing number of councils and housing providers are turning to vacant public and commercial buildings as a way to meet the increasing demand for affordable, supported, and emergency housing. With pressures from homelessness, housing shortages, and high private rents, repurposing existing buildings provides a more immediate and sustainable response.

Howgill Centre, Whitehaven: Assembly Rooms to Affordable Housing: The former Howgill Centre in Whitehaven, originally constructed as Georgian assembly rooms, is now earmarked for conversion into five one-bedroom flats. The building had most recently been used for children’s services before falling vacant. Owned by Cumberland Council, the property’s Grade II-listed status posed development challenges, but has also allowed the project to draw on potential support from Historic England and conservation-based funding streams. The proposed redevelopment includes a mix of shared and self-contained units with garden access. Positioned in a central town location with good amenities and links to local employment, including Sellafield, the scheme offers a timely response to the town’s housing need and regeneration ambitions.

52 & 72 King Street, Whitehaven: Mixed-Use Units with Residential Potential: Two vacant commercial properties with residential units above on Whitehaven’s King Street High Street have been identified by Cumberland Council as potential sites for redevelopment. With calls for compulsory purchase orders already being considered for other high street properties, the council is exploring how these buildings could be repurposed to support local housing and regeneration strategies.

Bitts Park Lodge, Carlisle: Opportunity for Community-Led Reuse: A locally owned, disused historic lodge in Bitts Park has drawn public interest as a potential reuse opportunity. Although there are no formal redevelopment plans yet, the site has been highlighted in council discussions as a potential community-led housing or temporary accommodation project. The building's central location, heritage value, and visibility make it a strong candidate for a pilot reuse project or community facility.

Heaton Moor Road, Stockport: Office to Affordable Housing: Stockport Council previously worked with Carillion and CBRE to review its estate for housing potential. One of the key outcomes of this review was the conversion and extension of a large Victorian semi-detached office on Heaton Moor Road into 14 affordable apartments. The development, delivered through Stockport's housing partnership model, demonstrates how surplus civic buildings can be retrofitted for modern living and embedded in local affordable housing strategies.

Station Mews, Liverpool: Former Fire and Police Station to Affordable Homes: Torus Housing Association converted a former fire and police station in Allerton, Liverpool into a mixed affordable housing scheme, including homes for shared ownership and 40 homes for older people at affordable rent. Part-funded by Homes England and supported through the JV North consortium, this scheme exemplifies a strategic reuse of civic infrastructure to meet intergenerational housing need.

Scotland

Across Scotland, from the Isle of Islay to central Glasgow and Fife, public, private and charitable organisations are leading the way in converting underused or disused commercial buildings into homes. These examples demonstrate the potential of empty space to address housing shortages, especially in areas facing high demand, economic transition, or rural depopulation.

Port Ellen Police Station, Isle of Islay: Affordable Housing for Young People: The former police station in Port Ellen, a Victorian property built in 1887, was disused for over a decade before being transformed into six affordable flats by the Port Ellen Station charity, supported by the Ian Mactaggart Trust. The building had deteriorated significantly and was added to Scotland's Buildings at Risk register in 2009. Consultation with local young people identified a strong need for housing on the island, particularly among those unable to afford homeownership. The Trust's vision was brought to life in 2017, with support from West Highland Housing Association, Argyll & Bute Council, and £180,000 of Empty Homes Grant and Loan funding. The resulting flats are now managed as secure tenancies, helping retain younger residents, and support local apprenticeships.

Old Courthouse, Rothesay: Historic Civic Building to Homes: On the Isle of Bute, the Old Courthouse in Rothesay—a Category B listed building, was converted into housing following years of vacancy. Although this project dates back to 2011, it remains a standout example of conservation-led residential development. The refurbishment, led by Collective Architecture, retained key architectural features while adapting the space for modern residential use. This project illustrates sensitive conversion, especially in rural towns with rich heritage but limited housing supply.

Oban Hotel and Former Dentist Surgery: Projects in Development: In Oban, a derelict section of a former hotel is currently being prepared for redevelopment into four or five affordable homes, in partnership with a registered social landlord. Meanwhile, a disused dentist surgery on Islay is also

undergoing conversion to housing for health and social care staff. These two early-stage projects, both in Argyll & Bute, show a proactive local authority approach to unlocking empty commercial buildings for community benefit. The council's Empty Homes and Business Property Officers are actively working with owners and development partners to bring forward further schemes.

LAR Housing Trust: Conversions Across Fife and Central Belt: The LAR Housing Trust has delivered a range of affordable housing schemes across Scotland, including multiple office-to-residential conversions. While individual project details vary, LAR's model typically involves acquiring underused commercial properties, often in town centres, and converting them into long-term affordable rental homes. Their work across Fife and the Central Belt demonstrates the scalability of such projects when backed by patient investment and strong development capability.

Town Centre Living in Edinburgh and Glasgow: National Policy Alignment: The Scottish Futures Trust and Architecture & Design Scotland have supported national and local authorities in embedding "Town Centre Living" (TCL) into planning and delivery. Case studies from Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Glasgow, featured in the TCL Good Practice Reports, demonstrate the reuse of commercial floorspace above shops, vacant banks, and redundant community centres to create residential units. While many are early in development or part of broader masterplans, these efforts illustrate a coordinated, policy-led effort to return empty buildings to use as homes, while supporting sustainable, communities in Scotland.

Wales

Wales faces a complex mix of urban housing pressure, rural depopulation, and town centre decline, issues that make the reuse of empty commercial properties for housing particularly relevant. From conversions above shops to full redevelopment of disused civic buildings, a number of schemes across Welsh local authorities are now demonstrating how vacant assets can be transformed into affordable or supported homes.

Town Centre Living and Arts Hub, Swansea: Swansea has taken a proactive approach to repurposing buildings in its city centre through town centre regeneration funding. One standout initiative involves the proposed conversion of a commercial premises into a new arts and housing hub in the High Street area. With £780,000 secured from the Welsh Government's Town Centre Loans Scheme, the development is creating space not only for creative enterprises but also for affordable homes, contributing to the revitalisation of the area and improving the overall offer for residents and visitors alike. This model, combining community use with housing, demonstrates how vacant spaces can be transformed into vibrant mixed-use developments that respond to local priorities.

Faith-Owned Building Reuse in Carmarthenshire: According to a 2025 Bevan Foundation report, a number of churches, chapels, and faith-owned buildings across Wales, including in Carmarthenshire, are being repurposed to address local housing need. These schemes typically involve conversion of underused religious spaces into small clusters of affordable flats or shared accommodation, often in partnership with housing associations. In Carmarthenshire specifically, local officers have engaged in enforcement and grant-funded approaches to support this type of reuse, demonstrating how local regeneration and housing strategies can be embedded in creative asset use. Such conversions are

particularly valuable in rural or semi-rural areas where new land for development is limited, and where community support for preservation and reuse is strongWales.

Living Above Shops: Vale of Glamorgan and Cardiff: In Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan, several schemes have focused on reactivating vacant upper floors above retail premises. Although typically classed as regeneration rather than empty homes work, these projects have received backing from local authorities and the Welsh Government through Local Development Orders (LDOs), as Wales has minimal permitted development rights for residential conversion. Through LDOs, the councils are creating a planning route to encourage the transformation of these centrally located but underused spaces into residential flats, often earmarked for young people, key workers, or low-income tenants. These conversions play a key role in reducing pressure on housing waiting lists while also supporting local high street recovery.

Newport and Town Centre Flats Conversion: In Newport, similar work has been focusing on identifying empty buildings suitable for conversion into affordable housing. Several above-shop units and redundant civic spaces have been redeveloped into small-scale flats through Welsh Government capital funding. The approach taken by Newport is notable for combining regeneration aims (reviving retail areas) with direct delivery of supported housing, offering a replicable model for mid-sized towns across Wales.



Opportunities With Vacant Spaces – Summary

Across the UK, a quiet but powerful shift is underway. Faced with mounting housing pressures, from record homelessness to unaffordable rents and limited land for development, a growing number of local authorities and community-led organisations are rethinking what constitutes a home, and where homes can be made. Instead of relying solely on new build schemes, they are turning their attention to the buildings already in place: vacant shops, disused care homes, redundant civic buildings, and empty office blocks. These spaces, once seen as liabilities, are being transformed into vital housing assets.

This movement reflects a broader recognition that solving the housing crisis requires more than just building from scratch. In towns, cities, and rural communities alike, repurposing empty spaces offers a faster, more sustainable, and often more affordable route to delivering homes, particularly for those in urgent housing need. The case studies presented in this report show just how varied and impactful these initiatives can be.

Local authorities are leading the way. In cities like Bristol and Barnsley, councils have converted former children's centres, police accommodation blocks, and even disused care homes into supported housing for people experiencing homelessness or with complex needs. In Coventry, a redundant police building now provides temporary accommodation with onsite support, helping reduce dependence on B&Bs while improving outcomes for vulnerable residents.

Elsewhere, councils are turning to their own estates to identify opportunities. Warwick and Bury have both faced scrutiny over the cost of maintaining empty civic buildings, sparking debate about whether these assets could be better used for affordable housing. In Nottingham and Croydon, the decision has already been made: former care homes and commercial office buildings are being refurbished to create secure, well-managed homes for local people.

The South East and South West regions offer numerous examples of how public buildings and high street properties are being brought back into use. In Kent, the long-running No Use Empty programme has supported the conversion of commercial spaces like Queens House in Folkestone, where 32 self-contained flats will soon provide much needed accommodation in a town where supply is struggling to meet demand. In Cornwall and Torbay, hotels and old schoolhouses have been transformed into affordable housing through strong partnerships between councils, community land trusts, and social landlords.

Community-led initiatives are also playing a critical role. In Port Ellen, on the Isle of Islay, a former police station was repurposed by a local charity to create affordable flats for young people. This project, supported by the local housing association and grant funding, has helped to retain younger residents and support apprenticeships in a rural area at risk of depopulation. Similarly, in Goran Churchtown in Cornwall, a disused school was turned into affordable homes by a community land trust, supported through a blend of ethical finance and grant funding.

These projects are not only providing homes, they are reviving derelict buildings, restoring heritage assets, supporting local economies, and reducing carbon emissions by avoiding demolition and rebuild. In many cases, they are also tackling social issues head-on. In Liverpool, a former fire and police station has been transformed into intergenerational housing, including homes for older people

at affordable rents. In Barnsley, the conversion of Joseph Locke House and 18 Regent Street demonstrates how former government buildings can be reintegrated into town centre life, supporting regeneration while meeting housing demand.

The flexibility of these schemes is striking. Some focus on emergency or temporary accommodation; others deliver permanent homes for key workers, families, or people with support needs. Buildings repurposed include churches, pubs, town halls, banks, dentist surgeries, warehouses, and even Georgian assembly rooms. Whether small-scale or part of wider regeneration strategies, these conversions show housing delivery can be locally led and highly adaptive.

What unites these efforts is a blend of local leadership, strategic asset management, and partnership working. Councils and communities that have succeeded in repurposing vacant spaces tend to share certain features: a clear understanding of local need, a willingness to collaborate across departments and sectors, and access to funding that supports flexibility rather than rigidity. In some cases, enforcement powers have helped unlock stalled buildings; in others, long-term vision and community ownership have driven success.

Importantly, these case studies send a strong message to other authorities: it can be done. Repurposing empty buildings is not without challenges; planning constraints, funding limitations, and building condition all matter. But where political will and operational capacity align, the results can be transformative. These projects demonstrate that vacant spaces are not just eyesores or financial burdens, they are places of potential.

They also suggest that the solutions to our housing crisis may be closer at hand than we think. Publicly owned buildings that no longer serve their original purpose, or high street properties left empty by commercial decline, could offer thousands of homes across the country. To unlock this potential at scale, national government support is needed through policy reform, dedicated funding for retrofit and reuse, and better data on publicly-owned vacancy rates. But local innovation and initiative are already showing the way.

In a housing system facing mounting pressure and stretched resources, these examples represent not just opportunity but urgency. They show that we do not always need to build homes, we can create them, from the fabric of the places we already have. That message, embedded in practice from the Highlands to the South Coast, is one of encouragement and practical inspiration for local authorities, community groups, and housing providers across the UK.

Research Summary

This paper set out to investigate the scale, nature, and strategic potential of vacant commercial premises across England, with a particular interest in how these spaces might support affordable and social housing supply through repurposing, meanwhile use, or conversion. Against the backdrop of rising housing need and underused urban assets, it aimed to give evidence and insights that would help local authorities, housing providers, and policymakers consider vacant commercial properties as part of a broader strategy to address place-based regeneration and housing delivery challenges.

Through a combination of data analysis, policy mapping, and case-based insight, it sheds light on the distribution and characteristics of vacant commercial space, interrogates how and where such space might contribute to housing or community objectives, and identifies emerging practice and barriers across different local and regional contexts. In doing so, it offers an important counterpoint to the over-reliance on newbuild supply as the primary solution to housing need. Several key findings and cross-cutting themes have emerged from the research, which together suggest both a significant opportunity and a clear need for more joined-up, proactive approaches to vacant commercial premises in the UK's housing and regeneration policy landscape.

One of the central findings of the paper is the sheer scale of vacant commercial stock across many parts of the country, much of which remains hidden in plain sight. While vacancy is sometimes temporary or cyclical in nature, the paper highlights a substantial volume of premises that are long-term or structurally underused, especially on high streets, in small-town centres, and in post-industrial or transitional neighbourhoods. Despite this, such spaces often fall through the gaps in both housing and economic policy frameworks. They are rarely treated as part of the housing supply conversation, and efforts to animate or reuse them for social value purposes are often small-scale, fragmented, or short-lived. This highlights a missed opportunity to unlock a potentially rich, if complex, source of usable space.

The geography of commercial vacancy is deeply uneven, reflecting wider economic shifts and structural inequalities. Areas experiencing economic decline, retail contraction, or post-COVID high street retraction have seen a rise in persistent commercial voids. Meanwhile, even in some relatively affluent areas, changing patterns of consumption, logistics, and work have left legacy buildings functionally obsolete or poorly aligned to contemporary need.

What emerges is a picture of commercial vacancy that is driven less by isolated market failure and more by broader transitions in how people live, work, and interact with place. Understanding this context is key to crafting meaningful reuse or conversion strategies, not every vacant shop or unit will be suitable for housing, but many could support transitional, temporary, or hybrid uses that meet local demand. A recurring theme throughout the paper is the disconnect between planning, housing, economic development, and regeneration agendas when it comes to commercial vacancy. The lack of coherent policy alignment often means that vacant premises sit unused not because of a lack of potential, but due to inertia, regulatory barriers, or siloed responsibilities within councils and public agencies.

Permitted development rights (PDR), particularly the conversion of Class E uses to residential, have theoretically opened up new avenues for re-use. However, the paper notes that these tools are often market-led, resulting in poor quality outcomes or missed opportunities to align reuse with social and community value. Meanwhile, local authorities often lack the capacity or resources to proactively

intervene, especially where ownership is complex. Despite these challenges, the paper identifies promising examples of practice where vacant commercial space is being brought into productive use, either through meanwhile housing, community-led repurposing, or housing association-led conversion schemes. These interventions often require creativity, partnership, and local intelligence, and tend to emerge where councils have embedded cross-disciplinary working and strong enabling frameworks. Key enablers include the use of local data to map opportunity, creative planning and asset disposal strategies, and access to revolving funds or property acquisition models. Where these are in place, vacant commercial premises can offer not only a source of housing but also a means to tackle town centre decline, support community enterprise, and test more agile, low-carbon forms of urban adaptation.

A vital contribution of the paper is to challenge prevailing assumptions about vacancy, as a failure or liability, and to reframe it as latent opportunity. This reframing requires both a culture shift and an infrastructure shift: recognising the public value of adaptive reuse, and providing the financial, legal, and organisational mechanisms to support it. Doing so also invites a broader conversation about stewardship: who owns and controls vacant space, for what ends, and with what degree of accountability to place. In many cases, enabling housing or community uses in commercial voids requires navigating fragmented ownership patterns or unlocking private sector partners from 'hope value' expectations that bear little relation to market realities.

Finally, the paper makes a compelling case for integrating vacancy strategies with wider policy goals, most notably housing affordability, climate action, and town centre renewal. Reusing vacant commercial premises can contribute to net zero targets by reducing the embodied carbon costs of demolition and new construction. It can support local economies by reintroducing footfall and vibrancy. It can create new forms of tenure and typology that expand the housing offer, particularly in constrained urban areas.

In short, commercial vacancy is not only a housing issue, it is a placemaking issue. When viewed through a broader social value lens, it becomes a vital piece of the puzzle for building more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable urban and rural futures. In reviewing the evidence and analysis, this research has brought fresh attention to an overlooked dimension of the housing supply and regeneration debate, and it has done so in a way that is grounded, practical, and forward-looking.

The findings point to a substantial but under-realised opportunity: to harness vacant commercial premises not only to meet housing need, but to do so in ways that support community cohesion, spatial justice, and climate resilience. Realising this potential will require intentional policy shifts, targeted investment, and a reframing of how we understand and manage the value of space. As the paper now turns to recommendations, it prepares for a conversation not about whether to act, but about how best to do so, guided by evidence, place insight, and the collective ambition to build a fairer and more liveable built environment.

Recommendations

The absence of consistent, granular, and up-to-date data on commercial vacancy represents a major barrier to effective policy and intervention. It is recommended that central government, working with local authorities, the Valuation Office Agency, and other stakeholders, develops a standardised national dataset on publicly-owned vacant property. Including duration of vacancy, ownership status, previous use, and location, this data should comprise information of property owned by public bodies such as central government, local authorities, the Fire Service, National Health Service, Ministry of Defence and HMRC.

There is a clear need for a national strategy that treats vacant commercial premises as a cross-cutting policy opportunity rather than a narrow sectoral issue. This strategy should align housing, planning, economic development, and climate objectives, recognising the potential of commercial reuse to support housing delivery, reduce emissions, and regenerate struggling places. The strategy should include clear delivery mechanisms, long-term funding streams, and support for innovation, including meanwhile use, modular infill, and low-carbon retrofit.

England should learn from and align with the progressive place-based planning approaches now embedded in Scottish and Welsh policy. Both nations have adopted a “Place First” principle that prioritises wellbeing, inclusion, and sustainability in spatial decisions. England’s planning system should follow suit by embedding a place-led framework that enables the reuse of vacant commercial premises for community and housing use, especially where such reuse supports local need and climate objectives. This would also provide clearer policy justification for local authorities wishing to challenge speculative or inappropriate commercial-to-residential conversions under permitted development rights.

While existing funding for housing and regeneration is often channelled into newbuild or large-scale infrastructure, a dedicated programme is needed to unlock the potential of smaller, underused commercial spaces, particularly for social and community-led housing. This programme should include capital and revenue funding, access to finance, and support for feasibility work, site acquisition, and retrofit. Priority should be given to projects that demonstrate community benefit, sustainability, and align with local housing need.

Many councils lack the capacity or tools to proactively address commercial vacancy, particularly where ownership is fragmented or speculative. Local authorities should be supported to take on a more strategic convenor role through enhanced planning powers (e.g. refined Article 4 directions, local design codes), access to revolving acquisition funds, and the ability to lead or broker cross-sector partnerships with housing associations, developers, and community groups. National government should also invest in training and guidance to help local planning and regeneration teams identify and bring forward viable reuse opportunities within existing commercial stock.

Habitat for Humanity and its partners should use the findings of this paper to identify high-potential localities for pilot projects that explore the adaptive reuse of vacant commercial premises for affordable and social housing. These pilots should be place-specific, responsive to local housing need and vacancy patterns, and designed to generate learning that can inform future policy and scaling. Priority could be given to areas with persistent commercial voids, supportive local authorities, and established housing need, particularly where local stakeholders are already engaged in regeneration or community-led initiatives.

Building on the evidence and momentum generated by this paper, Habitat for Humanity and its network should explore the development of an investment and delivery model tailored to unlocking underused commercial premises. This might include creating a collaborative framework with housing associations, local authorities, and ethical investors to pool resources, share risk, and support feasibility, acquisition, and conversion costs. The model should prioritise affordability, sustainability, and community impact, and be capable of replication in diverse local contexts.



Thank you.

Appendix 1: Resources and References

Statistics

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/housing-statistics-empty-properties-and-second-homes/>
<https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/search-the-census#/topics>
<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10173/>
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/homelessness-statistics>
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/house-building-statistics>
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/housebuildingdataukjanuarytomarch2024>
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/second-homes-and-empty-properties-in-september-2024/>
<https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Local-Government/Finance/Council-Tax/Dwellings/chargeableemptyandsecondhomesbylocalauthority>
<https://landregistry.data.gov.uk/app/ukhpi/browse?from=2024-05-01&location=http%3A%2F%2Flandregistry.data.gov.uk%2Fid%2Fregion%2FUnited-kingdom&to=2025-05-01&lang=en>
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/council-taxbase-statistics>
<https://www.gov.scot/collections/homelessness-statistics/>
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/social-housing-lettings-in-england-april-2023-to-march-2024/social-housing-lettings-in-england-tenants-april>

Websites

<https://www.dontwastebuildings.com>
<https://www.midsteeplequarter.org>
<https://www.scottishfuturestrust.org.uk>
<https://larhousingtrust.co.uk>
<https://historicengland.org.uk>

Land Search Tools

<https://www.demolitionmap.uk/map>
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/brownfield-land-registers>
<https://www.landcycle.com>
<https://searchland.co.uk>
<https://land.tech>

Publications

[‘Good Homes for All’](#) – The Architects Journal

[‘A Blueprint to tackle the affordable homes crisis’](#) – District Councils Network

[‘Regenerating Communities: Affordable homes from unused faith-owned buildings’](#) – The Bevan Foundation

[‘New Homes from Vacant Historic Buildings’](#) – Historic England

News Articles

[‘Inside the economics of temporary accommodation’](#) – Inside Housing

[‘Home Truths: Housing is a distributional problem’](#) – Prospect Magazine

[‘City of London’s ‘retrofit first’ policy to come into force’](#) The Architect’s Journal

[‘New report reveals number of RSL empty homes by local authority area’](#) – Scottish Housing News

[‘The housing crisis can’t be solved by only building new’](#) – The Bevan Foundation

[‘Empty properties cost social housing sector £1.6bn in 2023-24, research shows’](#) – Inside Housing

[‘City of London’s ‘retrofit first’ policy to come into force’](#) – The Architect’s Journal

[‘Former council offices in Matlock could be turned into dozens of apartments’](#) – The Derby Telegraph

[‘NUE – Queens House in Folkestone to be given a new lease of life!’](#) – No Use Empty.Org

[‘£265,000-per-year cost of disused Warwick office block “is wrong”](#) – Warwick News Hub

[‘Derelict former school to be auctioned off’](#) – Bury Council

[‘This East Lancs Council spent more than £100,000 maintaining unused buildings’](#) – MSN.Com

[‘Shop vacancy rates in Peterborough city centre lower national average’](#) – Peterborough Today

[‘Vacant properties and above-the-shop units could increase housing output’](#) - Newstalk

[‘Ex-Fife Council property in Dunfermline set to become flats’](#) – Dunfermline Press

[‘Work to start soon on homeless flats, says council’](#) – Brighton and Hove News

[‘Clifton: Empty care home to be transformed into council housing’](#) – West Bridgford Wire

[‘Value of Heritage-led Regeneration for England’s High Streets Revealed by New Independent Evaluation’](#) – Historic England

[‘The Rise Of Property Guardianship: How Brits Are Turning Abandoned Buildings Into Affordable Housing’](#) - ibTimes

[‘The temporary housing crisis is a national scandal. We’re exploring how meanwhile sites could deliver much-needed homes for people in need.’](#) – RCKA

[‘5,200 people trying to find a home in Wirral, Merseyside whilst some commercial properties are sat vacant for long periods of time’](#) – Mike Doyle, LinkedIn

[‘Vacant West Berkshire Council building to house refugees’](#) – BBC

[‘New flats planned for listed city centre building’](#) -BBC

[‘Basildon Eastgate House to house Havering Council’s homeless’](#) – Echo News

[‘London council on the brink of bankruptcy to house homeless in empty office blocks’](#) – The Standard

[‘Plans to turn old Jobcentre into aparthotel backed’](#) – BBC

[‘The Empty Homes Epidemic: The UK regions with the most vacant council houses’](#) Housing Management & Maintenance Online

['Social housing waiting list could reach two million people and take more than two decades to clear, JLL says' – Inside Housing](#)

['Transforming Whitehaven: £450,000 investment in Green Market and Duke Street' – Cumberland Council](#)

['Number of homeless people in temporary accommodation in Scotland hits 22-year high' – Inside Housing](#)

['Office-to-homes conversions: London blocks hold fresh allure since shift to home-working' – The Guardian](#)

['Croydon Council approves new plans to tackle homelessness and provide more temporary housing for residents](#)

[Case Study: Zodiac House by shedkm – The Architect's Journal](#)

['Council plans to convert vacant buildings into supported housing' – Inside Housing](#)

['MSV launches two community initiatives in one' – MSV Housing](#)

['£780,000 to create a new arts hub in Swansea City Centre' – Wales 247](#)

['Cumberland council to reexamine empty homes motion' – The News and Star](#)

['Whitehaven businesses to benefit from grants to improve town centre' – The News and Star](#)

['Final warning issued to King Street, Whitehaven landlords' – The News and Star](#)

['No plans to demolish Bitts Park Lodge, says Cumberland Council' – The News and Star](#)

['At least 354,000 people homeless in England today' - Shelter](#)

['London's temporary accommodation crisis \ The Latest Data' – The Trust for London](#)

['Slough has second longest social housing waiting time in UK' – Slough Observer](#)

['Social Housing Crisis: Over 1.2 Million Waiting, Some Face Decades-Long Delays' - iHowz](#)

['Some social housing tenants face 26 years wait for a home' – Property188.com](#)

Appendix 2: Research Data

2021 Statistics

The 2021 statistics highlighted key differences and similarities across England, Scotland, and Wales in relation to FOI requests, homelessness, housing supply, and empty homes. Whilst the FOI requests focused on the number of vacant non-residential properties owned by local authorities, the homelessness, housing supply and empty homes data were all obtained through publicly available sources, and include statistics across all local authorities, not just those subject to an FOI request.

In the 2021 study, freedom of Information (FOI) requests were sent to 90 local authorities in England (90), with 81% of requests receiving responses. Scotland showed the highest response rate (92%) despite fewer requests (12), while authorities in Wales received only 8 requests with a 75% response rate.

In terms of homelessness, England reported the highest number of main duty decisions (62,490), with 40,030 classified as homeless or in priority need. Scotland followed with 31,335 and 30,145 respectively, and Wales reported 7,731 and 3,057. England had the most households in temporary accommodation (98,300), followed by Scotland (11,665) and Wales (2,324).

Since 2019, temporary accommodation use increased most in England (+12.2%), with smaller rises in Scotland (+6%) and Wales (+4%).

Under housing supply, England led in Housing Association completions (32,330) and local authority completions (1,810). Notably, 39 English authorities recorded zero completions, compared to none in Scotland and 3 in Wales. House prices were highest in England (£262,175), with Wales seeing the greatest annual increase (+8.2%).

The empty homes category reveals 278,470 long-term empty homes in England, a 16.92% rise since 2019. In contrast, Scotland (47,333) and Wales (24,671) showed smaller figures, with Wales experiencing a slight decrease (-3.6%). England also had the highest number of registered second homes (262,758), with modest increases in all nations.

Empty clergy dwellings were mainly recorded in England (1,121), obtained through the annual Council Taxbase submission, and local authority-owned empty homes numbered 23,974, a 3.34% rise from 2018.

These figures underscore persistent challenges around homelessness and underutilised housing stock, particularly in England, and demonstrate varying levels of responsiveness and housing output across the three nations.

	2021 Statistics	England	Scotland	Wales
FOI Requests	Number of freedom of information (FOI) requests submitted	90	12	8
	Number of responses received as a result of the request	73	11	6
	% of responses received of requests	81%	92%	75%
Homelessness	Total number of main duty decisions	62,490	31,335	7,731
	Total homeless + priority need + unintentionally homeless	40,030	30,145	3,057
	Households in temporary accommodation (March 2020)	98,300	11,665	2,324
	% change since 2019	+12.2%	+6%	+4%
Housing Supply	Housing Association completions, all types & tenures	32,330	4,204	1,019
	Local Authorities, all types & tenures	1,810	1,465	12
	Number of authorities recording zero completions in 19/20	39	0	3
	Average house price October 2020	£262,175	£152,680	£209,723
	% change from October 2019	+5.09%	-2.87%	+8.2%
Empty Homes	Total number of long-term empty homes, October 2020	278,470	47,333	24,671
	% change of long-term empty homes from October 2019	+16.92%	+13.46%	-3.6%
	% of total housing stock considered long-term empty	1.10%	1.88%	1.7%
	Total number of registered 2 nd homes, October 2020	262,758	24,466	24,423
	% change of 2 nd homes from October 2019	+3.93%	+0.62%	+0.93%
	% of total housing stock considered 2 nd homes	1.06%	+0.97%	1.7%
	Empty Clergy dwellings,, October 2020	1,121	105	-
	Empty Clergy dwellings,, October 2019	1,137	106	-
	Local Authority-owned empty homes, October 2019	23,974	-	-
	% change of local authority-owned empty homes from October 2018	+3.34%	-	-

This data presents a comparative overview of local authority-owned vacant properties across England, Scotland, and Wales in 2021, segmented by the property's primary usage class: retail, office, leisure, and other.

England reported the highest number of local authority-owned vacant properties, with a sample of 1,346. Scotland and Wales followed with 324 and 122, respectively. Retail space accounted for the largest share of vacant properties in Wales (45%) and England (30.75%), while in Scotland, retail space represented a smaller proportion (18.8%).

Office space made up nearly a quarter of England's vacant stock (24.5%) and a fifth in Scotland (19.4%). Wales had a notably smaller share in this category, with office spaces representing just 13.1% of its vacant stock. Leisure spaces were the least common category in all three nations, making up only 4.9% of vacant space in England, 6.1% in Scotland, and 4% in Wales.

The "other" category, which includes vacant spaces not classified as retail, office, or leisure, comprised the largest share in Scotland (55.5%) and a significant proportion in both England (39.6%) and Wales (36.8%). This suggests a broad range of underutilised spaces beyond traditional commercial uses, which may offer potential for adaptive reuse or repurposing.

The estimated total number of local authority-owned vacant properties further underscores the scale of the issue: 6,324 in England, 942 in Scotland, and 447 in Wales. Estimated numbers of vacant retail spaces were highest in England (1,944), with Wales (201) slightly ahead of Scotland (177). For office vacancies, England again led with 1,549, compared to 182 in Scotland and just 58 in Wales.

Leisure space vacancies remained relatively low across the board, but England's estimate of 309 was considerably higher than Scotland's 57 and Wales's 17. The "other" category showed the largest disparity, with 2,504 vacant spaces in England, 522 in Scotland, and 164 in Wales.

Overall, these figures reflect both the scale and the diversity of vacant space types within local authority portfolios. While retail and office space make up substantial portions, a considerable proportion falls under "other" uses, particularly in Scotland. These vacant assets represent both a challenge and an opportunity, highlighting the importance of tailored, place-based approaches to reuse and regeneration in each nation respectively.

	2021 Statistics	England	Scotland	Wales
Vacant Spaces	Total sample number of local authority-owned vacant properties	1,346	324	122
	Total number of vacant retail spaces	414	61	55
	% of total vacant spaces classed as retail space	30.75%	18.8%	45%
	Total number of vacant office space	330	63	16
	% of total vacant spaces classed as office space	24.5%	19.4%	13.1%
	Total number of vacant leisure spaces	67	20	5
	% of total vacant spaces classed as leisure space	4.9%	6.1%	4%
	Total number of other vacant spaces	534	180	45
	% of total vacant spaces classed as other use space	39.6%	55.5%	36.8%
	Estimated total number of local authority-owned vacant properties	6,324	942	447
	Estimated total number of vacant retail spaces	1,944	177	201
	Estimated total number of vacant office spaces	1,549	182	58
	Estimated total number of vacant leisure spaces	309	57	17
	Estimated total number of other vacant spaces	2,504	522	164

2021 vs 2025 Freedom of Information Responses

The 2025 FOI data should not be interpreted as a direct measure of sector engagement or transparency but rather as a reflection of a more refined and strategically focused research methodology. In contrast to the broader approach taken in 2021, when Freedom of Information (FOI) requests were sent to 110 local authorities, the 2025 study engaged only 56 authorities. These were deliberately selected based on their provision of high-quality, complete responses in the earlier research. As a result, any apparent drop in raw figures between 2021 and 2025 should be understood in the context of this smaller, more selective sample rather than as a decline in activity or performance across the sector.

This refined approach aimed to build on existing strong relationships and streamline the data-gathering process by prioritising reliability and continuity over volume. Accordingly, the number of FOI requests submitted decreased in every nation: from 90 to 43 in England, from 12 to 8 in Scotland, and from 8 to 5 in Wales. Far from indicating reduced interest or engagement, this shift represents a more efficient, insight-driven strategy that re-engaged with authorities known to provide consistent, accurate data.

Encouragingly, response rates improved across all three nations. England's rate rose from 81% to 84%; Scotland maintained high responsiveness, with a slight dip from 92% to 86%; and Wales improved from 75% to 80%. This reflects the benefits of working with known, data-proficient authorities—producing stronger data with fewer resources.

This evolution in method underscores the value of developing trusted data partnerships. By engaging with responsive local authorities, the research team reduced administrative burden while preserving data integrity. It also offers a potential blueprint for future studies: fostering collaboration with well-performing authorities while continuing to support transparency and capacity-building across the wider sector.

In summary, the 2025 FOI strategy represents a methodological progression, not a shift in sector dynamics. By narrowing the sample to high-quality responders from the 2021 study, the research achieved deeper, more reliable insight. The resulting dataset supports robust comparative analysis and enhances the accuracy of conclusions drawn about housing, vacancy, and public asset use across the UK.

2021 v 2025 Statistics	England		Scotland		Wales	
	2021	2025	2021	2025	2021	2025
Number of freedom of information (FOI) requests submitted	90	43	12	8	8	5
Number of responses received	73	36	11	7	6	4
% of responses received of requests	81%	84%	92%	86%	75%	80%

Place by Place FOI Data for Empty Non-Residential Local Authority-Owned Buildings

England

Local Authority	Retail			Office			Leisure			Other			Total		
	2021	2025	+/-	2021	2025	+/-	2021	2025	+/-	2021	2025	+/-	2021	2025	+/-
Barking & Dagenham	2	21	+19	0	0	0	0	10	+10	17	14	-3	19	45	+26
Brent	10	0	-10	5	2	-3	2	5	+3	25	6	-19	42	13	-29
Brighton & Hove	2	3	+1	4	13	+9	1	3	+2	3	5	+2	10	24	+14
Bristol	9	4	-5	0	5	+5	1	1	0	5	2	-3	15	12	-3
Bromley	3	1	-2	3	2	-1	0	1	+1	27	1	-26	33	5	-28
Central Bedfordshire	8	17	+9	3	3	0	2	0	-2	18	4	-14	31	24	-7
Cheshire West & Chester	21	6	-15	53	8	-45	0	0	0	1	13	+12	75	27	-48
City of London	12	8	-4	6	10	+4	0	0	0	10	18	+8	28	36	+8
Coventry	7	7	0	10	18	+8	0	2	+2	8	55	+47	25	82	+57
Croydon	2	0	-2	3	0	-3	0	0	0	2	0	-2	7	0	-7
Derby	51	4	-47	76	1	-75	4	2	-2	42	19	-23	173	26	-147
Doncaster	6	16	+10	5	5	0	4	4	0	7	7	0	22	57	+35
Dover	0	0	0	1	0	-1	0	0	0	3	4	+1	4	4	0
Gateshead	12	26	+14	12	14	+2	0	0	0	31	63	+32	55	103	+48
Haringey	1	6	+5	4	1	-3	1	0	-1	10	0	-10	16	7	-9
Kirklees	9	15	+6	7	9	+2	0	2	+2	4	1	-3	20	27	+7
Lambeth	1	18	+17	6	4	-2	4	3	-1	7	12	+5	18	37	+19
Leeds	35	2	-33	23	2	-21	3	0	-3	40	0	-40	101	4	-97
Leicester	5	5	0	2	9	+7	0	0	0	13	1	-12	20	15	-5
Luton	4	13	+9	0	15	+15	0	2	+2	0	0	0	4	30	+26
Manchester	11	6	-5	2	3	+1	2	1	-1	24	39	+15	39	49	+10
Merton	1	2	+1	1	0	-1	1	0	-1	1	2	+1	4	4	0
Milton Keynes	10	13	+3	1	2	+1	1	1	0	13	5	-8	25	21	-4
Newham	3	2	-1	4	2	-2	0	1	+1	13	1	-12	20	6	-14
Oldham	6	5	-1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	+3	7	9	+2
Peterborough	0	2	+2	0	0	0	0	2	+2	3	1	-2	3	5	+2
Richmond Upon Thames	0	0	0	3	0	-3	0	0	0	2	0	-2	5	0	-5

Rochdale	0	4	+4	1	0	-1	0	0	0	4	0	-4	5	4	-1
Rotherham	37	13	-24	5	1	-4	0	0	0	0	1	+1	43	15	-28
Sheffield	2	37	+35	2	19	+17	2	7	+5	11	38	+27	17	101	+84
Southampton	16	27	+11	6	10	+4	1	6	+5	13	53	+40	35	96	+61
Southwark	3	5	+2	0	4	+4	0	0	0	0	6	+6	3	15	+12
Tower Hamlets	11	6	-5	1	2	+1	0	1	+1	0	3	+3	12	12	0
Wakefield	4	7	+3	5	6	+1	0	8	+8	3	21	+18	12	42	+30
Wandsworth	0	1	+1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	+1
Westminster	13	13	0	1	6	+5	0	0	0	7	4	-3	21	23	+2

Scotland

Local Authority	Retail			Office			Leisure			Other			Total		
	2021	2025	+/-	2021	2025	+/-	2021	2025	+/-	2021	2025	+/-	2021	2025	+/-
Aberdeen	5	2	-3	10	11	+1	3	4	+1	21	41	+20	39	58	+19
Dundee City	18	14	-4	5	5	0	0	0	0	8	9	+1	31	28	-3
City of Edinburgh	15	21	+6	14	10	-4	5	2	-3	80	25	-55	114	58	-56
Fife	3	1	-2	5	1	-4	12	3	-9	31	17	-14	51	22	-29
Highlands	5	0	-5	6	1	-5	0	0	0	11	34	+23	22	35	+13
South Lanarkshire	2	2	0	13	3	-10	0	0	0	20	10	-10	35	15	-20
Stirling	8	9	+1	9	10	+1	0	7	+7	2	5	+3	19	31	+12

Wales

Local Authority	Retail			Office			Leisure			Other			Total		
	2021	2025	+/-	2021	2025	+/-	2021	2025	+/-	2021	2025	+/-	2021	2025	+/-
Cardiff	0	7	+7	0	7	+7	0	1	+1	21	4	-17	21	19	-2
Merthyr Tydfil	1	13	+12	9	0	-9	1	0	-1	3	0	-3	14	13	-1
Neath Port Talbot	18	2	-16	1	53	+52	1	29	+28	9	5	-4	29	89	+60
Swansea	8	5	-3	2	2	0	1	1	0	4	0	-4	16	8	-8