



Repurposing Empty Non-Residential Buildings for Housing: Strategic Lessons from Local and Combined Authorities in England

Executive summary

The UK housing crisis affects over 3 million people, yet thousands of non-residential buildings, with the potential to be repurposed into hundreds of thousands of homes, sit empty. This research explores strategies used by authorities in England to convert empty non-residential buildings into homes, to address sustainable and affordable housing needs. The report finds that conversions can reduce embodied carbon compared to new builds, be delivered quicker than new builds and generate wider place-based benefits - both social and economic. The report recommends that authorities adopt a strategic approach to maximise impact.

The methodology includes desk research of 143 authorities and interviews with stakeholders across three authorities identified as active in this domain:

1. West Midlands Combined Authority: An established combined authority with many buildings with conversion potential - including warehouses, factories, and retail sites - and limited viable land for new builds.
2. Torbay Council: A coastal tourist location in Devon with limited greenfield land and a surplus of underused hospitality stock.
3. Sefton Council: A coastal authority in Merseyside with high vacancies in town centres above shops and considerable heritage at risk.

Vacant buildings are both a symptom of the housing crisis and a solution to it; repurposing underused stock can introduce a new pipeline of affordable, high-quality homes and thus, ease demand pressure in a sustainable way. While planning and financing remain challenging aspects, building repurposing is becoming a more established practice in local planning and urban regeneration. By accumulating and sharing good practice the marginal cost of new conversion projects is decreasing. Due to various types of benefits, the case for conversion over demolition and rebuild is growing stronger.

Converting empty non-residential buildings into residential properties offers multiple benefits: on the one hand, it helps address the housing shortage, while on the other, it minimises the burden to society of excessive carbon emissions associated with building new homes.

Drawing on this research, the report recommends that local and combined authorities take a strategic approach across four areas: **evidence and opportunity mapping** (capacity and feasibility studies; local trends and clusters); **delivery and governance** (dedicated project officers; design principles; learning infrastructure and best-practice sharing); **funding and appraisal** (flexible blended funding; broader cost-benefit assessment); and **place-based activity** (town-centre focus; programmatic regeneration; skills and apprenticeships).

These options show that when institutionalised, conversions can help authorities meet housing need, regenerate place, and reduce environmental impact simultaneously, addressing the linked challenges of housing shortage, building vacancy and climate change. Repurposing empty non-residential buildings should therefore not be treated as a niche or opportunistic measure, but as a credible and scalable part of England's housing response.

For Habitat for Humanity GB, this report suggests a complementary role focused on evidence-building, delivery coordination and communications. Habitat is well placed to work with partners such as Historic England to share research, to drive advocacy, and to convene the actors needed to move smaller conversion schemes forward; a current gap in the market. It can also help make the case for conversion more visible through workshops, partnership-building, and engagement with future professionals in planning, architecture and public policy.

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Policy Labs are part of the MA curriculum and give an opportunity for small teams to work for external clients producing and presenting policy relevant research that will be used for advocacy, assessment, and development. Clients are civic organizations, donors, research centres and international organizations.

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1. Housing needs and building opportunities

The housing crisis unfolding in the UK is not an isolated issue; it is part of a global trend¹. Across Europe, housing supply fails to satisfy demands, with millions on social housing waiting lists, residential construction declining and costs rising.² Shortage and inequality characterise housing in most European countries. In addition, while the rising cost of housing impacts all people across society, its negative effects are exponential for vulnerable groups and those with less stable financial and social background. The high number of vacant properties³ is among the causes of the housing crisis, but it can also be part of the solution if addressed well. Unoccupied properties have the potential to provide over 525,000 homes if repurposed⁴. Habitat for Humanity GB aims to address the housing crisis from various angles, among others, by maximising the potential of local empty building stock. The findings presented in this report feed into Habitat's research and advocacy strands to help facilitate effective remedies at the local level through building repurposing.

While taking stock of vacant buildings is not a straightforward endeavour, Council Tax statistics can help us gauge the numbers. The number of empty homes has been

¹ Housing Europe, "State of Housing in Europe 2025: Trends in a Nutshell," Housing Europe, October 15, 2025, <https://www.housingeurope.eu/state-of-housing-in-europe-2025-trends-in-a-nutshell/>.

² Ibid.

³ Meghan Owen, "'Each Empty Home Shows There Is a Problem' — Housing Leaders Call for Action," *BBC News*, February 23, 2026, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy4w7z7v1ndo>.

⁴ Habitat for Humanity Great Britain, "New Housing Research: Repurposing Empty Spaces to Address the Housing Crisis in Great Britain," Habitat for Humanity, August 2025, <https://www.habitat.org/emea/newsroom/2025/new-housing-research-repurposing-empty-spaces-address-housing-crisis-great-britain>.

increasing, reaching its post-pandemic peak in 2025⁵. The 2025 Council Taxbase reports more than half a million empty homes; a number that exceeds one million when including “second homes and unoccupied exemptions”⁶. In addition to private properties, vacancy rates are rising among commercial buildings as well, including buildings owned by local authorities (LAs) and retail space⁷. In addition to the rate of underused properties, the UK has an outstandingly high average number of rooms per household members, which implies a misallocation issue⁸. Together, these figures point to a dual call for action: the UK needs not just more homes, but the *right* homes - units that match people’s needs and living conditions. Building repurposing is one way to address this need, as vacant properties can be part of the solution if converted to residential spaces.

This research aimed to explore the strategies local and combined authorities (CAs) have used to convert empty buildings to address sustainable and affordable⁹ housing needs in England. The impact of such initiatives, as well as the strategies behind them were examined to understand how to do conversions and building repurposing effectively. The broader objective was to provide a starting point and useful resources to LAs that wish to address the local housing need this way.

Why repurpose?

Building repurposing has multiple benefits to offer¹⁰. Compared to demolishing and new builds, conversions can reduce costs, as well as carbon emissions by up to 70%, and vacant buildings can be brought back to use more quickly¹¹. Examining successful conversion strategies and conducting interviews with third parties, such as developers and heritage protection organisations, provided insights into the deeper advantages conversions can offer to communities. In addition to preserving the heritage value of buildings and thus

⁵ Empty Homes Network, *Council Taxbase 2025: Empty Homes in England Rise to Over One Million — National and Regional Analysis Report* (Empty Homes Network, November 2025), <https://ehnetwork.org.uk/read/council-taxbase-2025-empty-homes-in-england-rise-to-over-one-million-national-and-regional-analysis-report>.

⁶ Empty Homes Network, "Council Taxbase 2025"

⁷ Empty Homes Network, "Repurposing Empty Spaces to Address the Housing Crisis in Great Britain."

⁸ OECD, "HC2.1 Living Space," *OECD Affordable Housing Database*, last updated October 2, 2025, https://webfs.oecd.org/els-com/Affordable_Housing_Database/HC2-1-Living-space.pdf.

⁹ 'Affordable housing' is defined in the [National Policy Planning Framework](#) as “housing for sale or rent, for those whose needs are not met by the market”, including: social rent (~50% of market rates), affordable rent (up to 80% of market rate) and intermediate rent (between social and market rents).

¹⁰ Sophie Hoogendijk, "Using Workplace to Create Social Housing Space: The Applicability of Office Conversion for Achieving Urban Sustainability in the Netherlands" (Master's thesis, Utrecht University, 2019), <https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/35290>; Laura Lane and Bert Provan, "Replacing Empty Spaces with Productive, Green Places," CASE Report 166 (Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics and Political Science, March 27, 2026), <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cr/casereport166.pdf>

¹¹ West Midlands Combined Authority, *Repurposing to Zero: A Framework for the Repurposing of Buildings across the West Midlands* (Birmingham: West Midlands Combined Authority, 2023), <https://www.wmca.org.uk/media/dlsovig/repurposing-to-zero-framework.pdf>.

maintaining the integrity of urban structures¹², a wide range of positive effects can be realised for local communities. Conversions require various resources, partially because this is not yet the default mode of addressing vacant buildings, therefore, the know-how is lacking, and every project requires careful planning. However, our case studies confirmed that repurposing also has a lot to contribute to communities if done well. For example, multi-purpose buildings can be created, offering more to the local community than merely residential space.

According to local findings from the West Midlands CA, the cost-benefit metrics of repurposing a building can be challenging to calculate in advance, and may vary depending on various factors such as the applicable building regulations, available funding opportunities, and rental plans for the newly built units¹³. However, compared to demolition and rebuild¹⁴ the benefits of conversion “could yield at least 10% to 15% for cost and speed respectively”¹⁵, besides wider economic benefits, such as boosting local employment¹⁶.

As discussed in a volume edited by Wilkinson and Remøy¹⁷, the aspect of sustainability also cannot be disregarded when considering the benefits of conversions over demolition and new builds. Repurposing the available housing stock offers a way to address the housing shortage and the need for decarbonisation concurrently¹⁸. With its high material needs, waste production, and CO₂ emissions, the construction industry is among the most polluting ones; “[a]ccording to the UK Green Building Council, it accounts for around 60% of material use and waste production in the UK.”¹⁹ Given the current state of the environment and projections of where it is headed, no industry can afford to neglect its environmental impact, especially not if it is a polluter of this scale. Conversions can help move in the direction of a *circular economy model*, which is more sustainable and conscious of the coming generations and the planet than the traditional linear model, “where resources are extracted, used to build, and then discarded as waste”²⁰. The Greater

¹² Lydia Kiroff and Simon Parris, “Adaptive Reuse and Repurposing of Industrial Buildings to Residential Dwellings in Auckland City,” *SOAC 2017*, <https://www.researchbank.ac.nz/server/api/core/bitstreams/3ebabd82-a588-4322-b70f-a3e298bad918/content>

¹³ Kiroff and Parris, “Adaptive Reuse and Repurposing.”; West Midlands Combined Authority, *Repurposing to Zero*

¹⁴ Nigel Addy, “Making Sustainable Refurbishment of Existing Buildings Financially Viable,” in *Sustainable Retrofitting of Commercial Buildings: Cool Climates*, ed. Simon Burton (London: Routledge, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315765877-5>.

¹⁵ West Midlands Combined Authority, *Repurposing to Zero*, 6.

¹⁶ Kiroff and Parris, “Adaptive Reuse and Repurposing,” 2.

¹⁷ Sara J. Wilkinson and Hilde Remøy, eds., *Building Urban Resilience through Change of Use* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119231455>.

¹⁸ Housing Europe, “Housing Europe News: December 2025,” Housing Europe Newsletter, December 2025, <https://mailchi.mp/15bcd674d2b2/housing-europe-news-november-2017-issue-16541217>.

¹⁹ CM Staff, “What Is a Circular Economy and Why Does It Matter in Construction?,” *Construction Management*, December 10, 2024, <https://constructionmanagement.co.uk/what-is-a-circular-economy-and-why-does-it-matter-in-construction/>

²⁰ CM Staff, “What Is a Circular Economy.”

London Authority, for example, has adopted this approach²¹, requiring Circular Economy Statements for new buildings²². The wider value of conversions is increasingly embedded in local plans, housing plans, and urban redevelopment strategies, as councils attempt to maximise the potential of their land and housing stock.

“The redevelopment of brownfield land and the conversion of existing properties is vital to supporting the regeneration of some of our local places. Some of our larger towns have been affected by the erosion of the retail offer in recent years, leading to empty shops; other localities are affected by neglected brownfield sites, which have not been developed. Making best use of these underutilised resources to help provide new homes for people is an important part of our housing growth plans.”

– North Yorkshire Council Housing Strategy 2024-2029²³

“Development of vacant and low-value sites for residential purposes is critical to successful placemaking. New housing strengthens community ownership of town centres, creates vibrancy throughout the day, and generates footfall to sustain retail, leisure and other uses. Housing diversifies the High Street and helps rationalise the amount of retail to more sustainable levels.”

– Middlesbrough Borough Council, Local Plan²⁴

2. Methods and scope

The research relied on two strands of data collection: a desk review, followed by interviews with relevant stakeholders. The first phase comprised reviewing various documents from devolved and combined authorities (CAs) in England, including Housing Strategies, Delivery Plans, Local Plans, conversion guidelines, development permits, project documentation by developers, media coverage, and cabinet minutes. The primary objectives were to understand the landscape of housing strategies on repurposing empty non-residential spaces to address housing needs and identify authorities active in this domain. Based on the findings, a database of England’s strategic and devolved authorities, and Devolution Priority Programme areas, including the constituent local authorities within them, was developed (143 authorities). A set of criteria was applied to identify

²¹ Tom McDonald, "Circular Construction: Putting Theory into Practice," *Construction Management*, August 7, 2025, <https://constructionmanagement.co.uk/circular-construction-putting-theory-into-practice/>.

²² Greater London Authority, *Circular Economy Statement Guidance*, London Plan Guidance (London: Greater London Authority, March 2022), <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/planning/implementing-london-plan/london-plan-guidance/circular-economy-statement-guidance>

²³ North Yorkshire Council, *Housing Strategy 2024–2029* (Northallerton: North Yorkshire Council, 2024), <https://www.northyorks.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-09/Housing%20Strategy%202024-2029%20-%20accessible.pdf>.

²⁴ Middlesbrough Council, *Middlesbrough Publication Local Plan 2022–2041* (Middlesbrough: Middlesbrough Council, March 2025), <https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/media/3wwwgjfal/lp-middlesbrough-publication-local-plan-2025.pdf>.

useful case studies. Non-residential-to-residential conversions were of primary interest, ideally producing long-term, socially or affordably oriented accommodation in an environmentally conscious manner. Furthermore, whether the conversions are embedded in a strategy and the Council's role in them was taken into account as well (see figure below). Following these considerations, the West Midlands Combined Authority, Sefton Council's project on Lord Street, and the Hotels to Homes scheme in Devon and Torbay were chosen as case studies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted online and focused on key enablers, challenges, and funding of the projects. Interviewees were initially selected by purposive sampling, aiming to identify key stakeholders involved in the projects or working on the relevant Council strategy. In addition, referral sampling was used to reach more stakeholders through the professional networks of our contacts. The interview findings were analysed in conjunction with the desk research data to deduce case-specific conclusions and identify recurring themes to inform the present recommendations.

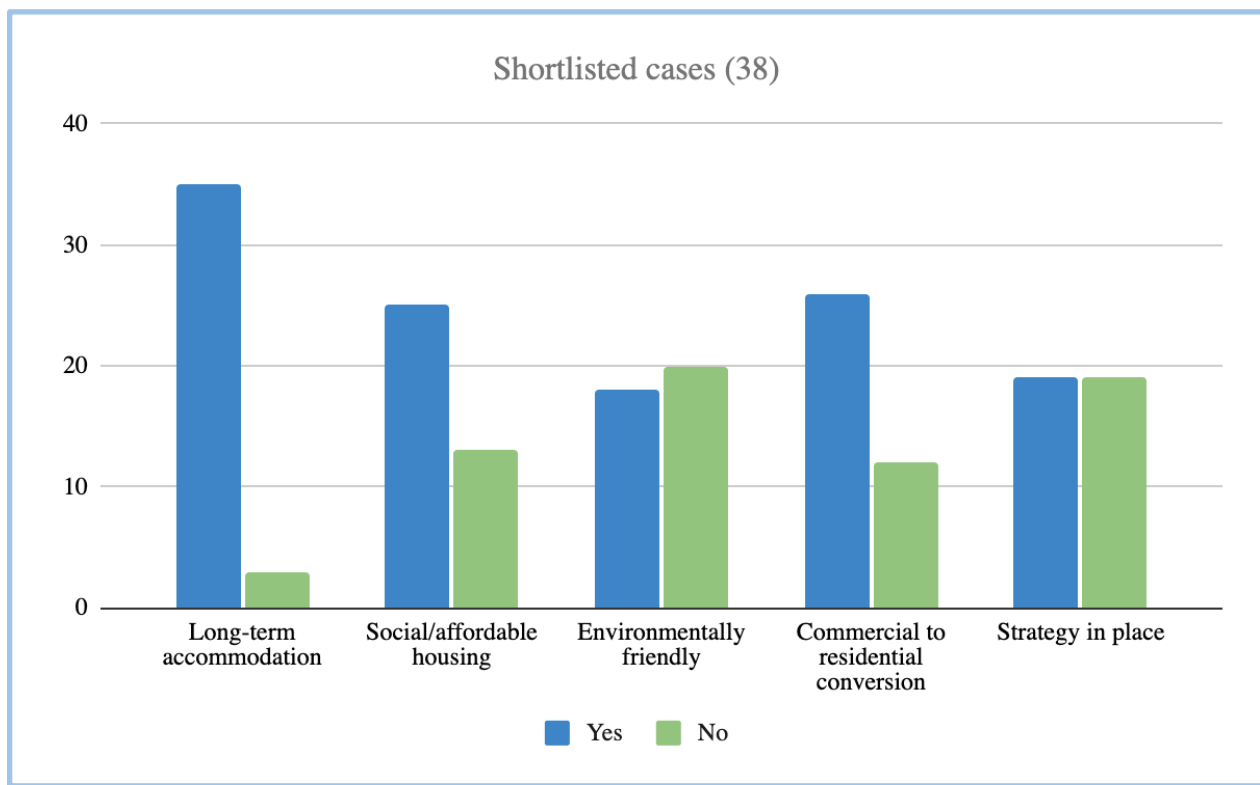


Figure 1: Graph of shortlisted cases

The initial scope of the data collection was 143 authorities. The ratio of authorities addressing empty buildings was just below three-quarters. A wide range of tools is used for this: imposing Council tax premiums, establishing funding schemes to support owners of empty buildings, providing advice to owners, assisting with repairs, enforcing the sale of properties through compulsory purchase orders, or incentivising rent or sale. Just over one-third of the examined authorities are active in non-residential-to-residential

conversions, with most making strategic commitments and enabling conversions through dedicated policies, funding schemes, and permits, but only a few actively participating in conversions. Frequent themes among conversion activities include funding projects, utilising brownfield sites, and converting spaces above shops on high streets. A wide range of non-residential buildings have been converted into housing, including offices, care homes and hospitals, schools, shops (and empty spaces above them), mills, hotels, a probation centre and police station, garages, and industrial spaces. This shows that conversions open a new route of urban development and reusing limited space effectively. Relevant best practice resources and additional examples of non-residential to residential conversions identified through this desk review are listed in Appendices I and II.

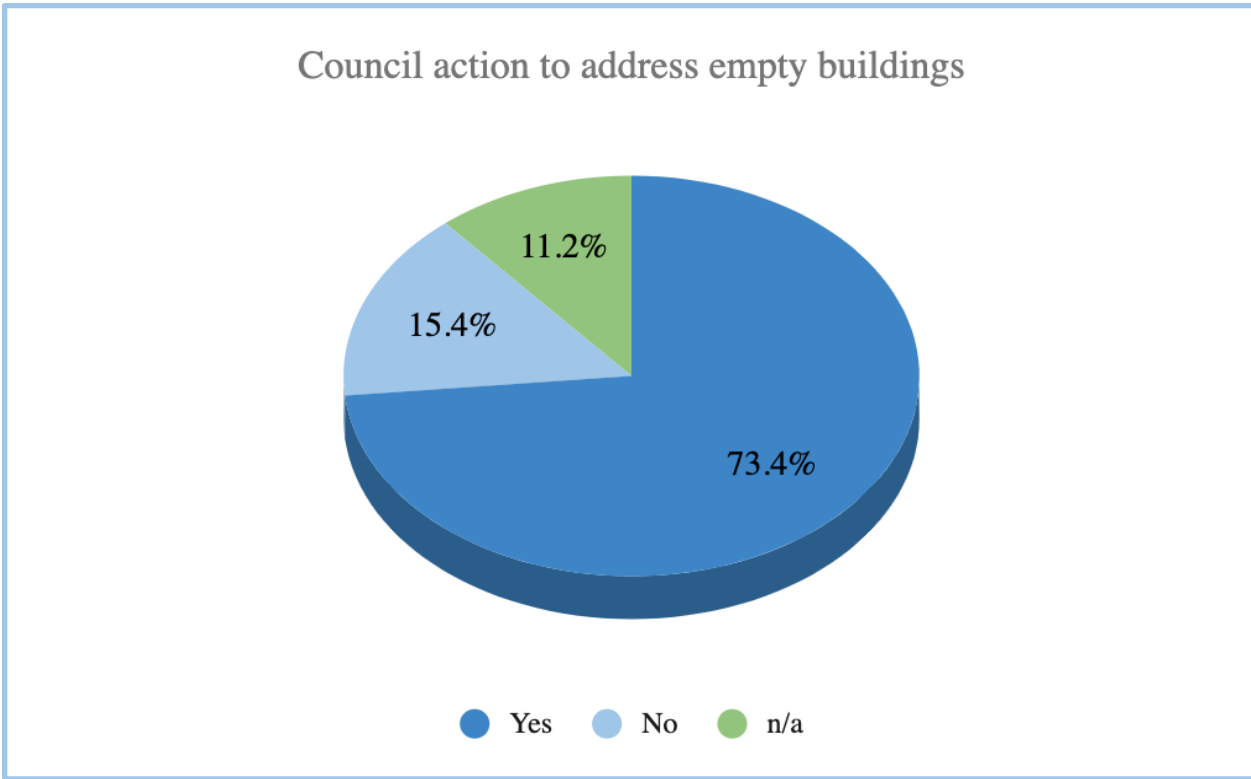


Figure 2: Pie chart of researched authorities addressing empty buildings²⁵

Case study	Name	Position	Organisation
West Midlands	Robert Lloyd-Sweet	Head of Devolution & Local Government Policy	Historic England
West Midlands	Rob Lamond	Head of Strategy &	West Midlands

²⁵ n/a indicates that no evidence of action on empty homes could be identified in the council's publicly available documentation

		Analysis for Housing Property & Regeneration	Combined Authority
West Midlands	Helen Collins	‘Homes for Everyone’ Taskforce Chair	Avison Young
Sefton	Alexandra Starritt	Heritage at Risk Officer	Sefton Council
Sefton	Cecilia Micklethwaite	Strategic Housing Officer	Sefton Council
Sefton	Anna Spencer	Housing Development Manager in the Housing Delivery Team	Liverpool City Region Combined Authority
Sefton	Aidan Semple	Housing Delivery Officer	Liverpool City Region Combined Authority
Sefton	Rebecca Johnstone	Housing Development Associate	Liverpool City Region Combined Authority
Torbay	Lucy Griffin	Housing Delivery Manager	Torbay Council

Table 1: Information about participants

3. Case Studies

3.1 West Midlands Combined Authority

West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) is a major regional funder of housing and regeneration, with a strong brownfield-first approach, including non-residential to residential conversions. This commitment is embedded across its funding schemes and strategic frameworks, helping to ensure its prioritisation. It reflects both a regional need (there is not enough viable land available to build on to meet government housing targets) and a significant opportunity (changing building use needs in the WMCA area create

many derelict warehouses, factories, and retail buildings that could be repurposed to meet growing housing demand)²⁶.

Existing strategies and task forces

This strategic emphasis has developed in recent years in response to changing town-centre and high street dynamics, net zero commitments, and brownfield land and viability constraints, in the context of high government housing targets *and* housing need. It is reflected across a suite of existing strategies and governance mechanisms:

- ❖ **Housing and Regeneration Functional Strategy²⁷**: Recognises changing roles of high streets and increasing demand for residential-led developments across town centres, including the repurposing of existing retail units into new homes.
- ❖ **Repurposing to Zero: A framework for the repurposing of buildings across the West Midlands²⁸**: developed to help key partners and stakeholders (including surveyors, architects, and developers) to understand whether building repurposing could be a valid avenue to pursue, and explore approaches and best practices.
- ❖ **A Guide for Investors and Developers to the CA's Single Commissioning Framework²⁹**: Brings funding into one place to increase ease of access, particularly where scheme viability is challenging or when investment is not readily available elsewhere (as can be the case for non-residential to residential conversions). Increases strategic partnerships and efficient decision-making.
- ❖ **'Homes for Everyone' Taskforce³⁰**: WMCA moved from portfolio leads to dedicated taskforces in 2024, to fulfil the Mayor's four-pronged vision for the region: Jobs, Homes, Growth and Journeys for Everyone. The Homes for Everyone taskforce is made up of experts from a range of sectors (e.g., housing associations, developers, charities, community groups, advisory firms), supported by officers from the CA. It provides diverse expertise and perspectives, scans for best practice, and commissions work in support of accelerating the supply of good quality housing with an emphasis on affordable housing. Flagged empty homes and non-residential to residential conversions as important issues for WMCA.³¹

²⁶ Rob Lamond, interview by author, online, January 20, 2025.

²⁷ West Midlands Combined Authority, *Housing and Regeneration Functional Strategy* (Birmingham: WMCA, 2025), <https://www.wmca.org.uk/media/n1lfizxi/housing-regeneration-functional-strategy.pdf>

²⁸ West Midlands Combined Authority, *Repurposing to Zero*.

²⁹ West Midlands Combined Authority, *Building the Future: A Guide for Investors and Developers to the CA's Single Commissioning Framework* (Birmingham: WMCA, n.d.), <https://www.wmca.org.uk/media/mfcb3zpu/building-the-future.pdf>

³⁰ West Midlands Combined Authority, "Homes for Everyone Taskforce," accessed January 1, 2026, <https://www.wmca.org.uk/mayor-of-the-west-midlands-more-information-about-the-role/mayor-of-the-west-midlands-taskforces/>

³¹ Helen Collins, interview by author, online, January 26, 2026.

- ❖ **Homes for the Future³²**: the repair, reuse and regeneration of resources is determined critical for WMCA to become a net zero carbon region within the next 20 years.
- ❖ **Asset review**: WMCA is looking at assets owned by different public bodies (NHS, police, LAs, etc.) collectively, to identify sites where WMCA can secure greater affordable housing provision, of maximum value and impact.

These strategic frameworks, in conjunction with funding schemes, have enabled WMCA to successfully support non-residential to residential conversion delivery and subsequent housing affordability. WMCA funding has facilitated the Royal Quarter scheme, which includes the conversion of Wolverhampton's long-derelict Royal Hospital into 48 sustainable and affordable apartments for people aged 55 plus³³, for example, as well as Great Hampton Street Works (a semi-derelict Victorian warehouse) into 29 one-and two-bedroom apartments³⁴. Additional ongoing projects include the conversion of Wolverhampton's Dixon House (a former paint firm) into 93 social homes, adjacent to the Royal Hospital³⁵.

Devolution has been key to WMCA's repurposing work. Since 2018, it has provided over £1 billion in devolved Housing and Land Funds³⁶ (which the CA has a good track record of deploying³⁷), helping unlock complex sites, acquire land and buildings, and de-risk regeneration – by reducing upfront costs and delivery uncertainty for developers. Across these funds, WMCA explicitly requires or prioritises brownfield development and housing from public and private sector delivery organisations (e.g., £100 million Land Fund must be used on schemes delivered on brownfield land and/or vacant buildings with change of use to residential only³⁸). The 2023 Deeper Devolution Deal³⁹ specifically, is key to enabling WMCA to pursue their goal of unlocking 'difficult to deliver' high-quality homes and places⁴⁰. It grants them greater flexibility and control over housing delivery, strategy

³² West Midlands Combined Authority, *Homes for the Future* (Birmingham: WMCA, 2023), <https://cloudcdn.wmca.org.uk/documents/wmca/pdf/wmca-homes-for-the-future-reduced.pdf>

³³ Morro Partnerships, "Nightingale House – Wolverhampton," accessed January 1, 2026, <https://morropartnerships.co.uk/project/nightingale-house-basement-wolverhampton/>.

³⁴ West Midlands Combined Authority, "Mayor Visits Historic Building Following Restoration to Provide New Homes," September 2, 2025, <https://www.wmca.org.uk/news/mayor-visits-historic-building-following-restoration-to-provide-new-homes/>.

³⁵ West Midlands Combined Authority, "Landmark Wolverhampton Building to Be Converted for New Social Housing," February 13, 2025, <https://www.wmca.org.uk/news/landmark-wolverhampton-building-to-be-converted-for-new-social-housing/>.

³⁶ West Midlands Combined Authority, "Housing & Land Funds," accessed January 1, 2026, <https://www.wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/housing-property-regeneration/housing-land-funds/>.

³⁷ Robert Lloyd-Sweet, interview by author, online, January 16, 2025.

³⁸ West Midlands Combined Authority, "Housing & Land Funds."

³⁹ West Midlands Combined Authority, *Delivering a Deeper Devolution Deal for the West Midlands* (West Midlands Combined Authority, 2023), <https://www.wmca.org.uk/media/owkntfwp/devolution-deal-summary-final-ea0963523623144ae8a9afd0534d462df94d61b24202832dde2f6e1b77abd8c3.pdf>.

⁴⁰ WMCA's industrial legacy means its brownfield-first approach often involves derelict and contaminated sites that require expensive and risky remediation to be repurposed as housing, termed 'difficult to deliver'. West Midlands Combined Authority, "Housing & Land Funds".

and funding, including an [Integrated Funding Settlement](#) established in 2025/26, consolidating central government funds into one, more flexible local spending pot; a £500 million housing deal; and involvement in decisions on major government land disposals (a first for any CA) – supporting repurposing and redevelopment of public assets⁴¹. This has resulted in a higher overall intervention rate, supporting more complex conversions that might otherwise be unviable⁴². Devolution effectively empowered WMCA to set the strategic direction and be central to decision-making.



Figure 3: Nightingale House, the former Royal Hospital, Wolverhampton. Source: WHG, "Nightingale House," accessed January 1, 2026, <https://www.whg.uk.com/nightingale-house/>

“Honestly, it's incredible. [...] I can't stop talking about it because of the great job they've made of using that building [...] reused like an incredible building that would have gone to waste and probably if the intervention hadn't been done at the time it would, you can imagine it being one of those buildings ends up, kind of gets vandalised, and then there's a fire and the roof falls in and then eventually it's just cleared because nobody knows what to do with it. Fortunately, the decisions were made to get it up and running again at the right time and it's really great to see that.”
– Rob Lamond, Head of Strategy & Analysis for Housing Property & Regeneration at WMCA

⁴¹ West Midlands Combined Authority, Delivering a Deeper Devolution Deal.

⁴² Lamond, interview.

WMCA has additionally supplemented grant funding with its own loan fund, supporting commercial-to-residential conversions in Birmingham (e.g., Jewellery Quarter). This mix-and-match approach, between grant and loan funding, has proved particularly useful in addressing a major barrier of this type of work: cash flow.⁴³

Importantly, as a CA, WMCA's role is largely convening – collaborating with LAs and delivery (developers), funding (Homes England) and third sector (signed Memorandum of Understandings with Historic England⁴⁴ and Local Community Land Trust, to explore how to use vacant buildings) organisations. Wolverhampton's Royal Quarter conversion exemplifies this well: Homes England acquired the empty site; a housing association applied to convert it; WMCA funded the wider site's remediation; and a Homes England grant made the apartments affordable. Under WMCA's planning system, Homes England funding is used to support their organisation policy of delivering a minimum of 20% affordable housing across all their developments.⁴⁵ Such partnerships are a direct result of WMCA's priorities: affordable housing, high streets (have a specific fund), town centres (reflecting community demand for housing *in* towns), historic buildings, and the use of public land⁴⁶. They frame building reuse as of community *and* financial value, increasing public purse savings and council tax returns from new tenants.

3.2 Torbay Council, Hotels to Homes

Torbay is a coastal tourist location in Devon with limited greenfield land and a surplus of underused privately owned hospitality stock. It has experienced a sharp decline in the availability of affordable housing over the last decade. The limited opportunities for greenfield development and the local brownfield affordable housing threshold, which exempts schemes of fewer than 15 homes from affordable housing requirements, have constrained supply⁴⁷. Meanwhile, housing pressures have risen, with high levels of homelessness across the South West intensifying demand.

These challenges are accompanied by a significant decline in tourism in Torbay following COVID-19⁴⁸. Many hotels, guesthouses, and bed-and-breakfasts have struggled to survive, with many going out of business because they could not afford to continue operating. This has resulted in many underused spaces. Rather than allowing these buildings to deteriorate and attract anti-social behaviour, the Council identified

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Historic England is the public body responsible for protecting, championing and managing England's historic environment. See Historic England, homepage, accessed January 1, 2026 <https://historicengland.org.uk>

⁴⁵ Lamond, interview.

⁴⁶ Lloyd-Sweet, interview.

⁴⁷ Torbay Council, *Torbay Housing Delivery Plan: First Review*, 30 May 2025, 2, <https://www.torbay.gov.uk/DemocraticServices/documents/s160767/Torbay%20Housing%20Delivery%20Plan.pdf>

⁴⁸ Lucy Griffin, interview by author, online, January 29, 2026.

repurposing these underused spaces as an opportunity to bring much-needed housing to Torbay with the quickest possible turnaround, without building on limited green space, and at the same time supporting neighborhood regeneration. This is the premise of Hotels to Homes, which is within Torbay Council's broader Accommodation Repurposing Project.⁴⁹

The Council identifies underutilized hotels that could be repurposed into high-quality affordable housing, acquires the properties, and, after conversion, lets the housing units at affordable rents to tenants.

"Our housing delivery programme is vast and targets several identified housing needs such as homelessness accommodation, temporary accommodation, general needs and many more. The vision for the Hotels to Homes programme is to utilise underused buildings to provide suitable and high-quality housing for our community."

– Lucy Griffin, Housing Delivery Manager at Torbay Council

Stream of opportunities to identify potential sites for conversion used by Torbay Council⁵⁰

1. The Hotels to Homes project is widely promoted within the local community via social media, the Council's website, and other channels. Aware of the project, several hoteliers have approached the Council directly, saying that they can no longer afford to continue trading and inquiring about the possibility of selling their properties for repurposing.
2. The Council contacts agents of hotels that have been listed on the open market for extended periods.
3. The Council reviews planning applications and flags potential sites.

Sustainability is central to the project, with eco-friendly improvements integrated into refurbishments. Conversion is the preferred approach, reducing the carbon footprint of housing delivery while retaining original character features where possible. However, demolition and redevelopment are used when building conditions make refurbishment impractical or not cost-effective.⁵¹

Funding, combined with the Council's capital investment, is critical to the scheme's viability. Homes England's grant has an essential role, funding the majority of projects. More recently, funding from the Devolution Deal for the Devon and Torbay Combined

⁴⁹ Torbay Council, *Torbay Housing Delivery Plan*, 7.

⁵⁰ Griffin, interview.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Authority has been secured and will contribute towards the delivery of more social housing.⁵²

The Council has set a target of 14-36 social rent homes within three years and 50 or more within five years.⁵³ However, with over 100 units currently in the pipeline, the Housing Delivery Manager explained that the target may increase moving forward, depending on factors such as availability of buildings to convert, delivery capacity, and identified local needs⁵⁴.

Former Brampton Court Hotel to Brampton House

The first completed scheme was the conversion of the former Brampton Court Hotel into 14 modern, energy-efficient one- and two-bedroom apartments, delivered as 100% social housing and allocated to those with ties to Torbay through Devon Home Choice.⁵⁵

The accommodation was ready to move into by December 2025, less than nine months from planning permission approval, and ahead of schedule, demonstrating the potential for rapid delivery through conversion. Everything that could be saved from the original structure was preserved, including the front door, and a new roof was designed to be highly sympathetic to the surrounding neighbourhood. At the same time, significant improvements were made, including high-quality insulation, solar panels, and energy-efficient boilers.⁵⁶



Figure 4: Brampton Court Hotel, Torbay before (left) and after (right) conversion.⁵⁷

While combining character preservation, such as maintaining curb appeal and facade elements, with energy-efficient standards in older buildings presents a significant challenge, this scheme demonstrates a successful example.

⁵² Griffin, interview.

⁵³ Torbay Council, *Torbay Housing Delivery Plan*, 7.

⁵⁴ Griffin, interview.

⁵⁵ Torbay Council, "Brampton Court," last modified December 2025, <https://www.torbay.gov.uk/leisure-sports-and-community/regeneration/brampton-court/>

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

“14 self-contained flats that all meet really high energy efficiency standards and air-tightness standards. They all meet EPCB, which is almost unheard of in a regeneration or refurbishment of an old building of this nature.”

– Sam Irving, Head of Strategic Housing & Delivery at Torbay Council⁵⁸

Former Seabury Hotel

The second scheme, the former Seabury Hotel, takes a different approach. The building had been extended repeatedly over the years and was found to contain asbestos, making conversion not cost-effective and unsuitable for delivering high-quality housing⁵⁹. Hence, a decision was made to demolish the building and rebuild on the site.

According to Torbay Council, the new scheme will help key local employers, including the NHS, retain and attract staff to work and live in the area, helping to promote the long-term revitalization of Torbay.⁶⁰

3.3 Sefton Council, Lord Street Living

Southport, a coastal town situated in the administrative area of Sefton Council, presents yet another example of a strategic use of conversions to meet local housing needs. One of Southport’s conservation areas “at risk”, Lord Street, experiences particularly high vacancies among spaces above shops, accompanied by deteriorating conditions of a significant number of listed buildings in the town centre⁶¹.

At the same time, the borough’s new housing delivery target of 1300 units per year creates an urgent need to seek new sources of supply⁶². Therefore, the declining demand for retail space and changing consumer behaviour in Lord Street present an opportunity for repurposing unused spaces to meet heritage preservation and town centre regeneration goals.

First, Sefton conducted a capacity study, which revealed potential for approximately 300 additional homes through repurposing existing upper floors along Lord Street⁶³. Then,

⁵⁸ Torbay Council, "New Homes for Local People at Brampton House in Torquay," YouTube video, December 11, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EY5EQHdvkeo>

⁵⁹ Griffin, interview.

⁶⁰ Torbay Council, "Second Hotels to Homes Scheme Will Deliver More Social Housing in Torbay," news release, May 16, 2025, <https://www.torbay.gov.uk/news/pr9303/>

⁶¹ Lord Street Living, "Project Background," Lord Street Living, 2024, <https://lordstreetliving.org/project-background/>

⁶² Micklethwaite, interview.

⁶³ Dan Whelan, "Sefton Looks to Fill Empty Southport Spaces with Homes," *Place North West*, August 5, 2024, <https://www.placenorthwest.co.uk/sefton-looks-to-fill-empty-southport-spaces-with-homes/>

the Lord Street Living project was launched in August 2024 with initial funding support from Historic England and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The project's primary goal is to encourage the reuse of these spaces by linking property owners and local developers.

A key feature of the project is directly reaching out to property owners where vacant space has been identified, rather than relying on voluntary participation.

“I will go out when they're willing [to] meet with them, determine whether it's appropriate, how it might work, if they want to convert vacant space to flats, [and] advise them on the sort of standards they need. [...] I suppose with the heritage side of it, looking at the significance and what they need to keep and what they could possibly change. So it's to kind of guide them through the process”

– Alexandra Starritt, Heritage at Risk Officer at Sefton Council

The Council offers free pre-application advice as an early-stage incentive. This consists of identifying the best scheme for conversion and guiding through the planning requirements, including appropriate quality standards, for example, around space and access to natural light⁶⁴.

This reflects Sefton's long-term vision and unwavering commitment to not only bringing vacant spaces back into use and regenerating the town centre but to also ensure high-quality residential units that avoid overcrowding or poor design⁶⁵.

Given a strong focus on heritage preservation, proposals are assessed based on their alignment with heritage objectives, providing guidance on what elements must be preserved during the conversion. This aspect is especially crucial considering that the buildings are located within the conservation area.

A dedicated [website](#) of the project serves as a platform for promoting available properties and helps match vacant properties with potential investors and developers. Other channels of outreach include social media posts and landlord forums, where these opportunities are shared. Facilitating reuse of the existing building stock through linking owners with developers, while abstaining from direct involvement in negotiations, allows the Council to maintain neutrality in property ownership-related matters.

⁶⁴ Starritt, interview.

⁶⁵ Micklethwaite, interview.

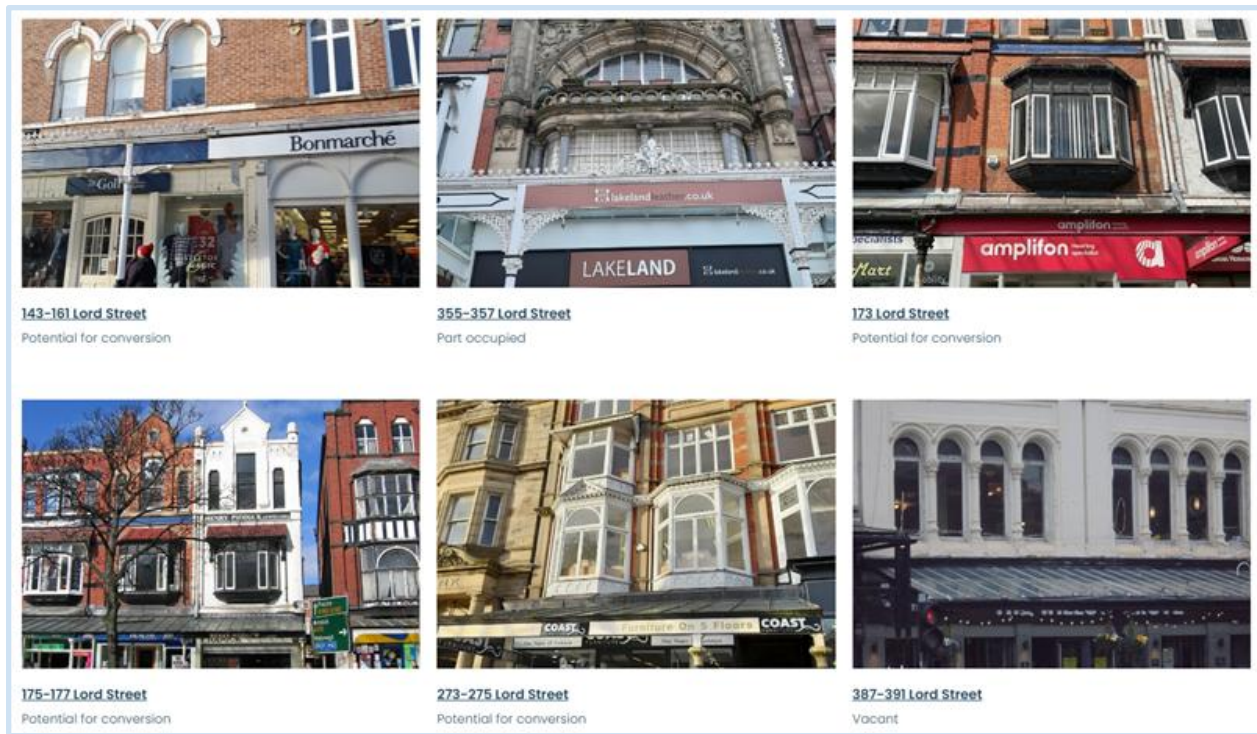


Figure 5: Examples of the properties available on the official website⁶⁶

Since funding opportunities for Lord Street Living remain limited, ensuring affordability of conversions is challenging at the moment, especially when quality remains one of the key priorities. However, the project team hopes to secure new funding streams, enabling more affordable homes in future conversions.

Although full conversions are yet to be delivered, Lord Street Living has already successfully supported a number of property owners in advancing development schemes and actively connecting sellers with interested investors. For example, within a week, the Council helped an owner sell an empty commercial property on Lord Street through promotion, and in a few more days, suitable local developers were found to work on it⁶⁷.

The role of the Combined Authority

While Sefton Council takes the lead on the ground by identifying sites, consulting the owners of vacant properties and connecting them with investors or developers, the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) operates at a more strategic level within the region, committed to its brownfield first approach. The Integrated Settlement, which the LCRCA is expecting to receive from the central government in April 2026, will allow greater flexibility over how this funding can be allocated across the region⁶⁸.

⁶⁶ Lord Street Living, "Project Background."

⁶⁷ Starritt, interview.

⁶⁸ Spencer, interview.

However, the CA recognizes some limitations of this type of grant funding, such as a focus on new-built houses and insufficiencies in the scale of the fund to create meaningful change in the community. Therefore, to support conversions across its regions, as the following quote makes clear, there is a desire to shift toward a more investment-based funding structure to supplement governmental grants.

“The Liverpool City Region Combined Authority is exploring ways it can use its devolved funds more as an investor than a grant funder, which has been its historic position. [...] We’re trying to look at how we could make our money go further and see how we can leverage in private funding, so we look to other Combined Authorities and to Institutional Investors to see what others are doing and which approaches could work for us”

– Anna Spencer, Housing Development Manager in the Housing Delivery Team at LCRCA

4. Policy options

Although a rather small proportion of UK councils (see p.14) are currently actively engaged in repurposing empty non-residential buildings for residential use, evidence from strategic local documents alongside stakeholder interviews indicates growing interest in this area among local and combined authorities. That said, this section sets out ten policy options, combining recommendations for authorities in the formative stages of conversion work with those for more established actors seeking to expand their role. Additionally, specific contextual features are highlighted for a better recommendation-case suitability. While primarily aimed at LAs and CAs, these recommendations are also relevant to a wider range of stakeholders willing to support conversion efforts.

4.1 Understanding the nature of the problem

Sefton’s example illustrates that before planning an intervention for vacant non-residential buildings in the given area, it is crucial to develop a clear understanding of the scale and the nature of the problem. This requires identifying how many properties are vacant, where they are located, why they are vacant (e.g., changing consumer behaviour, market conditions, or ownership barriers), their physical condition, and whether they are suitable for conversion.

The first step is to conduct a capacity study. Mapping vacant buildings across the area will help assess the overall scale of the issue. Additionally, applying tools such as RAG rating⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Designing Buildings, "RAG Report," *Designing Buildings Wiki*, last edited October 23, 2020, https://www.designingbuildings.co.uk/wiki/Rag_report

- Red (high risk), Amber (moderate risk) or Green (low risk) - will assign these properties into one of three categories, based on the condition of the building, the risks involved, and its potential for conversion.

“The first thing is understanding what the problem is, what capacity you might have. A capacity study is quite a useful thing to do because it just means that you get a sense of OK, we could create maybe around 300 units from just Lord St. potentially”

– Alexandra Starritt, Heritage at Risk Officer at Sefton Council

“The very first thing we've had to do is the data piece, and I underestimated how challenging this task would be. The LCRCA wants to understand how big the challenge of vacant properties is across the City Region - so our first port of call is in seeking Council Tax data via our Local Authorities. Social housing in this region is provided, in the vast majority, by Registered Providers, so we have engaged with them too. Ideally, we want to end with a mapping tool that identifies, but also categorises or RAG-rates, the quality of each property in order that we get a quantitative, but also a spatial, view to plan from”

– Anna Spencer, Housing Development Manager in the Housing Delivery Team at
LCRCA

Furthermore, a feasibility study⁷⁰ will be helpful to assess more closely the condition and risks involved in converting a specific building. This study is essential to ensure that conversion is financially and technically viable, aligned with statutory, legal, and environmental considerations (Figure 6).

⁷⁰ David Williams, "Dublin's Retrofit Potential: An Architect's Guide to Office-to-Residential Conversion," David Williams & Co. Architects, <https://dwco.ie/insights/office-to-residential-conversion>.

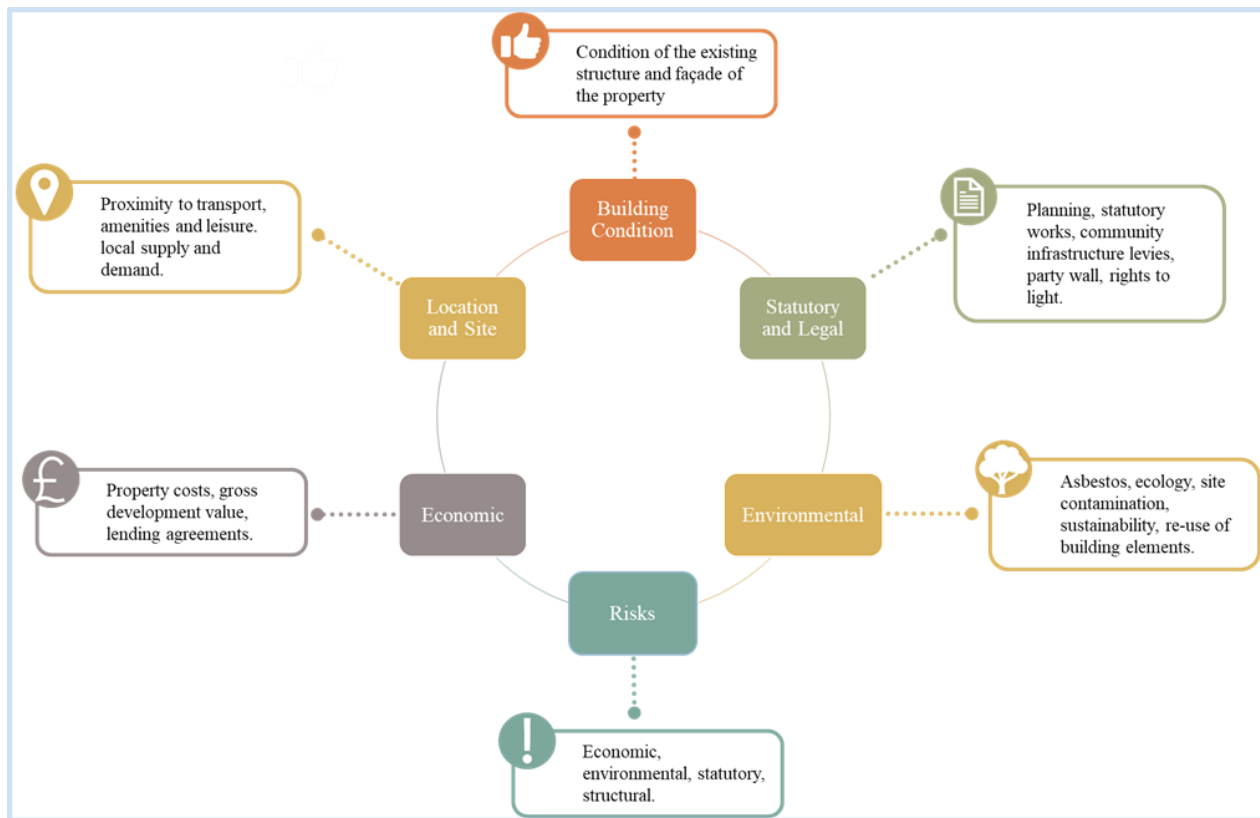


Figure 6: Conversion Appraisal Elements⁷¹

CAs play a key enabling role by funding capacity studies, as in the Lord Street Living example in Sefton⁷². By working closely with LAs on mapping empty buildings in the area, CAs can ensure consistency in data collection and allocate funding more efficiently⁷³.

Policy Opportunities: This recommendation is the most suitable for LAs and CAs at an early stage of addressing empty non-residential buildings, who lack data on the scale of the problem and types of buildings, etc. Where capacity is limited, mapping and categorising such buildings will identify the most viable opportunities and aid in future decision-making.

4.2 Identify contextual opportunities

Once the scale of the problem has been mapped (see previous recommendation), authorities should examine carefully what the data reveals about the nature and

⁷¹ Kieran Taylor et al., "Converting Commercial and Industrial Property into Rented Residential Accommodation: Development of a Decision Support Tool," *Facilities* 41, no. 1–2 (2023): 1–29, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/364310889_Converting_commercial_and_industrial_property_into_rented_residential_accommodation_development_of_a_decision_support_tool

⁷² Semple, interview.

⁷³ Johnstone, interview.

distribution of opportunity in the area. Even where some buildings do not score the highest in RAG, it may still be worthwhile to develop a target project around them if clear patterns, trends, or clusters emerge. For example, mapping may reveal a surplus of underused hospitality stock in a coastal tourist location like Torbay, or an area experiencing high levels of vacant spaces such as the Lord Street example in Sefton.

While repurposing office buildings may seem like the straightforward option, the local environment might offer less conventional and more viable opportunities. The research carried out for this study has shown that a wide range of non-residential buildings have been considered for repurposing into housing, including unusual types such as hospitals, schools, mills, probation centres, police stations, and garages. The potential for repurposing is broader than often assumed. Moreover, authorities may consider repurposing only parts of former buildings, rather than the entire space, combining residential units with community spaces; this blended approach can increase community buy-in.

In this context, there are advantages of concentrating publicity and resources within a defined area or targeting a specific type of building, rather than a dispersed one-off approach across the borough.

Once an opportunity is identified, authorities can build a pipeline through a variety of channels, as Torbay has done. They can combine approaching building owners directly with promoting the project on social media and official channels, encouraging them to approach the council, while also monitoring properties that have been on the open market for extended periods and flagging potential sites through planning applications.

“Torbay is demonstrating how local market characteristics such as surplus hotels and other commercial buildings can provide unique housing opportunities [...] being aware of the potential opportunities around you and how these could be utilised effectively to deliver suitable housing is crucial when delivering housing in areas of limited greenfield development potential.”

– Lucy Griffin, Housing Delivery Manager at Torbay Council

Policy Opportunities: This approach may be particularly relevant for authorities in areas that rely heavily on sectors that are declining or adapting, such as tourism post-COVID-19, high street retail, or industries increasingly transitioning online.

4.3 Adopt a flexible, blended funding approach

Generally, one of the features of funding in this area is that they are often tied to one stream, such as housing, heritage, or environmental protection. Council housing officials recognize that this can narrow down the type of funding LAs usually get allocated. To

overcome this, a more flexible and blended approach to funding could be advantageous to enable conversion projects to draw on multiple sources of funding⁷⁴. Framing conversions as something bigger than simply meeting housing supply needs that brings a variety of additional benefits to the community is more likely to gather more political and public support, as well as unlock wider financial opportunities.

“It's recognized as a regeneration initiative rather than purely a housing or heritage conversion project. The focus is not just on converting X number of buildings into X number of houses. It's actually what that brings to the overall area of the town centre, including heritage preservation.”

– Cecilia Micklethwaite, Strategic Housing Officer at Sefton Council

While LAs may have limited capacity to mobilise and manage multiple funding streams, this presents a unique opportunity for CAs, whose integrated settlement allows greater flexibility to combine otherwise separate funds across housing, heritage and regeneration. For instance, the GMCA uses an integrated pipeline⁷⁵ to blend funding streams strategically based on the range of benefits a project is expected to deliver rather than outputs in only one area, such as housing.

Moreover, funding is more effective when it is shared and coordinated across different bodies. For instance, CAs can fund site remediation, while organisations such as Homes England can help support conversions into affordable housing, as illustrated by Wolverhampton's Royal Hospital project⁷⁶. Making sure that funding opportunities are accessible and visible, and developers and property owners know about them, is equally important.

Finally, flexibility is important not only in terms of where the funding comes from but also how it is distributed at a local level. For example, according to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, emergency homelessness budgets often focus on costly short-term solutions rather than more sustainable, affordable and preventative options⁷⁷, such as conversions⁷⁸. Several examples demonstrate how LAs have successfully used conversions to provide temporary accommodation (TA), including

⁷⁴ Micklethwaite, interview.

⁷⁵ Greater Manchester Combined Authority, "Integrated Pipeline and Growth Locations," Together We Are Greater Manchester, <https://togetherwearegm.co.uk/our-vision/integrated-pipeline-and-growth-locations/>

⁷⁶ Lamond, interview.

⁷⁷ Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Systems-Wide Evaluation of Homelessness and Rough Sleeping: Preliminary Findings (London: MHCLG, 2025), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/systems-wide-evaluation-of-homelessness-and-rough-sleeping-preliminary-findings/systems-wide-evaluation-of-homelessness-and-rough-sleeping-preliminary-findings>.

⁷⁸ Guy Shrubsole, "A Pragmatic Solution to Homelessness in the UK," *Centre Think Tank*, February 20, 2025, <https://centrthinktank.co.uk/2025/02/a-pragmatic-solution-to-homelessness-in-the-uk/>.

Enfield⁷⁹, Hackney⁸⁰, Knowsley⁸¹, and Bristol⁸², which have already embedded conversions into their TA housing strategies.

Policy Opportunities: This recommendation is particularly relevant for LAs with high vacancy rates in high streets or town centres, as blended sources funding can support wider regeneration. LAs struggling with high homelessness rates can also benefit from conversions as a more sustainable solution to support temporary accommodation.

4.4 Appoint a dedicated project officer

Limited staff capacity within LAs and CAs can significantly slow down progress for non-statutory projects. For this reason, creating a specific project officer role to work on non-residential to residential conversions would be a valuable investment for authorities. This role would provide full dedication, focus, and high accountability (See Table 2 for more benefits of a dedicated project manager).

“I think it's having some sort of project officer who drives all this because it's a regeneration project that requires, you know, delving into different areas across the number of departments”

– Alexandra Starritt, Heritage at Risk Officer at Sefton Council

Aspect	Dedicated Project Manager	Shared Project Manager
Focus	Full-time on one project	Divides time across multiple projects
Availability	Always accessible for team & client needs	Limited or scheduled engagement
Ownership	High accountability & visibility	Shared accountability
Risk Mitigation	Proactive, immediate response	Reactive or delayed intervention
Best For	Complex, high-value, or time-sensitive projects	Low to medium complexity projects

⁷⁹ Enfield Council, *Housing and Growth Strategy 2025–2030* (London: Enfield Council, 2025), https://www.enfield.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0042/98898/housing-and-growth-strategy-2025-2030-housing.pdf

⁸⁰ Hackney Council, *Hackney Housing Strategy 2024-25*, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YcT_2gQooWTeA_M8FIDhK_jQWiX4Vmm/view

⁸¹ Laura Johnston, "Working Together to Prevent Homelessness in Knowsley," *Knowsley News*, February 13, 2024, <https://www.knowsleynews.co.uk/working-together-to-prevent-homelessness-in-knowsley/>

⁸² Business Biscuit, "Council Appoints Architects to Retrofit Empty Properties for City's Homeless," *Business Biscuit*, 2025, <https://businessbiscuit.com/esg-news/business-governance-news/empty-properties-bristol/>

Table 2: Dedicated vs shared project manager comparison⁸³

While a lack of resources might restrict the ability to create a dedicated role at the LA level, starting with a coordinating role at the CA level seems much more feasible.

Policy Opportunities: This will be useful for LAs where non-statutory projects make little progress, so a dedicated role is highly needed. CAs can also benefit from a coordinating role that can support and guide projects across the region.

4.5 Establish strong design principles and strength technical capacity

“There's no doubt that conversions are generally more expensive to deliver than new build housing however, with a strong delivery model and a team of professionals with a passion for delivering affordable housing working together, converting underused buildings can be a viable option for increasing the supply of affordable housing.”

– Lucy Griffin, Housing Delivery Manager at Torbay Council

For authorities directly involved in conversions, while the ideal scenario would be to work with a team experienced in affordable and conversion housing, the labour market is tight, and this is not always possible. Having design principles embedded early in the project with clear criteria and standards allows the authority’s vision to be built into the process and ensures that all parties involved, from architects to contractors, are aligned.

Some examples of design guides covering textile mill and town centre building conversions, as well as conversions in the countryside and former garages, among others, are included in the Appendix I. Those frameworks could serve as a starting point, but they should be tailored to the area's unique characteristics and the authority's long-term vision to ensure relevance and specificity. In Torbay, sustainability is central to the programme. By including solar panels, it ensured that the homes remain affordable not just in terms of rent but also in terms of heating costs over time.

As informed by interviews carried out for this study, clear design principles also help facilitate and accelerate the decision-making of whether to convert old buildings or demolish and rebuild.

Finally, conversion comes with a unique set of challenges and often significant trade-offs, such as the difficulty in retaining the character of an old building. Strengthening technical capacity can help mitigate some of these challenges (see policy option 4.10 “Strengthen skills training and apprenticeships”).

⁸³ Michelle M, "Dedicated Project Manager: What It Means and Why It Matters," PM Hub (Project Manager Template), December 5, 2025, <https://www.projectmanagertemplate.com/post/dedicated-project-manager-what-it-means-and-why-it-matters>.

Policy Opportunities: This is particularly relevant to authorities that are new to the conversion of non-residential buildings or where in-house expertise is limited.

4.6 Adopt a town-centre focus

Historic England has established an organisational priority for housing. Some of their funding is ring-fenced to be spent through local government. Authorities should capitalize on this opportunity, listening to community demand for housing *within* town centres, where many historic buildings that could be used for housing are located. This will help overcome the “doughnut effect” (‘the hollowing out of large metropolitan centres towards their respective suburban areas (“commuting zones”)’, following the rise of remote working post-COVID-19⁸⁴), helping regenerate town centres as investment, and community ownership, increases. Partnerships with other relevant third sector organisations should also be considered (e.g., Power to Change, who focus on high streets⁸⁵), and conversion projects aligned with wider regeneration funding streams (as mentioned above), such as the Levelling Up Fund (e.g., North Yorkshire Council using £19m Levelling Up Fund investment for regeneration⁸⁶).

“we can demonstrate that heritage is actually part of the solution for housing and skills and innovation, not [just] for public events or visitor attraction”

– Robert Lloyd Sweet, Head of Devolution & Local Government Policy at Historic England

Policy Opportunities: This is particularly relevant for authorities that do not have enough land to build on to meet government housing targets and/or where the existing retail part of their town centres is too big and/or have a large number of vacant buildings in town centres.

4.7 Consider programmatic regeneration

Situate non-residential to residential conversion work within larger regeneration projects. Paired new builds can function as enabling developments, to evidence return on investment, to get access to funding⁸⁷. For example, the Stockport Town Centre Mayoral

⁸⁴ Rudiger Ahrend et al., “Expanding the Doughnut? How the Geography of Housing Demand Has Changed Since the Rise of Remote Work with COVID-19,” *OECD Regional Development Papers*, no. 54 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1787/cf591216-en>.

⁸⁵ Power to Change, “High Street Renewal and Community Ownership Must Go Hand in Hand,” Power to Change, May 3, 2026, <https://www.powertochange.org.uk/evidence-and-ideas/news-and-events/high-street-renewal-and-community-ownership-must-go-hand-in-hand/>.

⁸⁶ North Yorkshire Council, *Housing Strategy 2024-2029*, 26.

⁸⁷ Lloyd-Sweet, interview.

Development Corporation⁸⁸ managed to access funding to convert Weir Mill into housing, by situating it within their wider development scheme. This approach can increase buy-in from politicians and the public - as well as from funders - by emphasising the wider town benefits of regeneration, and heritage preservation opportunities; conversions offer benefits beyond just delivery. Integrating community space into conversion schemes can strengthen local backing further by extending those benefits across the wider community (as recognised above).

Policy Opportunities: This recommendation may be particularly relevant for authorities in the Midlands and North, where authorities do not feel they possess the funding to prioritise historic buildings, and subsequently that it is not within their remit. Here, embedding historic conversions within wider projects will help evidence return on investment.

4.8 Broaden how costs and benefits are considered

Move beyond assessing housing schemes through only housing units delivered and immediate financial returns, to consider wider social, environmental and economic costs and benefits e.g., health, crime, local growth, etc. This requires a longer-term view of housing need and sustainability, so that developments remain viable over time and do not require rebuilding in the coming decades⁸⁹.

Whilst strict grant criteria has required strong cost-benefit ratios favouring narrow and purely economic calculations in the past, the government is introducing ‘place-based business cases’, which emphasise the strategic case for investment: what are local needs and what is the best way to address subsequent objectives, including how might multiple interventions be combined to increase effectiveness and impact, across sectors, for example housing and transport? This presents a “really, really strong opportunity” for authorities and the third sector to push the wider benefits of non-residential to residential conversion work, and access funding to enable such work⁹⁰. Stronger evidence could also help attract NHS investment, by evidencing how good quality affordable housing is a high quality health driver.

⁸⁸ Stockport Town Centre Mayoral Development Corporation, homepage, accessed January 1 2026, <https://www.stockportmdc.co.uk/>

⁸⁹ Lamond, interview.

⁹⁰ Lloyd-Sweet, interview.

“It's more about what the thing does [the outcome] than the intervention [the input]. So, if you've got a historic building, what does and can the historic building do for a place? Rather than what does our intervention do to improve the historic building? Because that's what we actually need to justify funding to come in.”

– Robert Lloyd Sweet, Head of Devolution & Local Government Policy at Historic England

Tables 3 and 4 draw on work published by WMCA to begin to illustrate how costs and benefits could be structured in practice, setting out potential beneficiaries, benefit types, and possible methods for evidencing them.

Potential Beneficiaries

Private sector

Investors Local
Businesses
Developers
Contractors

Public sector

NHS Local
Authorities
Policy & Emergency
Services

Society

Local Communities
Residents Jobseekers

← Owners and occupiers of buildings →

Benefit Type	Benefits	
Social	Heritage value/community identity	Encourage urban density
	Mitigate fuel poverty (housing)	Less disruption & business as usual for neighbours
	Community involvement & support	Increase in health & wellbeing
	Improved pride, confidence and perceptions of place	Reduced housing insecurity and homelessness pressures
Economic	Cost savings during construction	Reduction in waste
	Reduced programme	Vitalised high street
	Supply chain innovation	More economically resilient & adaptable places
Environmental	Embodied carbon savings	Reduction in landfill

	Reduction in energy consumption (during construction & post completion)	Reduction in raw material extraction (e.g., quarrying and logging)
	Decrease in construction traffic	Less need for greenfield development

Table 3: Potential benefits of non-residential to residential conversions⁹¹

Benefit Type	Benefit	Methodology	Example Data
Social	Increase in community support	Surveys	Qualitative responses from surveys
Economic	Cost savings during construction	RICS Whole lifecycle costs assessment	BCIS costs
Environment	Embodied carbon savings	IStructE/RICS methodology guidance on measurement GLA Whole lifecycle carbon assessment guidance BEIS Carbon valuation guidance	BEIS carbon values

Table 4: Table of methods and data to evaluate key priorities⁹²

Policy Opportunities: Devolved authorities are particularly well placed to lead on this agenda, as greater discretion over funding gives them increased scope to incorporate the wider place-based benefits of conversion into appraisals. Mayoral combined authorities now have almost complete coverage of the North of England, creating strong opportunities for strategic collaboration; tools to quantifying wider costs and benefits could be shared (e.g., framework above), involving third sector organisations who have conducted work on this (e.g., Habitat for Humanity GB and Historic England). Explore relevant academic literature too⁹³.

⁹¹ Adapted from West Midlands Combined Authority, Repurposing to Zero.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ E.g., Asal Sharbaf and Patricia Schneider-Marin, "Cost-Benefit Analysis of Sustainable Upgrades in Existing Buildings: A Critical Review," *Energy and Buildings* 328 (2025), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0378778824012581>

Policy Challenges: Place-based business cases are currently being trialled in Birmingham, Liverpool, Plymouth and Port Talbot, so are not available nationally at this point in time.

4.9 Strengthen learning infrastructure and best practice sharing

Establish permanent cross-sector housing forums/taskforces to support local governments, increasing institutional learning. Poor sharing of best practice is currently a prominent barrier to non-residential to residential conversions. Forums/taskforces are a way of increasing local government capacity and insight, capturing best practice across regions, through horizon-scanning, as well as alternative expertise and perspectives. They should function as non-political bodies, of diverse actors from diverse organisations, supported by local government, focused not on day-to-day housing delivery but on the mechanisms that make delivery happen at scale (e.g., where to concentrate investment, or most effective funding models)⁹⁴. This might involve commissioning deep dives to make policy recommendations; engaging with the market and regional stakeholders to identify local priorities; and using their convening powers to discuss issues important to the community and influence thinking. Collaboration between relevant and motivated organisations and people was regularly cited as crucial to non-residential to residential conversion work.

Where authorities already have relevant partnerships or platforms, these should be built on rather than duplicated, involving established delivery partners, relevant authority teams, housing providers and voluntary sector organisations. Existing successful collaboration models can also provide inspiration, including the East Sussex Housing Partnership⁹⁵ and Liverpool City Council's approach to community-led housing⁹⁶.

“[Torbay] is pretty lonely in our journey at the moment and we're sort of learning as we go. But I think it would be great to share that, share that experience. And that's been a really big challenge for us is that we don't really have anyone else we can go to to say, oh, how did you make that work or have you experienced this? So that's been a really big challenge for us, I think. So I think sharing experiences would be a really positive thing and another challenge I would say.”

– Lucy Griffin, Housing Delivery Manager at Torbay Council

⁹⁴ Collins, interview.

⁹⁵ East Sussex Housing Partnership, *East Sussex Housing Partnership Strategy*, East Sussex County Council, 2025-2032, <https://democracy.eastsussex.gov.uk/mgConvert2PDF.aspx?ID=65040>

⁹⁶ Co-operative Councils' Innovation Network, "Liverpool City Council Case Study: The Story of the Local Authority's Approach to Community-Led Housing," CCIN, 2019, <https://www.councils.coop/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/LIVERPOOL-CASE-STUDY.pdf>

When people see the results of *“an iconic building or a local landmark or whatever it might be being reused in a different way and the great results of that, I think that then shifts the perception internal to organisations to see that it's achievable, it makes a massive difference, and see it didn't cost much more, if any more than what the other options were.”*

– Rob Lamond, Head of Strategy & Analysis for Housing Property & Regeneration at
WMCA

Best practice sharing will additionally reveal that whilst this type of work requires some slightly different technical expectations and skills, and one is limited to certain things because of the original structure, it is often not massively more expensive or difficult, with the added benefit of allowing more room to be creative⁹⁷. It will also inform empty property owners that conversion work is financially profitable (e.g., selling empty floor space above shops), shifting tax obligations to new tenants.

Policy Opportunities: Alongside devolution, the number of councils are drastically being reduced across England; these bigger units function well for such forums/taskforces - as do CAs. WMCA's Homes Taskforce is described as “really, really worthwhile”, for example⁹⁸.

4.10 Strengthen skills training and apprenticeships

Upskilling is required for conversion and retrofit work; there is currently a skills deficit⁹⁹. The government has just committed extensive funding to construction training (£600 million 2025-2029¹⁰⁰) and apprenticeships (£3 billion 2025-2026¹⁰¹) more broadly, so authorities should use local skills planning and provider partnerships to ensure that relevant construction training includes conversion, retrofit and heritage maintenance skills. Authorities should also coordinate with local developers, training providers, colleges and housing organisations to provide a pipeline of opportunities for apprentices, connecting learners and workers to conversion projects. Since this allows these partners to evidence their commitment to the locality and social responsibility, their participation is incited. Successful third sector models should be considered e.g., Giroscope¹⁰² and

⁹⁷ As an architect working on these schemes has stated, Lamond, interview.

⁹⁸ Lamond, interview.

⁹⁹ CM Staff, "What Is a Circular Economy."

¹⁰⁰ HM Treasury, "Government Unleashes Next Generation of Construction Workers to Build 1.5m Homes," GOV.UK, March 23, 2025, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-unleashes-next-generation-of-construction-workers-to-build-15m-homes>

¹⁰¹ Department for Work and Pensions, "Industry Training Board Reform," GOV.UK, March 23, 2026, <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/industry-training-board-reform/industry-training-board-reform>

¹⁰² Giroscope, homepage, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://giroscope.org.uk/>

Canopy¹⁰³. This is a financially worthwhile investment: retrofitting and renovation have the highest return in terms of job creation (in the EU, for every million euro invested, between 12-18 new jobs are created¹⁰⁴).

Policy Opportunities: Whilst the government's Adult Skills Fund is available across England, strategic authorities have devolved control over their budget, granting them greater capacity to use this fund toward construction skills training, specifically including conversion work¹⁰⁵.

Policy Challenges: The UK's shrinking and ageing population¹⁰⁶ will reduce future manual labour capacity, making productivity gains increasingly important. Construction training remains focused on new builds, however, despite the fact that at least 80% of the buildings needed by 2050 already exist¹⁰⁷. Authorities should actively work with providers and developers to redirect skills training accordingly.

5. Recommendations for Habitat for Humanity GB

5.1 Coordination

Coordination refers to bringing together public, private and third sector actors to align research, funding and delivery efforts on building repurposing. Habitat is well placed to play a convening role, helping to connect stakeholders, share knowledge, and facilitate collaboration to accelerate non-residential to residential conversions.

Research coordination

Historic England's and Habitat's work very closely align, so to avoid duplication, and maximise impact, consider collaborating – for example by sharing your work plan for the coming year; introducing Historic England to the community of practise on affordable housing; and both sharing ongoing research.

¹⁰³ Canopy Housing, "Self-Help Housing for the Homeless in Leeds," accessed January 1, 2026, <https://www.canopyhousing.org/>.

¹⁰⁴ International Energy Agency, *Sustainable Recovery*, IEA, Paris, 2020, <https://www.iea.org/reports/sustainable-recovery>.

¹⁰⁵ E.g., as WMCA as done: CM Staff, "West Midlands Mayor Commits £75m to Boost Construction Skills," *Construction Management*, October 17, 2025, <https://constructionmanagement.co.uk/west-midlands-mayor-commits-75m-to-boost-construction-skills/>.

¹⁰⁶ Office for National Statistics, "National Population Projections: 2024-Based," statistical bulletin, 28 April 2026, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/bulletins/nationalpopulationprojections/2024based>.

¹⁰⁷ Chartered Institute of Building (CIOB), "Heating Our Homes," written evidence submitted to the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee, UK Parliament, August 2023, <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/123394/pdf/>.

Historic England is currently conducting a literature review to establish how best to advise LAs and CAs on how to bring housing into town centres, exploring currently available methods to fund and support building reuse. These findings are being piloted in Dudley, to get the evidence for a bigger business case, to return to the CA with. Historic England then intends to conduct similar work in other authorities nationally, to determine the best package of investment across different areas, and how to successfully embed wider cost-benefit calculations in funding decisions. This could provide an excellent research and advocacy resource for Habitat, and could substantiate work they have been undertaking, to promote and accelerate conversion work. For example, the tool Habitat is planning to develop for LAs and CAs to capture the wider costs and benefits of conversion work; this could be co-developed and then trialled in Historic England's pilot research, shared with participating authorities to get on-the-ground feedback, to improve the tool, and maximise its utility.

Historic England additionally has European connections, so this partnership would be a step towards Habitat's engaging 50 European cities work. Many European countries have gone through the same devolution process (e.g., Spain, Norway) and successful conversion schemes (e.g., Greece's golden visa programme's pathway for investors to convert commercial properties into housing, generating over 10,000 units in one year¹⁰⁸), so they can be looked to for learning and best practice.

Delivery coordination

On top of research sharing, Habitat should consider what unique role it could play in delivery. CAs typically focus on large brownfield sites, due to pace and funding pressures (Homes England is unlikely to get involved in small sites). Historic England is focusing on turning historic buildings into housing (no affordability requirements). Habitat could coordinate with other third sector organisations, to connect smaller sites not attracting investment, to create affordable projects with efficiencies, to be able to access funding. Smaller sites can function as leading projects, creating impetus for wider investment subsequently.

This convening role could again be trialled in Historic England's pilot studies, initially partnering with established active partners (e.g., Don't Waste Buildings¹⁰⁹, Giroscope, WMCA's London architectural firm connection) to develop a best model of coordination, which could then be applied more widely considering local context and partners. Authorities might have relevant teams (e.g., Dudley's Stalled and Derelict Sites Group¹¹⁰; WMCA Homes for Everyone Taskforce), and our research shows there is much interest

¹⁰⁸ European Parliament Special Committee on the Housing Crisis in the EU, "Public Hearing: Addressing Vacancy and the Repurposing of Empty Housing in the EU," July 14, 2025, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/public-hearing-addressing-vacancy-and-th/product-details/20250704CHE13246>

¹⁰⁹ Don't Waste Buildings, homepage, accessed January 1, 2026, <https://www.dontwastebuildings.com/>

¹¹⁰ Dudley Council, "Empty Properties," accessed January 1, 2026, <https://www.dudley.gov.uk/residents/housing/housing-options/private-housing/empty-properties/>

among them in conversion work. These are important partners as Habitat, Historic England and CAs are not direct delivery organisations. Property Guardians (who focus on short-term reuse of empty buildings) could additionally be brought in, in an information sharing role; empty properties can be referred to one another depending on timeframes of possible use.

Successful collaboration models already exist, exemplifying how coordination can unlock housing delivery (including conversions) and how Habitat could consider getting involved:

- ❖ East Sussex Housing Partnership¹¹¹: a cross-sector partnership bringing together LAs, housing providers, health and voluntary sector organisations, Homes England and government representatives to accelerate affordable housing delivery in the area.
- ❖ Liverpool City Council's approach to community-led housing¹¹²: a partnership between the council, registered providers, community land trust and a housing co-operative brought 110 empty properties back into use through a coordinated regeneration programme.

Habitat's convening role could also bring in builders, architects, surveyors, etc. Strong internal collaboration between construction workers, authorities and third sector organisations is key to align goals and produce high quality, affordable conversions. Habitat could incorporate lessons learned from a similar convening role they recently played for an LA, and address this gap in the market: nobody's remit is currently bringing people together.

*"Conversions are best when done through a collaborative or consortia approach, with the buy-in of the local authority and/or partnerships with local housing associations."*¹¹³

In terms of funding, this would also address the current barrier that smaller projects often do not have the funds to do initial scoping work (e.g., planning application, architectural design). It would pool organisations resources, as well as opening up new funding streams (only available to larger projects), facilitating this early-stage, enabling work and triggering new projects. Habitat's investment fund could also play a role here.

¹¹¹ East Sussex Housing Partnership, *East Sussex Housing Partnership Strategy*.

¹¹² Co-operative Councils' Innovation Network, "Liverpool City Council Case Study."

¹¹³ APPG for Housing Market and Housing Delivery and APPG for Ending Homelessness, *Rethinking Commercial to Residential Conversions* (Crisis, 2023), <https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/fbpbnpnl/rethinking-commercial-to-residential-conversions-joint-appg-final-report.pdf>

Policy Opportunities: This approach would likely be most effective in areas with large numbers of empty properties (incentivising action), and existing conversion experience, collaborative partnerships and strong leadership.

Policy Challenges: Habitat needs to position itself as a visible contact point for stalled or unviable conversion schemes, so that such owners and partners know to try to access this support. This necessarily involves a communications campaign, and outreach. Habitat could build on existing, and proposed, partnerships to begin this work.

5.2. Communication

If building repurposing is to become a more established mode of urban regeneration, the benefits of conversion and the role they can play in addressing housing shortages need to be properly communicated and promoted to the government, councils, and private developers, as well as the next generation.

Habitat, along with other actors from the non-governmental sector, needs to highlight and advocate for the value of conversions and town centre repurposing by framing developments in a way that captures attention. Good storytelling is a key component of successful advocacy work; thus, we identified two routes to pursue this.

Regular workshops - hosted online or in a hybrid format - could ensure that relevant stakeholders are in touch with each other and Habitat. This format would allow Habitat to share its research findings and accumulated expertise, and the workshops would provide a platform for stakeholders to work together, share best practice and talk about common or unique experiences and challenges. Habitat's Coalition lends itself well to this format, but to expand the scope of communication, the workshops could be advertised to the wider public as well. This would align with the finding that emerged from the interviews: that in addition to pooling experience and expertise, it is important that momentum is maintained and positive outcomes are shared among stakeholders working on conversions. In some regard, conversions are still seen as an unorthodox method of urban regeneration, thus it would be beneficial to provide units working on them with a common platform. Discussing real-life experiences could also help dismantle negative perceptions about the investment and planning that repurposing requires (among others).

Universities are another arena where communications could yield significant results. Familiarising students - of architecture, urban planning, public policy, to name a few - with the benefits of building repurposing could ensure that it becomes a well-established practice in the future. Various formats could be considered here: public lectures and talks,

guest lecturing a class of a relevant module, or cooperating with keen and socially sensitive student unions. It is crucial that the next generation of architects, urban planners, and decision-makers are familiar with the concept of conversions and see it as a viable option.

Policy opportunities: Habitat could formalise these engagements by partnering with universities and local stakeholders to develop education initiatives tailored to the specificities of the communities where universities are embedded.

Conclusion

The findings of this report demonstrate that repurposing empty non-residential buildings can make a sufficient contribution to ease the UK housing crisis. The experiences of West Midlands, Torbay and Sefton illustrate how conversions can be used to address housing needs in a more environmentally sustainable way, while also preserving heritage assets and contributing to the regeneration of town centres and local economies. The diversity of buildings suitable for conversions, from spaces above shops to hotels and hospitals, underlines the scope of opportunity to deliver more housing. Furthermore, as consumer behaviour continues to change, reusing existing building stock, especially in town centres, will soon become a necessity. While acknowledging limited capacity of local authorities, the technical complexity and relative novelty of conversions, evidence collected in this report suggest a number of recommendations that aim to support authorities in overcoming these barriers. Successful examples from the case studies highlight the importance of adopting a strategic approach, supported by diversified and flexible funding, well-defined design principles and mechanisms for sharing practices. The combination of these factors can not only make the delivery more financially viable, but also strengthen political and public support, ultimately unlocking further opportunities for future conversions.

Appendix

Appendix I: Best practice resources

These resources were identified through the desk review of 143 authorities and selected because they provide guidance on non-residential to residential conversions or help facilitate and accelerate their delivery.

- [Pendle Weaving Mills Design Code](#) (developer advice for Big textile mill conversions, including into housing)
- [Repurposing to Zero: A framework for the repurposing of buildings across the West Midlands](#)
- [Council of Experts](#) (WMCA 'Homes for Everyone' Taskforce)
- [Guide for investors and developers to get access funding](#) (example other LAs/CAs could adopt, WMCA)
- [Guiding principles for successfully repurposing town centre buildings](#)
- [Converting shops to residential - design principles](#) (chapter 3)
- [A beginner's guide to property conversion](#)
- [Oldham Mills Strategy](#) (a positive strategy for the sustainable future of the textile mill stock)
- [The Conversion of Buildings in the Countryside](#)
- Funding for non-residential to residential conversions examples: [Grant scheme launched to help regenerate empty town centre units in March - Fenland District Council](#); [Scunthorpe Town Fund Board - North Lincolnshire Council](#); [Empty Property Policy](#)
- [Building Urban Resilience through Change of Use | Wiley Online Books](#)
- [East Sussex Housing Partnership](#)

Appendix II: Additional examples of successful non-residential to residential conversions

Similarly identified through the desk review of 143 authorities, evidencing successful non-residential to residential conversions nationwide.

- [New life for former garages in Battle Hill | North Tyneside Council](#)
- [Hidden Homes](#) (Brighton & Hove City Council's empty council building to housing project)
- [Giroscope has spent 40 years turning empty properties into affordable homes](#)
- [Liverpool City Council Case Study: The story of the local authority's approach to community-led housing](#)

- [Community Homes Tees Valley](#)
- [Salix Homes' innovative approach to tackling the housing crisis](#)
- [Repurposing of Stockport's St Thomas' Hospital site](#)

Appendix III: Wider evidence on the benefits of repurposing existing buildings

While not specific to residential conversions, these examples illustrate broader industry learning relevant to building repurposing. Namely, how to retain a large proportion of an existing building structure and predominantly use recycled/reused materials, and how results can be quicker, cost effective, and sustainable - drastically reducing whole-life embodied carbon. Identified through reviewing trade journals and academic literature.

- [SSDA 2022: London office is reused and rebuilt](#)
- [McLaren chosen for £100m LSE Passivhaus retrofit - Construction Management](#): McLaren Construction's managing director for London and South, Darren Gill, said: "Retrofit techniques have advanced to the point where we can remodel 70-year-old buildings to create world-class spaces at the same time as minimising both the embodied carbon in a construction project and the future operational carbon emissions."
- [Wates demolition subcontractor cuts emissions by 40% using retrofit-first - Construction Management](#)
- [Converting commercial and industrial property into rented residential accommodation: development of a decision support tool](#)

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