

CHAPTER 22.

UNSUSTAINABLE STATUS QUO: A NEW APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING INACTION IN EMPTY HOME OWNERSHIP IN THE NORTH WEST OF ENGLAND

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The UK is in the midst of a national housing crisis. Estimates show that by 2022 there will be a shortage of 1.1 million homes (JRF, 2011). Meanwhile, figures report that in 2014 there were over 600,000 empty homes in England (Empty Homes Network, 2014). In the North West, there are currently 25,000 long term empty homes. If returned back to use, these properties could house one quarter of the families currently on the social housing waiting list (McCourt, 2013).

This chapter will explore the context of empty home ownership in the UK, while presenting some of the key findings from research completed by the Sustainable Housing & Urban a Studies Unit in partnership with Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council. Fieldwork was undertaken across two research projects: in the first project eleven in-depth interviews with empty homeowners were carried out; the second project analysed data collected from two focus groups conducted with a total of twelve participants who attended an empty homes event. **The latter project was selected as the 2014 winner of the Jonathan Sime Award; a national award that recognises a significant contribution to the field of people-environment research.**

Empty homes and empty homeowners

What we know about empty homes is largely drawn from existing Government policy information and practitioner led good practice. In the past research has principally focused on the geographical location and physical condition of the empty property. Commentators have contested that the issue has been wrongly interpreted as indicating a lack of demand or over-supply (Wood & Bryan, 1997), and by adopting a somewhat simplistic view of the phenomenon of empty homes, the often deeply personal and individualistic challenges faced by empty homeowners (EHOs) have been overlooked.

Over the last two decades legislation has been increasingly driven by enforcement; increasing the pressure on EHOs to act, and punishing inaction. A critical representation of this has seen many local authorities selecting to charge an 'empty homes premium'. Despite suffering greater financial loss as a result of such strategies, EHOs are still 'choosing' to leave their properties empty. A lack of success has demanded a new approach in dealing with the stock of empty homes and, drawing

from the field of behavioural economics, the focus has shifted towards better understanding the attitudes, behaviours and experiences of those who own an empty property.

To date, very little is known about EHOs who represent a complex and hard-to-reach demographic. Despite the commonality of owning an empty property, individual characteristics, current circumstances and the historical context of ownership are unique for each individual:

“...the reasons for being the owner of an empty home are extremely diverse and even more difficult to address. Homeowners can be located almost anywhere, be of any ethnic or age profile and may be unwilling or unable to do anything with the house due to finance, emotional attachment or family breakdown” (Salford Business School, 2012)

Key findings from research in Tameside, Greater Manchester, highlighted that the experience is consumed by a range of motives for inaction, operating simultaneously with an acceptance that the ‘status quo’ – the failure to return the property back to use – is unsustainable.

The empty home as a burden

In general owning an empty home is portrayed as a negative experience; ownership is persistently problematic and the property itself is defined as a relentless burden. The financial strain of the property is a dominant issue, and one that is not only situated in present times. Costs associated with letting the property consumed narratives of past experience where properties were frequently left damaged by ‘bad tenants’ and consequently in need of repeated restoration. In the present, ongoing mortgage repayments, insurance costs and other charges such as council tax, served as motivation to return the property back to use. For many EHOs, looking to the future involved the application of strategic, uncertain and often stressful economic planning in weighing up the value of a property against the current housing market. The affliction of the empty home extended beyond only a financial burden and was presented by EHOs as similarly deleterious to their psychological and temporal resources.

Attachment to the property

An array of life events or decisions can result in the ownership of an empty home, including: inheritance, failed buy-to-let investments, an inability (perceived or otherwise) to sell, and even diminished motivation as an experienced landlord. As a result, the level and nature of attachment EHOs hold to their properties is varied and complex.

The presence of a strong emotional attachment, such as following a bereavement, appears to determine a greater fondness towards the property itself. Such affection was characterised as emblematic of attachment that extends beyond that of the property to its former resident. In this context, inertia is driven by a reluctance to return the property back to use operating in parallel with grief. EHOs called for local authorities to demonstrate greater compassion towards those who have inherited properties, suggesting a case by case approach where emotional considerations are at the forefront of engagement. Evidence has suggested that attachment to possessions lead to objects becoming an extension of the self, particularly where *“basis for attachment is emotional rather than simply functional”* (Belk, 1982, p38). Supporting this view, a contrast was observed in those who had purchased a property as a buy-to-let venture where aspects of attachment to the empty home were not presented. This interpretation strengthens the view that a pragmatic or commercial relationship with the property is likely to be a significant driver in expediting its return to use.

Empty Homeowners as powerless

The presence of a trichotomous power dynamic – between the local authority, tenants and EHOs – was outlined as a key contributory factor sustaining inaction. Many expressed a need for help in returning their property back to use, and saw the local authority as a key figure in achieving this, however support provision was perceived as focused only on the protection of tenancy rights, and not equally between the rights of tenants and landlords alike.

Negative experiences with tenants represented one of the most significant challenges. No evidence of positive landlord-tenant relationships was presented. Where a hopeful example was presented it was grounded in the experience of others and perceived as a result of good luck. Multiple failed attempts at letting the property successfully – often defined as the opportunity to let on a long term basis – had resulted in diminished motivation. Such challenges had created a sense of defeat, triggering disconnect from the home. Tenant management was portrayed as chaotic and tenant behaviours, at times, presented as anarchic. Interestingly, tenants were occasionally referred to as disposable, yet difficult to get rid of; representative of an ideological dilemma for EHOs as landlords.

‘Empty Homeowner’ as an undesirable status

Attempts to construct the EHO identity were made through narratives of alternative existing identities such as that of a parent or a surviving relative. Interestingly, the term ‘empty homeowner’ was not used by the EHOs themselves, which may be suggestive of an identity that is not yet established, or one that is unaccepted or unwanted. Literature describes the construction of identity as something which involves both the self, from internal self-conceptions, and others, through social interactions (Taylor, 2007; Littleton & Taylor, 2006; Petriglieri & Stein, 2012). It was suggested that as a somewhat underlying and concealable identity, EHOs may rarely be given the opportunity to construct aspects of this identity through social interactions with others, therefore providing a possible justification for why EHOs did not directly identify as such.

Moving forward from enforcement to engagement

In brief, these findings highlight ongoing challenges for EHOs, policy practitioners, local authorities and academics in tackling the issue of empty homes across the UK. In shifting the focus towards the development of effective engagement strategies, rather than harsher enforcement tactics, we have gained a new perspective on the attitudes, behaviours, decision making processes and motivations of those ultimately responsible for action. EHOs are recognised as an extremely diverse and hard to reach group within society and maybe it is through the recognition of this diversity and individual experience that will open up a greater potential for success in the future. The more we can understand about individual experience of empty home ownership and how EHOs construct their role, responsibilities, capabilities, and consequently their motives for action, the better informed future policy design will be. Perhaps, the key to future success lies in providing a platform where the voices of all those involved in returning the properties back to use can be heard.

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Author Biographies



Danielle Butler is a psychology graduate from the University of Salford with interests in environmental and behavioural psychology, community engagement and marginalisation. Danielle completed her undergraduate dissertation in collaboration with the Greater Manchester Empty Homes Knowledge Transfer Partnership in which her research explored the experiences of empty home ownership. This project was selected as the 2014 winner of the Jonathan Sime Award; a national award that recognises a significant contribution to the field of people-environment research. Danielle has continued her studies at the University of Salford and is currently undertaking an MSc by

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John Hughes is the Principal Housing Strategy Officer at Tameside Council and graduate of the University of Salford. Specific interests include how local authorities can integrate Psychology and behavioural insight to inform housing policy and practice, specifically in the field of empty and vacant property and stalled housing development sites. John was lead supervisor on a Knowledge Transfer Partnership in collaboration with the Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit which explored the reasons for empty home ownership and their impact on Neighbourhoods in Tameside.

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