

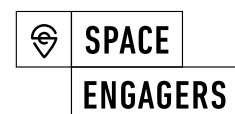
Incentives for the reuse of vacant buildings in town centres for housing and sustainable communities in Scotland, Denmark and France

Dr Philip Crowe, Space Engagers

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Executive Summary

This research examines national programmes that incentivise the reuse of vacant buildings for housing and sustainable communities in town centres in Scotland, Denmark and France. The programmes reflect the diverse contexts of each country in terms of the extent and nature of vacancy, the condition and role of town and village centres, and the scale and complexity of governance.

This report records findings relating to each country in turn, setting out the background, governance, resources, and processes involved. Relevant examples are included at different scales depending on the nature of the programme. A concluding section makes observations on commonalities and differences, and suggests points of interest.

In Scotland, there is a recent history of multiple agencies and programmes addressing the challenges of town centres and empty homes. This work is guided by a Town Centre First Principle from 2014 that reflects an holistic and cross-sectoral perspective within which town centre living, a collaborative approach, and the reuse of vacant properties are key aspects. Connections to outcomes such as health, well-being, safety and community cohesion are articulated. The Scottish Government's Town Centre Empty Homes pilot project from 2015 aimed to simultaneously help the private sector provide more homes for affordable rent and revitalise town centres through the reuse of vacant buildings (or parts of buildings) as housing. £4million was available as grants and loans in a 50:50 split subject to eligibility requirements and funding award conditions. The pilot involved 10 projects that together created 87 affordable homes. As a consequence of this pilot programme the Scottish Government introduced the 2016-2021 Rural and Islands Housing Funds programme, which offers funds in a 90:10 grant to loan split in a rolling call. There are two funds: the Rural Housing Fund of £25million and the Islands Housing Fund of £5million. Funds can be awarded for feasibility studies or for capital works, again all subject to eligibility requirements and funding award conditions. Short descriptions of completed building projects are provided for both funding programmes.

Denmark has negligible vacancy in urban areas but can have significant levels in rural areas due to many years of rural to urban migration. The Village Renewal Pool is an initiative aimed at vacant and derelict housing in small villages (under 3000 inhabitants) or rural areas within a large area of the country that is not near to the cities. The main aims are to return a sense of pride and sense of belonging that creates sustainable communities, and to avoid sub-standard accommodation being rented to already vulnerable members of society. The funding is managed by Kommunes and addresses a range of specific circumstances or scenarios with defined solutions that include renovation, demolition, change of use, removal of waste, and reuse for the community. A total of €90.5million has been made available between 2014 and 2020 to 55 municipalities who receive support for 60% of the costs involved. The remainder is sourced from the Kommune budgets or loans. There are clear eligibility requirements and conditions for funding awards. This report looks in detail at the application of the Village Renewal Pool in Morsø, a small island county in northwest Denmark where a citizens' group acts as a broker between communities and the Kommune in the delivery of the programme. In Morsø, the Village Renewal Pool has primarily involved the demolition of vacant or derelict properties that are isolated or in small villages, and that have been put up for 'compulsory sale'.

In France, the essential role of small to medium sized towns in providing services and in maintaining social cohesion across the regions is understood and clearly articulated. Vacancy is considered an identifier of endemic and systemic problems. Root causes put forward include rural to urban migration, degraded building stock that does not meet modern expectations, and a planning system that has historically given preference to out of town and car-dependent development. Several programmes exist for the regeneration of town and village centres, all of which include the reuse of vacant buildings for housing and sustainable communities as an integral part. The programmes relate to different scales of settlement and take a collaborative, holistic and cross-sectoral approach where the reuse of degraded buildings is combined with energy-efficiency upgrades, design for accessibility (for an aging population who want to live centrally), and heritage conservation. The Revitalisation des centres-bourgs programme from 2014 (and ongoing) addresses challenges at the scale of centres related to small towns, villages and dispersed rural settlements of less than 10,000 inhabitants. The French National Housing Agency has provided funds of €230million over five years. The programme acts as a catalyst and enabler for regeneration, providing municipalities with the necessary tools and resources, for example in the form of a dedicated project manager, to bring together diverse funds, initiatives and stakeholders into a coherent plan. The main focus of the funding is the reuse of degraded housing, owned by people on low incomes, for affordable rent or sale. The programme also supports the collation of survey data, feasibility studies and a wide range of actions relating to public space, sustainable transport, renewable energy cooperatives, and business incubation spaces. An example of the programme in the small town of Giromagny in eastern France is examined.

Project Overview

This report documents a multiple-case study that aims to provide and communicate examples of incentives for the reuse of vacant buildings in town centres for housing and sustainable communities. It is hoped that this will provide a basis for future research into barriers and opportunities for reuse in Irish town centres.

The research was commissioned by the Heritage Council of Ireland (HCI) as an output from the Collaborative Working Group for Housing and Sustainable Living, which includes representatives from the HCI, Housing Agency of Ireland, Mayo County Council and Space Engagers. This ongoing collaboration recognises the urgent need to address the nationwide housing crisis, to use existing buildings efficiently, and to revitalise rural towns and villages and realise their potential for creating sustainable communities. The working group members are listed in Appendix A.

The research is to help support the effective operation of Government of Ireland policy (such as the Project Ireland 2040 National Planning Framework; National Mitigation Plan; National Adaptation Framework) on the ground, and the effective and impactful deployment of NDP funds for Urban Regeneration and Development, Rural Development, Climate Action, and Disruptive Technologies. It is also intended to inform a future funding application under the NDP for a collaborative project in border towns, with partners that may include the Heritage Council of Ireland, Housing Agency of Ireland, County Councils from the border region, and businesses from the private and non-profit sectors.

Methodology:

A multiple-case study was chosen as the research is interested in specific examples of practices and policy-making that can actively engage readers in extending the research findings to their own or other contexts.

Following initial desktop research to identify suitable cases and baseline information, semi-structured interviews with key representatives from each of the national programmes and examples of their implementation were carried out between November 2018 and February 2019. Interviewees were initially approached using publicly available contact details. The interviews were recorded in note form only. No audio recordings were made.

Ethics and data protection:

The research did not involve any vulnerable persons or sensitive topics. Interviewees took part willingly and were informed about the project in advance to their satisfaction. Each interviewee has been given the opportunity to review the relevant section of this report prior to final submission to the Heritage Council. The names of interviewees are only provided where consent has been given. Contact details are not provided. Interviewees will be fully informed of any published material resulting from the research further to this report.

Reporting:

This report records findings relating to each country in turn, setting out the background, governance, resources, and processes involved. Relevant examples are included. These are at different scales depending on the nature of the programme. A concluding

section makes observations on commonalities and differences, and suggests points of interest.

All information is derived from interviews unless specifically referenced.

The author and the Heritage Council of Ireland would like to sincerely thank all the interviewees for their vital contributions to this research.

Scotland

Town Centre Empty Homes Project

Interviewee:

- Gavin Leask, Scottish Empty Homes Partnership.

Background

The Scottish Government Town Centre Empty Homes Project (TCEHP) was a pilot project launched on the 26th June 2015. The TCEHP supported local authorities in prioritising housing for town centres and identifying the potential for mixed use living in town centres through the reuse of existing vacant or underused buildings. The TCEHP operated alongside the work of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) and the Local Housing Strategies of Local Authorities.

The TCEHP is one step on a timeline of initiatives relating to empty homes in Scotland instigated by the Scottish Government. Relevant earlier initiatives include the Empty Homes Initiative in 1994, which provided 100% funding for projects, or the Empty Homes Loan Fund for Local Authorities in 2012. A National Review of Town Centres, first convened in 2012 (and ongoing) and led by an External Advisory Group (EAG), identified the need for a Town Centre First Policy and emphasised the import of people living in the town centres. The EAG review¹ identified empty units above shops as part of 'a fertile context for proposing a new housing model around occupation of empty flats, and other properties, in town centres' (External Advisory Group, 2013, 7). Town Centre Living is one of the six themes in the review, and a key action under this theme is:

"New homes from old: Work with housing providers in the private and public sectors to bring empty town centre properties, such as those over shops, back into use for affordable housing." (External Advisory Group, 2013, 8)

The EAG review prompted a further report: 'Town Centre Action Plan – the Scottish Government Response' in November 2013, which endorsed 'the idea of encouraging more people to live in town centres' (Scottish Government, 2013, 4). The Action Plan lists actions under the Town Centre Living theme including a Town Centre Housing Fund and identification of best practice and models of engagement to encourage owners of empty properties to bring their properties back into use.²

A follow up report to the Town Centre Action Plan from 2014 reported on progress after one year and sets out the Town Centre First Principle:³

"Town centres are a key element of the economic, social and environmental fabric of Scotland's towns; often at the core of community and economic life, offering spaces in which to live, meet and interact, do business, and access facilities and services. We must take collective responsibility to help town centres thrive sustainably, reinvent their function, and meet the needs of residents, businesses, and visitors for the 21st century."

The principle requests that:

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/Publications/2013/07/7250>

² Other actions include supporting Local Authorities in prioritising housing for town centres and coordination with the Affordable Housing Supply Programme; the National Community Planning Support Framework project; and the Assets Focused Approaches project to ensure towns are safer places (Scottish Government, 2013).

³ For more information visit [here](#).

Government, local authorities, the wider public sector, businesses and communities put the health of town centres at the heart of proportionate and best value decision making, seeking to deliver the best local outcomes regarding investment and de-investment decisions, alignment of policies, targeting of available resources to priority town centre sites, and encouraging vibrancy, equality and diversity.

We commit to:

A collaborative approach which understands and underpins the long-term plan for each town centre.”

(Scottish Government, 2014, 2)

The Principle is described as a non-prescriptive guide that takes local needs and context into account, and promotes:

- adopting an approach to decisions that considers the vibrancy of town centres as a starting point;
- ensuring that the health of town centres features in decision-making processes;
- open, measured and transparent decision making that takes account of medium to longer-term impacts on town centres;
- recognising that town centre locations are not always suitable but making sure that the reasons for locating uses elsewhere are transparent and backed by evidence (Scottish Government, 2014, online).

A key partner in helping deliver the Principle is the Scotland’s Town Partnership (STP). The Principle is set out on the STP [website](#).

In November 2014, a Town Centre Housing Fund of £2.75million was announced to bring back empty high street properties into use in six towns: Cupar, Tillicoultry, Tranent, Crieff, Carnoustie and Kirkintilloch (Scottish Government, 2014, 19).⁴

The Town Centre Empty Homes Project (TCEHP)

The TCEHP Pilot in 2015 was an outcome of the National Review of Town Centres, the Town Centre Action Plan, and the work of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) since its inception in 2010.

In their response to the Commission on Housing and Wellbeing Consultation (2014), the SEHP sets out recommendations that support bringing empty houses into use in town centres and specifically references the National Review of Town Centres recommendations. The SEHP notes that the number of potential buildings (for reuse) in town centres is ‘unquantified’ (SEHP, 2014, 1) and that their reuse as homes in town centres is critical in the context of creating sustainable places; supporting resilient and safe communities; providing easy access to employment, schools and shops; and increasing footfall to create and sustain viable local businesses and services (ibid.). The SEHP (2014) response also makes the case for reuse in terms of environmental sustainability, listing benefits such as ensuring better use of existing infrastructure, services and transport links; reducing waste of embedded carbon (relative to demolition and new build) (see box, ‘New Tricks with Old Bricks’, overleaf);⁵ cutting

⁴ For more information please see [here](#).

⁵ SEHP (2014) points out that “Despite perceptions, existing properties can be retrofitted to provide high levels of energy efficiency.” The SEHP references a report from The Building and Social Housing Foundation (BSHF) and the Empty Homes Agency in the UK, ‘[New Tricks with Old Bricks](#)’, from 2008.

down on the need to develop green field sites; reduced demand for new build; cutting down on car dependency and associated emissions; and the clear impacts on well-being (SEHP, 2014).

The Scottish Government (2015b) guidance document for the TCEHP recognises the import of town centres economically, socially and environmentally, and that “There are many flats and other buildings sitting empty and unattractive above and near shops in our town centres, victims of a market where shop units were high value and rental from flats above shops marginal and therefore ignored. This situation has now reversed: the demand for shop units has fallen while the need for affordable and rented homes, and the interest in financing them, has grown, giving a firm basis for leading a market-revival of these properties.” (1)

The main aim of the TCEHF was to increase availability of residential accommodation in Scotland’s towns by refurbishing long-term empty homes or converting empty commercial premises into multi-unit residential projects (Scottish Government, 2015b; SEHP, 2016). £4million was made available, £2million as grants and £2million as loans. The pilot was oversubscribed, despite a limited bidding period of only one month and resulted in 10 selected projects (SEHP, 2016). Overall, the pilot provided 87 affordable homes, 37 of which were part of the Glasgow Shared Services Empty Homes Project. 62 units were for social rent, 11 for intermediate rent, and 14 for affordable sale (Scottish Housing News, 22 December 2015).

The 2016 SEHP Financial Incentives Recommendations report puts forward the idea of a Town Centre Empty Homes Fund 2nd Round.⁶ It is recommended that this should be run on a longer term rolling basis and ‘include feasibility funding to help draw a wider range of players into this area of work and to help ensure project deliverability’ (SEHP, 2016, 4).⁷

Further to this recommendation, the SEHP is now proposing a future revolving Town Centre Fund along similar lines to the Rural Housing and Island Fund (RHIF) to address the issues related to empty properties in town centres. The RHIF has a longer bidding window and a feasibility funding element, both of which were not present in the TCEHF. It is also a much larger fund with £29million available (SEHP, 2017).

⁶ It may be 2021 before the new scheme comes in, in line with election cycle (personal correspondence with Gavin Leask, SEHP, 16th November 2018).

⁷ Reasons given for wanting a rolling programme include that it would allow time for project planning and feasibility exercises; help to ensure that funding is distributed at a time of year conducive to building works; encourage different players (community groups, charities, social enterprises, small-scale developers) to consider bringing forward projects and not just organisations that are skilled at preparing bids to a deadline; remove the situation where projects that could benefit a town are left unpursued because there isn’t a suitable funding stream open for bids (SEHP, 2016).

New Tricks with Old Bricks:

The carbon savings of the reuse of empty properties is explored in the Building and Social Housing Foundation (BSHF) and Empty Homes Agency (UK) study 'New Tricks with Old Bricks', which shows that while new homes are more energy efficient once built, 50 tonnes of carbon emissions might be generated in their construction, compared to 15 tonnes for the refurbishment of an existing home. In most of the houses studied for the report, it took over 50 years for this difference to balance out in operational energy use (World-Habitat, 2008, online).

Governance and resources

The TCEHF was instigated and overseen by the Scottish Government and managed locally by Local Authorities. The SEHP promoted the fund, took part in adjudication of submissions, and provided help and assistance to all applicants.

Funding came from the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, the Scottish Towns Partnership and Scottish Heritage. A hybrid half grant and half loan funding model was chosen as it was recognised that converting from commercial to residential, or fully refurbishing a home that was vacant and exposed to elements, will cost more (SEHP, 2016 FIR). The expected total for each unit was £30-50,000.

All grant funding had to be paid in full by 31st March 2017. Loans were repayable to the Scottish Government and the loan repayment profile was agreed on a case by case basis set out in the agreements. In the pilot, the loan element had to be spent before 31st March 2016. The interest on the loan element was at 2% and there was a requirement to pay back at least 60% of the loan funding to the Scottish Government by 31st March 2020 and the remainder by the 31st March 2025. Each application was to describe how and when the loan would be repaid (Scottish Government, 2015a).

Process:

Any building that had been vacant for a minimum of 6 months (with an expectation that it would remain empty without additional funding support) and that could be brought back into use as affordable housing was eligible. The building did not have to have started out as residential, but the resulting housing had to contain two or more units. Not all areas were applicable: an "area eligibility" assessment was made using the Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification, which is based on population and accessibility. A property was eligible if in line with classes 1 to 4, which basically includes all urbanised areas except those with less than 3000 inhabitants (see Scottish Government, 2016, page 5).

Only a legally constituted body could apply. This includes Registered Social Landlords, charities, developers, but not private individuals. Loan funding was not available to councils unless they applied in partnership with another eligible organisation which could receive the loan funding and enter into an agreement with the Scottish Government.

Submissions for the TCEHP pilot in 2015 were from housing associations, private landlords and others. The pilot is considered to have encouraged close co-operation of different organisations or agencies to demonstrate the clear long-term benefits and better value for money that comes from sharing or combining resources.

The application form is structured in seven sections⁸ and asks for details of the project including: which Local Authority will be applicable; how many years the units will be available for rent; how long properties have been vacant for; other sources of public sector funding; dates for completion; when the loan will be repaid; the type of organisation applying; what financial and staff resources will be assigned; the applicant's history on similar projects; how equality of opportunity will be delivered; the current rateable value of the non-domestic business properties that will be converted to housing, and any current rates relief they might receive; a risk assessment; evidence of compliance with EU procurement regulations; a project management plan; ownership arrangements; how the project will help meet the overall housing need and priorities, for example as set out in a Local Housing Strategy and housing need and demand assessments for the area; how tenants/buyers will be identified; if the project fits with current or future strategies re town centre regeneration; compliance with regulations and standards including Code for Sustainable Homes (involving the incorporation of renewables); wider economic and social benefits; details of discussions with the local community; value for money; the type of accommodation to be provided; innovative features; how the project complements town centre initiatives; and the impact on the town centre (Scottish Government, 2015a).

The housing units had to be made available for sale or rent at affordable levels post-conversion/refurbishment (Scottish Government, 2015b). The application form sets out three options:

- Social rent
- Intermediate rent
- Affordable outright sale

Rent had to align with the Local Housing Allowance level for a minimum of five years. The loans had to be repaid through the rental income.

In the case of a sale, the price must be no higher than the relevant maximum threshold price that has been set for the Scottish Government's Open Market Shared Equity Scheme. This varies depending on location and size of property, and relates to an entry level price for a property on the open-market or affordable open-market homes. Once a property was sold, the loan was to be repaid immediately (Scottish Government, 2015b).

*Challenges identified in the reuse of vacant town centre buildings:*⁹

Space above shops (that might originally have been residential) are a priority, but it is difficult to quantify the extent of these spaces as the buildings have non-domestic rates and therefore no records. An entire building might be classified as non-domestic, so a residential unit above a shop does not appear in any data. Local Authorities are reliant on dedicated Empty Homes Officers (EHOs) to refine data and add these units to the vacant homes register. Access issues to properties above shops can often be a problem. Scotland's Towns Partnership reckons about 10-15k units are hidden by this classification system.

⁸ Headings on the application form: Summary info; Section A, General Information; Section B, Risk; Section C, Strategic fit; Section D, Quality and sustainability; Section E, Value for money; Section F, Innovation; Section G, Town Centre Initiatives/Strategies.

⁹ Personal correspondence with Gavin Leask, SEHP, 16th November 2018.

It is not clear where the line between salvageable and non-salvageable properties exists, or if the fund would have applied to the demolition of properties.

TCEHF example:

One of the successful bids in the pilot was the redevelopment of cottages on Elgin High Street, Elgin, Northern Scotland.

The row of six C-Listed dormer or two-storey cottages had been vacant for 10 years, in an area identified for regeneration in the Local Development Plan. The project received a grant of £120,000 and a £100,000 loan from the TCEHF. This was in addition to a grant from Moray Council Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme (CARS) of £69,000.

Works included stripping away and replacing plasterboard; installing insulation, secondary glazing, new kitchens and new shower rooms; redecorating; external repair to stonework; roof repair and replacement; replacing the cast iron guttering; and repainting. In two properties, new bedrooms were created in the loft spaces. The original windows were retained and repaired in four properties, with new double-glazing in the other two properties.

The project was completed in February 2017 and shortlisted for the Place Category in the Scottish Awards for Quality in Planning 2017. A pub to the ground floor of the end of terrace house has been leased out.



Cottages off Elgin High Street, Elgin, Northern Scotland, before (above) and after (below) regeneration.

Photos kindly provided by Robertson Regeneration and Property.



Rural and Islands Housing Funds

Interviewee:

- Gavin Leask, Scottish Empty Homes Partnership.

Background

The Rural and Islands Housing Fund (RIHF) is modelled on the pilot Town Centre Empty Homes Project (2015) and responds to relevant feedback. The RIHF started in 2016-17 and will run until 2021.

Most projects to date have involved the conversion of non-residential buildings (churches, pubs, care homes) to residential use, and all have been empty homes projects. Projects range from the reuse of properties where the shell was exposed to the elements, to those that were just not used.

The main motivation is to increase the supply of affordable housing of all tenures in rural Scotland and contribute to a target of 50,000 new affordable homes.

Governance and resources

The RIHF is run by the Scottish Government, Housing and Social Justice Directorate. There are two stakeholder organisations that support bids for the fund:

- Dumfries and Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust;
- Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust.

The Rural Housing Fund is £25million and the Islands Housing Fund is £5million.

There are two parts to the RIHF:

- Main fund: capital support (grants and loans) for direct provision of new affordable housing and refurbishment of existing empty properties.
- Small fund: contribution to feasibility studies.

Feasibility funding can be a contribution of up to £10,000 and is prioritised where there is limited opportunity to access any other feasibility support. The Scottish Government Rural Housing Fund webpage lists [alternative sources of feasibility funding](#).

The RIHF provides 90% grant funding and 10% loan. SEHP (2018) notes that this split and the rolling nature of the fund has made it more attractive relative to the TCEHP (SEHP 2018).¹⁰

SEHP run a Local Projects Service that provides advice on funding and project management/assembly for multi-unit empty homes projects. These projects might be eligible for RIHF funding. A total of 31 applicants had contacted SEHP for guidance relating to the RIHF at the time of writing the 2018 report (SEHP, 2018). Not all went ahead and some were simply given guidance on alternative sources of funding. For those that did proceed with an RIHF submission, SEHP provided help with the application form and arranging shadowing visits to other local projects (precedents).

¹⁰ It had been found difficult (with the TCEHP) to put a bid together when the bidding window was limited.

The fund is still considered to be underutilised.¹¹

Process:

The RIHF is only available to organisations including community organisations, development trusts, private landowners, private developers, and traditional housing providers. Applicants apply to either the Rural or the Islands Housing Fund.

Eligible projects must:

- have a specific site or properties identified;
- be in an eligible rural area, as dictated by classes 4, 5 and 6 of the Scottish Government Urban Rural Classification¹² (for the Rural Housing Fund);
- be located on a Scottish Island (for the Islands Housing Fund);
- demonstrate evidence of housing pressure in the location identified;
- have the support of the relevant local authority;
- be prepared to undertake appropriate community engagement;
- be able to provide long-term affordable housing.

There are a number of stages to the application and assessment process, all managed by SEHP with the Scottish Government:

- Pre-application eligibility check;
- Expression of Interest form;
- Response from Scottish Government as to whether or not you can apply;
- Invitation to apply;
- Main application form or feasibility application form;¹³
- Assessment;
- Adjudication.

¹¹ Personal correspondence with Gavin Leask, SEHP, 16th November 2018.

¹² Empty buildings in classes 1 to 3 of the urban/rural classification system are neglected at present.

¹³ There is no deadline for this as it is a rolling call.

RIHF example:

An old schoolhouse in Achiltibuie, Coigach, Wester Ross, had been empty for five years and was transformed into two affordable homes using a blend of funding including from the Rural Housing Fund, the Nationwide Foundation Decent Affordable Homes strategy, The Highland Council, and Highlands and Island Enterprise. The works included energy efficiency upgrades, accessibility improvements and landscaping. The building was originally acquired by a community group, Coigach Community Development Company, through the transfer of assets set out in Part 5 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, who then managed the renovation and conversion works.



The old schoolhouse, Achiltibuie, Coigach, Northern Scotland, before (left) and after (right) transformation into two affordable homes. Photos from <https://www.hscht.co.uk>.

Denmark

Village Renewal Pool

Interviewee:

- Ann-Sophie Øberg, Gruppelider, Teknik og Miljø, By og Landskab, Morsø Kommune¹⁴

Background

The 'Village Renewal Pool' is the latest in a series of national programmes for addressing vacant houses in Denmark. For example, in a previous programme, the 'Effort-Pool', 39 Kommunes received state subsidies of 150million DKK (est. €20million) in 2010 and 100million DKK in 2011 (est. €13million) to address surplus vacant housing. The 'Village Renewal Pool' (VR pool) was set up in 2013 to contribute to solving problems with derelict houses holistically. 400million DKK (€54million) was made available in two separate pools in 2014 and 2015 and used by 66 of the 70 Kommunes appointed (Ministeriet For By, Bolig og Landdistrikter, 2013). A subsequent national pool of 55million DKK (€7.3million) was allocated for each of 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2020. 55 municipalities were appointed as potential recipients of the subsidies. The Danish Government is now looking at a new revision of the VR Pool in 2019.

The Urban Renewal Act and The Planning Act are focused on nationwide growth and 'good living conditions for all citizens' (Dansk Byplan Laboratorium, 2014, 27).¹⁵ However, there is a recognised phenomenon in Denmark called 'peripheral Denmark' caused by population displacement from rural to urban areas, particularly by young people (Heltborg and Kapetanovic, 2015). Causal factors include:

- Job losses (including from changes in the agricultural sector);
- Centralisation of public functions such as schools, hospitals, courts, military and public administration;
- Lower levels of service in shrinking towns and villages (Jensen, 2017).

The areas most affected include southern Zealand, Lolland-Fasster and north-western Jutland. Challenges facing villages in these areas might include poor infrastructure, few companies, an elderly population, relocation of families on welfare, and poorly maintained buildings and village centres (Heltborg and Kapetanovic, 2015).

In some cases, far away from cities, vacancy rates can be up to 25-30%, mainly in single-family houses. There have been significant and inconsistent increases in vacancy in towns far from urban centres and there is uncertainty on figures (Jensen, 2017).¹⁶ This uncertainty is significant in relation to problematic houses for which there is no market demand. These might be houses that are old or outdated (they do not meet the needs and expectations of modern living); too small; built directly onto heavily trafficked roads; in a state of visible decay and disrepair (Dansk Byplan Laboratorium, 2014).

The VR Pool does not relate to social housing as there is almost no vacancy in this type of housing and there is a specific funding mechanism for retrofitting etc. and adequate

¹⁴ Group Leader, Technology and Environment, City and Landscape, Morsø Municipality.

¹⁵ This legislation allows for demolition of isolated properties (Dansk Byplan Laboratorium, 2014).

¹⁶ The uncertainty relates to declarations of holiday homes, market processes (sale or renovation), errors, and houses that may not have an associated CPR (property identity number) (Jensen, 2017).

supply. The VR Pool is considered a pro-active policy that tries to avoid speculators renting poor quality homes to vulnerable people, such as those on welfare (Jensen, 2017).

Governance and resources

VR Pool funds are distributed by the Ministry of Urban, Residential and Rural Affairs. Kommunes (Local Authorities) administer the VR Pool and 68% have prepared a strategy for management of vacant houses (Jensen, 2017). The VR pool gives Kommunes access to 60% state support for demolition and renovation of vacant houses and municipal acquisition of leased properties, sometimes increasing to 70% if the property is of historical significance (Jensen, 2017). The remaining 40% must come from the Kommune. Most Kommunes (77%) use their existing budget and others use loans.¹⁷ The VR pool funding can be used in combination with other urban renewal initiatives. Kommunes have to come up with 40% of costs. Most use their existing budget (77%) others use loans (Jensen, 2017). Kommunes often collaborate with communities on demolition and renovation and the subsequent use of the site (Jensen, 2017).

The legal basis for the funding is in the 'Declaration on Expenditure Frameworks for Urban Renewal, Pool for Village Renewal and Kommunes' and the funds are to be used in accordance with the Urban Renovation Act (Ministeriet For By, Bolig og Landdistrikter, 2013).

A Kommune must apply to participate in the VR Pool and to receive funds.

Process:

A Kommune's eligibility and need for the VR Pool programme is assessed under the following criteria:

- Empty homes in open country and in settlements under 3000 inhabitants;
- Housing in need of refurbishment in open country and in settlements under 3000 inhabitants;
- Empty commercial real estate in settlements with less than 3000 inhabitants;
- Property prices and property valuations;
- Income ratio;
- The extent of the Kommune's rural areas.

Funding can be awarded for a number of activities including resale, demolition, reuse, renovation and consolidation. In 2014, the majority of properties were demolished (83%) (Jensen, 2017). Any type of housing, including residential institutions, is eligible.

All works are to be in line with best practice and regulations on conservation. The Kommune can provide architectural, environmental and performance support to meet requirements set out in the agreements. Funds are granted in accordance with Urban Renovation Act and expenses generally relate to:

- Building works
- Consultancy fees (architect, engineer)
- Project management
- Administration costs

¹⁷ There is limited use of private finance in demolitions relative to other urban renewal programmes in Denmark (Jensen, 2017).

- Preparation of an operation and maintenance manual

The Kommune fixes a deadline for the completion of works and dates for financial reporting.

The application process follows rules set out in the Urban Renovation Act. How the funds are allocated is up to the Board of Directors of the Kommune. In the application process the Kommune can decide what to ask in relation to the project costs and the owner's finances. If funding is being received from another source, this is deducted from the VR Pool grant.

There are many conditions attached to the use of the grant monies, as set out in the guidance document from the Ministeriet For By, Bolig og Landdistrikter (2013), including:

- A Kommune must use the funds within 18 months.
- Agreements must be in place with owners of a property for funding support to be provided.
- Exemptions on committing within the 18 months can be heard and funds can be transferred between Kommunes on agreement.
- Competitive tenders for works are obtained in line with procurement processes for publicly funded contracts in line with various thresholds such as 3million DKK, under which three quotes are required and over which the owner or Kommune must advertise an invitation to tender in line with the Danish Public Administration Act.
- It is not possible to apply after works have started as funds are not granted in retrospect.
- Works can be carried out by an owner's own VAT-registered contracting company with checks carried out by the Kommune on price and quality.
- Mechanisms are in place to ensure that owners do not make a profit from the grant-supported renovations or demolitions. A grant should not be capitalised by an owner, who must pay back the same amount and any profit directly attributable to the benefit of the grant (depending on how many years have passed). Any profit that is a consequence of property price fluctuation does not have to be paid to the Kommune.
- Repayments can stretch out for up to 20 years. The grant amount is noted in the property records.

Houses and other buildings that are in poor condition, vacant or derelict are identified in a number of ways:

- consulting register-based mapping;
- ground-truthing/visual inspections;
- feed-backs and suggestions from local communities and organizations (crowd-sourcing);
- requests from building owners, and
- reports from social welfare workers who visit residents in their homes (Jensen, 2017).

In most cases the owners apply for assistance following communications from the local community or Kommune (ibid.). Half of the Kommunes collaborate with citizen groups for identification and deciding on demolition or renovation (ibid.). Properties that present a problem to neighbours, such as causing a negative visual impact, tend to be

prioritised (ibid.). Certain geographical areas can be designated for receipt of support from the VR Pool although this can present difficulties as crowd-sourced buildings tend to be distributed throughout the regions and Kommunes tend to go for the 'low-hanging fruit' first (ibid.).

Guidance from the Ministry (Ministeriet For By, Bolig og Landdistrikter, 2013) sets out the many different circumstances in which funding can be provided:

1 To renovate rented properties

Support for the rebuilding and refurbishment of private rented residential property in an area of housing demand. The property may have been built before 1950 and is in a poor state of repair. This includes all rental housing that does not meet modern standards, for example by not having a wc, bath or modern heating system. The state of repair is assessed by the Kommune.

There are two categories for funding:

- maintenance work (that does not affect the value or rent), where a cash grant is issued;
- improvement work (that will lead to a rent increase), where a loan is provided and paid back through an increase in rent.

Ability to pay is assessed to check that an owner cannot afford to do the work themselves. Where the same tenants return, 'phasing-in aid' is provided to avoid the tenants experiencing a rent increase. The owner of the property must inform the Kommune when tenants change.

2 To renovate owner-occupied properties

The Kommune may provide support to owner-occupied housing and cooperative housing that is not up to modern standards.¹⁸ The type of work eligible for funding includes:

- external envelope: rainwater goods, windows, doors and gates, balconies, porches, conservatories;
- main building: foundations, entrance steps, baths, fixing defects relating to health or fire (damp, fire escapes etc.).

Conditions may be imposed relating to best practice in conservation.

Support is provided as cash grants and must not exceed one-quarter of eligible costs, unless there is significant work required relating to energy efficiency, when it can be one-third.

3 To demolish residential buildings

The Kommune may decide to give support for the demolition of:

- private rented housing;
- owner occupied and cooperative housing.

¹⁸ Support is not available for holiday residences.

The decision is based on the physical condition of the building. For rented properties, the decision can also take into consideration the need to free up more space for the surrounding existing residential area.

The Kommune applies environmental and performance requirements, for example in relation to municipal waste regulations. There is Ministry guidance on legislation relevant to demolition under the City Renewal Act. There have been problems with illegal dumping in the past, so the contracts for demolition are very strict.

In the example of the Morsø Kommune, financial support is offered in the form of a cash grant that can amount to the total costs of demolition and the clearance of the property, less the remaining or added value of the property. There is a maximum grant of 10,000 DKK. In addition, support under other legislation is deducted, as well as discounts and insurance benefits etc.

4 To demolish private commercial premises

The commercial premises must be in towns with less than 3000 inhabitants. The funding does not apply to buildings located in open countryside or that are publicly owned. The funding is available to premises that have closed down and are causing a negative visual impact. Funding is not available for demolition related to contamination. The Kommune decides on the boundary between countryside and town, and can use this funding to encourage owners to complete demolition works.

As with residential demolition, there are strict codes relating to the disposal of waste.

The financial support is a cash grant for a percentage of the total costs up to a maximum of 10,000 DKK, as determined by the Kommune. The total cost includes demolition and cleaning up of the land, less any property appreciation due to demolition and support from other sources.

5 Support for external refurbishment of commercial premises in a mixed-use building where the housing component is also being renovated.

The list of eligible works to the external envelope is as per no.2 above. Works to parts of the main building may also be eligible. No support is available if the building is publicly owned, or in privately owned buildings where the public sector has a presence (for example, if it contains municipal offices or similar).

6 Conversion of private commercial to rental homes

This funding can apply to schools, small shops, stores, garages etc., where the commercial use has ceased. No support is available if the building is publicly owned, or in privately owned buildings where the public sector has a presence. The buildings must be converted into rented housing (not to cooperative housing or owner-occupied housing) or a mixed-use building with a rental housing component.

Funding is available for the reasonable cost of conversion. The Kommune may set relevant architectural, environmental and performance requirements to ensure that the heritage value of the building is maintained or increased. Additional funding is available for conservation work. The Kommune can use the grant to facilitate best practice in conservation and environmental design.

This is a cash grant of one-quarter of the costs unless there is a conservation aspect, where it is one-third of the costs. The increased costs of best practice conservation work are recognised.

7 Refurbishment of houses and buildings

This funding applies to works to the building envelope that are not covered by items 2 and 5 above. Eligible works include accessibility measures and addressing health or fire hazards (for example, fungus in construction, damp in the building, dangerous electrical installations).

If a property is derelict and a danger to public space and safety, for example if located directly on a road or path, the Kommune condemns it and tells the owner to carry out remediation works. The police can enforce the Kommune's decision by law under the Housing Act and the Environmental Act. If the owners refuse to do the work the Kommune can proceed to carry out the work and force the owners to pay. The courts will impose incremental repayments over time.

The Kommune cannot make the owners sell the property, they can only make them renovate it. The Kommune will demolish the building as a last step.

The Kommune will enforce relevant architectural, environmental and performance requirements to ensure that the heritage value of the building is maintained or increased by the refurbishment.

8 Removing waste on residential properties where there is private rental or owner-occupied housing.

Home-owners or tenants often use land around their properties to store waste such as broken down cars, machinery etc. The Kommune encourages private owners to carry out the necessary work, which is considered part of urban renewal, themselves. In the case of rental properties, the cash grant cannot exceed total eligible expenses for removal. For owner-occupied properties the grant can be equivalent to one-quarter of eligible expenditure. The Kommune can use this grant to ensure the waste is disposed of properly.

9 Buying out vacant or derelict property

This funding is available for properties in towns with under 3000 inhabitants or for properties in the open countryside. The funding is for demolition or refurbishment works to a property that the Kommune purchases through negotiations with the owners or through a forced sale. Foreclosure cases are common (where the owner has stopped paying a loan) and these properties become available on the market. The Kommune bids on them and buys them for a nominal amount (this might be a few DKK). Alternatively, the owner may request the Kommune to take on their property (they might have exhausted all attempts to do something with the property). All Kommune expenses for acquisitions are refundable and the Kommune can sell the properties with conditions.

10 Renovating community houses

The social capital of small villages depends on meeting spaces. In Denmark, there are many historic buildings from the 1870s to early 1900s that are used for community activities and that are not associated with any church. The buildings are often of architectural or cultural significance. Funding is available to support the community with renovation works, subject to conditions relating to architectural conservation, environmental and performance requirements.¹⁹

¹⁹ This option for funding is not listed in the official guidance document from the Ministeriet For By, Bolig og Landdistrikter (2013). However, it is listed as action no.38 under the Urban Renewal and Urban Development Act, which states that the

Challenges:

Data: While statistics for levels of vacancy in an area exist, identifying buildings for demolition or renovation is challenging due to the lack of mapping and data on the locations of derelict and vacant properties in the Kommunes (Jensen, 2017). Systematic mapping of the vacant and derelict buildings rarely takes place: methods are rather varied (ibid.). This makes it difficult to plan and prioritise tasks and to set targets.

Engagement: Establishing dialogue with the local community and owners of the buildings can be challenging (Jensen, 2017).

Demolitions: It can be difficult to complete demolitions in practice, find sustainable uses for the empty plots after demolition, and to combine demolition with regeneration (Jensen, 2017). There are cultural and psychological issues with demolition and the phasing out of settlements (Dansk Byplan Laboratorium, 2014).

Urban renewal: Demolition on its own is not an adequate response and more complex and strategic planning is needed (Dansk Byplan Laboratorium, 2014). It is necessary to differentiate and prioritise between different types of village; plan where services and amenities are needed; and consider how declining roadside villages can best be shrunk or phased out, taking into account how realistic it is to keep supplying and maintaining infrastructure (ibid.).²⁰ There is a need to enable discussion of shrinking villages; to break away from the conventional growth paradigm; and to introduce new finance models to help homeowners tied to declining villages (ibid.).

Kommune may decide to grant support for the renovation of assembly houses and similar buildings located in villages and rural areas. Morsø Kommune uses this action and funds the renovation of community houses (personal correspondence with Ann-Sophie Øberg, 19.11.18).

²⁰ Dansk Byplanlaboratorium (2014) is a collaborative study that looks at four scenarios for an imaginary model village, Shrinkby, centred around a co-created and shared model.

Village Renewal Pool Case Study: Morsø Kommune

Interviewee:

- Ann-Sophie Øberg, Gruppeleder, Teknik og Miljø, By og Landskab, Morsø Kommune

Background

Morsø is a small island county in northwest Denmark with just over 20,000 citizens and established problems relating to vacant and derelict properties. In 2005, a group of citizens in Morsø took the initiative to address vacant and derelict properties by setting up 'Better Housing at Mors' and establishing financing mechanisms. Since this time, demolition has been ongoing, subsequently co-funded by national programmes such as the VR Pool and in collaboration with the Kommune. The most obvious properties suitable for demolition were addressed at the start, but now the initiative is more strategic and looks to open-up access to the countryside or create larger and more viable/attractive sites in the county.

'Better Housing at Mors' is now a consultancy that acts as a broker between the Kommune and communities. The group approach and negotiate with citizens in relation to vacant and derelict property. People often have more confidence in the group than the Kommune, as they are seen to represent the interests of citizens. It can be easier for the group to convince owners to accept the Kommune's offers of support for demolition or renovation. The group has hyperlocal knowledge and they know when a property is about to become relevant to the initiative. The Kommune then steps in and carries out the transaction or enforcement processes.

Originally, 'Better Housing at Mors' was crowd-funded. It is now funded from the Kommune's allocation from government under the VR Pool.

Morsø is located in 'peripheral Denmark' (noted previously) and the broader context of a rural to urban flow is recognised. It is noted that there is potential for overcrowding and high demand for housing in Aarhus and Copenhagen while places not far away, such as Morsø, are losing population.

There is a vacancy rate of about 400 single family houses in the Kommune, but the stock of vacant properties continues to grow at around 40-50 properties per year. By 2015 about 60 properties had been removed. Primarily the properties are single, isolated properties, or properties in smaller villages. There are not so many commercial buildings.

In Morsø, the Kommune buys properties that have been put up for 'compulsory sale' (see item 9 above, 'Buying out vacant or derelict property') to prevent housing speculation and avoid sub-standard homes being rented out to vulnerable and resource-poor citizens.²¹

The VR Pool is a collaborative process with the community in terms of identifying derelict properties; contacting owners; managing financial and legal issues; gaining permissions; the demolition process; and subsequent use of the site.

²¹ These might be unemployed people, people on welfare, people needing social supports from the Kommune. Sub-standard accommodation creates further problems for the Kommune in terms of the welfare of citizens.

The demolition of properties creates empty sites, or 'holes in villages', that the Kommune may sell to a neighbour, or use to create a new connection to the landscape (with a path etc.). The Kommune often makes a deal with the village for the care and management of the empty site. In larger villages or small towns the site might be put on the market for new housing.

Since 2010, some 'village programmes' have been put together. These are effectively brief, outline masterplans.

Data on empty buildings is extracted from the address register, not from the property register, and local knowledge from working on the ground with communities and 'Better Housing at Mors'. Local people contact 'Better Housing at Mors' or the Kommune with suggestions. The VR pool is not advertised, but it is widely known in the community through extensive media coverage. It is recognised as a role of the Kommune.

The Kommune works a lot in villages and areas where the problems are, and they know the developers (who are often local but with a regional presence) and speculators involved.

Impacts

The VR Pool initiative in Morsø has received a positive reaction from communities and raised awareness of how space is (not) used, and that the Kommune is doing something pro-active to address vacancy and dereliction. There is a general consensus that it is not acceptable to let property fall into a ruinous state. Citizens observe that vacant and derelict buildings disappear and this gives confidence back to the village and builds a sense of pride of place. In one part of Morsø Kommune the population is starting to increase and it is observed that more professionals are moving to the area where they can work remotely to some extent and who value their work-life balance.

Challenges

There is no comprehensive database of vacant and derelict properties, although the Kommune has a good overview. The funding has been reduced in recent years.

Village Renewal Pool in Morsø example:

The Strømpøhuset, Øster Assels, in the south of Morsø, is an historic and prominent building in the village that was occupied until recently by tenants who caused disruption. The building was not well maintained.

The Kommune bought the building and started to renovate in 2015. The building is now a community centre with rooms for guests. The Kommune has retained ownership and rents the building out to a community association who pay a very low rent and in return maintain the building. The Kommune does not want maintenance costs but needs to have ownership to access funding.

The Kommune recognises the role of the community centre and the building in keeping villages animated and vibrant. The Kommune knows that villages are fragile social structures that could collapse easily. The removal of disruptive occupants and the addition of a community centre has had a very positive impact on the village.



Strømpøhuset, Mælkevejen 1, 7990 Ø, Øster Assels, Denmark, during refurbishment and on the opening day of an exhibition.

For a photographic record of the refurbishment and information about the building's past and present, please see [here](#).

France

Town Centre Revitalisation (Revitalisation des centres-bourgs)

Interviewees:

- Anne Vial, architecte-ingénieure, Chef de projets Quartiers Durables, Département Urbanisme-Habitat, Cerema.
- Patrice Morandas, Responsable du Groupe Planification, Stratégies Urbaines et Foncières, Département Urbanisme-Habitat, Cerema.

National Context

In France, the essential role of small to medium sized towns in providing services and in maintaining social cohesion across the regions is understood and clearly articulated. Vacancy is considered an identifier of endemic and systemic problems.

Support for the revitalisation of town centres has been ongoing for many years, for example through the PNRQAD (Programme National de Requalification des Quartiers Anciens) from 2009, and the National Urban Renewal Programme (NPNRU). The National Housing Agency (ANAH) has been working to improve the national housing stock for over 45 years (Cerema, 2018a). The French State, Caisse des Dépôts and other agencies and partners are strongly involved in the revitalization of towns and cities, addressing these problems for the common good (Caisse des Dépôts, 2016). Bringing life back to the 'heart of the town' was a key issue in the 2014 municipal elections (Gerbeau 2016).

The most recent programme aimed at the revitalisation of town centres, Action Coeur de Ville (action in the heart of the town), was announced in 2017 by the Prime Minister of France at the second National Conference of the Territories, and enacted in 2018. This programme makes available €5billion, €1 billion of which is from Caisse des Dépôts in equity and €700million in loans. Action Coeur de Ville was inspired by an earlier, experimental programme called Centre-Ville de Demain (town centres of tomorrow) focused on the centres of medium-sized towns and cities of between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. Centre-Ville de Demain in turn reinforced an earlier programme, Revitalisation des Centres-Bourgs (revitalisation of the centres of small boroughs) for settlements of less than 10,000 inhabitants.

This section examines the latter, established programme of Revitalisation des Centres-Bourgs, focusing in on the case study of Giromagny in the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region.

Background: Revitalisation des Centres-Bourgs

In 2014, an interdisciplinary partnership launched a call for a programme to address the multi-faceted issue of the revitalisation of the centres of small to medium sized villages, towns or boroughs: Revitalisation des Centres-Bourgs.²² The partnership included the Commissariat General for Territorial Equality (CGET), the National Housing Agency (ANAH), and the Ministries of Housing, Culture and 'Overseas France'. Out of the hundreds of eligible municipalities with communities of between 1000 and 10,000 inhabitants in France, 267 applied and 54 were selected. All regions are

²² 'Centres-bourgs' does not translate literally to 'town-centres'. It refers to a 'centre' from where services are provided and/or where communal facilities are concentrated. It can therefore refer to a 'hub' in a rural area that might be a small village; the centre of a territory or commune with 10 to 40 villages dispersed around it; or the central area in a small town or village. There are 36,000 communes in France.

represented including overseas territories and a variety of contexts (Bathellier, 2017b).

The programme reflects an understanding of the vital role that centres-bourgs play at the national level. The centres-bourgs are recognised as key to the accessibility and provision of services and the sustainable development of the territories (Crozier, 2017). The many attractive qualities of centres-bourgs are acknowledged such as their central and focal location, social capital, architectural and urban heritage, landscape, local economies etc.

Centres-bourgs often experience problems such as degraded housing, energy poverty, declining populations, increasing economic poverty, aging populations, poor accessibility etc. (Cerema, 2018a). Bathellier (2017b) writes of boarded up shop fronts, dilapidated housing and deserted public spaces, but also notes the potential of centres-bourgs to “serve as a base for a new dynamic” (page 12). Housing in historic centres-bourgs can be considered too small and dark, of poor quality, and not meeting the needs and expectations of residents (Bathellier, 2017b). In particular, it is recognised that independent living for older people can be challenging in old centres-bourgs due to physical conditions such as narrow lanes and entrances, many level changes, and heritage protection measures (Cerema, 2018).

Many factors can be seen to have contributed to these problems, including the urbanisation of rural areas. For example, where detached houses in the countryside have succeeded in meeting the social demand faster and cheaper than the rehabilitation of old housing; out of town commercial areas have drawn out uses that traditionally might have supported the town centre; and the use of the car for household travel has reduced the convenience and accessibility of the centres-bourgs (Bathellier 2017b).

Revitalisation des Centres-Bourgs

The Revitalisation des Centres-Bourgs programme is an experiment where a dedicated project manager for each centre-bourg and €230million (between 54 centres-bourgs) is provided to act as a catalyst and enabler for regeneration, providing municipalities and communities with the necessary tools and resources (Cabinet du Premier Ministre, online). A website for the programme, that provides resources such as guidance documents, can be found [here](#).

It is recognised that centres-bourgs are urban spaces where all public policies interact (housing, travel, culture, childhood etc.) and that it is necessary to mobilise different public and private actors around a common theme or project (Cerema, 2018c), working across and between sectors and departments. The programme therefore brings together private and public initiatives into a coherent and coordinated project.

The funds directly associated with the programme are principally to support private property owners on low incomes in restoring degraded buildings²³ for social and affordable rent, where works would otherwise be unaffordable (subject to conditions).²⁴ However, the project manager addresses the wider regeneration of the centres-bourgs with the coordinated use of funds from other sources. It is recognized

²³ In the Revitalisation des Centre-bourgs programme there is a focus on the state of repair of housing more than occupancy. Words used such as ‘indigne’ translate literally to describe ‘unworthy’, ‘degraded’ and ‘dangerous’ housing.

²⁴ In certain circumstances owner-occupiers on extremely low incomes can receive funds for basic facilities. This reflects the overall mission of ANAH to help the poorer members of society.

that revitalisation requires an holistic approach that includes economic activities, public spaces and responding to the particular context of that place (Cerema, 2018a). For example, Crozier (2017), in a presentation on the official website for the programme, sets out the following goals: restore the attractiveness of the centres-bourgs; reduce dependence on fossil fuels and restore biodiversity in the territories; and nurture collaboration and cooperation (rather than competition) between territories.²⁵

The vision is for the Revitalisation des Centres-Bourgs programme to act as a catalyst for the creation of a balanced network of vibrant centres-bourgs that addresses the issues of territorial inequality and the ecological and energy transition (Bathellier, 2017b), and that restores 'vitality and harmony' by adapting in response to changing uses, lifestyles and diverse communities (Cerema, 2018a; 2018c). The stated challenge is to restore value and meaning to living in centres-bourgs and to rethink how the territory is planned using cost-benefit analyses that measure value beyond the purely financial (Cerema, 2018c).²⁶

Governance and resources

The main partners are the Commissariat General for Territorial Equality (CGET) and the National Housing Agency (ANAH), who are joined on the high-level steering committee by the Directorate of Housing, Urbanism and Landscape (DHUP); Department of Overseas France (DGOM); Department of Culture; and Cerema.²⁷

Other active stakeholders in governance include:

- Regional Parks Authorities: in 26 of the 54 centres-bourgs in the programme the Regional Parks Authority is involved.²⁸
- Municipalities: the applications are made by municipalities who can then proceed to manage the process.
- Inter-municipalities: it is recognised that economic activities are dependent on the socio-economic context and sensitive to the balance of competition in the wider area. A synoptic and inter-municipal response is therefore identified as necessary to regulate economic and commercial development and avoid competition between municipalities (Cerema, 2018c).
- Town Centre Management Groups: bringing together all the players needed to create a successful centre-bourg.²⁹

The programme is managed under different themes:

²⁵ Crozier (2017) in the [transcript](#) to a presentation lists out actions relevant to revitalisation, including the restoration and reuse of vacant and degraded housing in private ownership for the social and affordable housing sector; adapting and improving accessibility of housing and centres-bourgs for an aging population and disabled persons; improving the energy efficiency and comfort of existing housing; supporting sustainable transport initiatives; facilitating entrepreneurship in renewable energy; and mobilising local energy production capacity.

²⁶ It is noted that the first step is to understand the perspective of the inhabitant, consumer and investor (Cerema, 2018c).

²⁷ Cerema is the Centre for Studies and Expertise on Risks, the Environment, Mobility and Development in France, under the joint supervision of the Minister for the Ecological and Social Transition and the Minister for Territorial Cohesion. Cerema has produced [leaflets](#) on all towns in the Revitalisation des Centres-bourgs programme and on several thematic aspects: Renovating and Adapting Housing; Upgrading Public Spaces; Economic and Commercial Revitalisation; Community Participation. Leaflets are also available on particular towns. Cerema maintains connections between regional and interregional scales, directs dissemination and lessons learnt, and implements continuous evaluation.

²⁸ Regional Parks Authorities have a motto 'une autre vie s'invente ici' (another life is invented here).

²⁹ In some cases, Citizens Councils have been formed as part of a public participation programme where citizens exchange ideas on the project (Cerema, 2018d).

- Renovation and reuse of poor quality and/or vacant housing.
- Reducing energy bills.
- Adaptation for aging and disability.
- Housing innovation.

There are generally five main modes of operation: incentives; technical and financial supports; coercion (administrative police procedures); substitution (change of use to office/workplace); and compulsory purchase and public take over for common good (Cerema, 2018a).

As noted above the programme provides three key enablers for revitalisation of the centres-bourgs:

1. A project manager, originally funded by the Fonds National d'Aménagement et de Développement du Territoire (FNADT, €15million) for the first three years of the programme. This has now been extended with funding from ANAH in response to positive feedback relating to the benefits of having a dedicated project manager.
2. State funds for public municipal housing (€15million).
3. €200million from the National Housing Agency (ANAH). ANAH works with local semi-state agencies (for example those related to public housing) who help manage the funds and prioritise distribution. The funds are principally directed towards surveying (to diagnose the centre-bourg) and, as noted above, supporting private property owners in restoring degraded buildings for social and affordable rent (subject to conditions). ANAH might provide up to 30% of the funds for a particular project. The towns are supported in their 'requalification project' for five years and receive on average about €4million.

The project manager coordinates other financial assistance and tools available under programmes dedicated to the development of small towns for specific contexts. These are often also supported by funds from ANAH and include:

OPAHs:

An OPAH is a programmed housing improvement operation in a specific area.

There are four types of OPAH:

OPAH classique (traditional);

OPAH-RU (urban renewal) ;

OPAH RR (rural revitalisation);

OPAH copropriétés (apartment buildings).

For example, the town of Sierck-les-Bains has implemented an OPAH-RU for the renovation of 151 dwellings over six years (Cerema, 2018a); and ANAH often works as a partner to local municipalities for operations that promote regional development through restoration of old private housing using OPAHs.³⁰

RHI and Thirori:

³⁰ ANAH has been supporting local authorities in dealing with degraded or not fit for habitation housing stock since 2010, originally through compulsory purchase orders and rehabilitation. In more recent years, the demolition and rehabilitation of vacant or degraded buildings can be carried out as part of an urban regeneration project in order to free up land for new development in central, well-serviced locations. There is a particular emphasis on supporting housing suitable for aging populations with up to a 70% grant, with 30% paid up front to encourage even the most economically disadvantaged households to engage with the process of improving their housing (Liquet, 2014).

Where housing is in particularly bad condition the RHI mechanism³¹ (for demolition of dilapidated and/or dangerous buildings beyond repair) or the Thirori system³² (for dilapidated but recoverable housing) can come into effect. The Thirori device aims at a substantial rehabilitation of a building or a set of buildings acquired by CPO or amicable agreement. Financial assistance is available from ANAH for a feasibility study and the construction works (Cerema, 2018a).³³

Habiter Mieux:³⁴

This scheme aims to improve the thermal comfort and energy performance of housing, addressing fuel poverty and the energy and ecological transition. Funded retrofit solutions are based on a survey of the existing building and depend on the local context/conditions. For example, a study of old buildings in Alsace examined seven typical dwellings for seven months, concluding with recommendations for energy efficient retrofitting that works with the existing building frame and fabric (Cerema, 2018a).

Union Sociale pour l'Habitat agreement:

Funding is made available for accessibility audits of old towns under a 2017 agreement with Union Sociale pour l'Habitat for the adaptation of housing and the living environment of social housing to support citizens living independently in their own home for longer (Cerema, 2018a). Under the Revitalisation des Centres-Bourgs programme towns can:

- Develop and offer adapted housing
- Improve local policy implementation related to accessibility
- Encourage innovation and best practice.

(Cerema, 2018a)

Additional supports and initiatives include:

- An eco-neighbourhood approach that can adapt to a town centre (from the DHUP (Directorate of Housing, Urbanism and Landscape)).
- Heritage advice and support from the ABF (Architects of the Buildings of France).
- The 'Ma boutique à l'essai' initiative, that attempts to revive commercial activity and attractiveness.

(Bathellier, 2017b)

Process:

Applications had to demonstrate cooperation between the local commune scale and wider regional scale, for example by pairing a municipality with an institution of inter-municipal cooperation (EPCI) so that all the different components of the project were

³¹ Financement de la reabsorption de l'habitat insalubre irremediable et dangereux (RHI). The prefect declares the building unsuitable for habitation. RHI is intended to be used on a neighbourhood approach basis along with a range of other tools (Cerema, 2018).

³² Traitement de l'habitat insalubre remediable ou dangereux, ou sous operation de restauration immobiliere (THIRORI).

³³ For example, in Lodeve (Herault) town centre the project included 13 buildings in RHI (demolition of dilapidated housing) and nine buildings in THIRORI (renovation/restoration of derelict and/or dangerous housing) (Cerema, 2018).

³⁴ Also known as Solidarité Ecologique (ASE).

covered. Applications also had to demonstrate they addressed cross-cutting issues and to assert the centre-bourg's central role in the area (Bathellier 2017b).

The Revitalisation des Centres-Bourgs programme is based on two agreements:

- an 'engineering' agreement, signed with the State, relating to the appointment and role of a project manager³⁵ and support for communities in diagnosis/surveys and feasibility studies; and
- a 'revitalisation' agreement, signed with ANAH, setting out how the intervention will be coordinated, implemented and monitored.

The project manager role can be summarised as:

- mobilisation and coordination of the diverse actors who are cooperating in the programme;³⁶
- identifying and accessing funding to make the interventions happen;
- thinking in systems and in the long term in relation to different aspects such as housing, mobility, public spaces or commerce.

Surveys:

The projects involve local surveys or diagnoses that identify major issues that provide a basis for decisions and actions (Crozier, 2017). For example, it is recognised that to have a balanced approach to heritage and the revitalisation of the towns, it is important to create an inventory of vacant or adaptable spaces and building conditions: good baseline data is essential (Bathellier, 2017b). Using this data, it is then possible to design contemporary ways of living that people demand, and that are well adapted to the context of small towns and cities (ibid.).

Revitalisation initiatives:

Eligible initiatives may be funded by ANAH or other sources. The official programme website provides numerous guidelines and reports on good practice and examples.

Urban planning:

Crozier (2017) summarises the type of projects related to urban planning including: the demolition of buildings 'to ventilate the urban fabric', reducing overcrowding and supporting ecosystem services such as fresh air circulation and natural light; co-creation processes with citizens and elected officials in design and implementation through participatory workshops; and projects that reveal and conserve architectural, urban and landscape heritage.

Cerema (2018b) reports on the numerous projects where public spaces are upgraded as part of the Revitalisation des Centres-bourgs programme. Public spaces such as streets and squares are recognised as places for 'living together' that play a critical role in the attractiveness of a town, the energy and ecological transition, and the social cohesion of the territory (ibid.). There is an emphasis on creating a new balance between pedestrian and vehicular use, with shared surfaces and spaces supporting social interaction and sustainable modes of transport with positive impacts on tourism,

³⁵ When the engineering phase is complete it is hoped that the Project Leader can be maintained by the communes or 'rurality' contracts (Bathellier 2017b). As noted above under 'Funding', ANAH is now supporting the extension of the project manager contracts.

³⁶ Cerema (2018c) notes the critical role of traders in creating vitality in a centre-bourg, individually as entrepreneurs and collectively: coordination between all players (economic, professional, community, institutional etc.) is therefore key.

trade, and urban and landscape heritage. The opportunity to provide outdoor seating areas for businesses and address accessibility issues to existing heritage buildings as part of the upgrading of public spaces is noted in Cerema (2018c).³⁷

Mobility:

Sustainable transport initiatives include car-pooling, bike and pedestrian routes, and structured hitch-hiking (Crozier, 2017). Cerema (2018c) notes the increasing recognition of the link between walking, cycling and commercial vitality, and the need for a secure and comfortable network at the scale of the municipality and inter-communality, with parking for bikes and benches for pedestrians.³⁸

Economy:

Initiatives to support the local economy include: local citizen investment projects; supporting local entrepreneurs in renewable energy projects (wind, hydro, solar, wood, anaerobic digestion or cogeneration); territorial marketing strategies; and implementation of digital showcases/platforms (Crozier, 2017). Many traditional businesses may no longer be viable and there are initiatives to support alternatives such as the bioeconomy, circular economy and experience economy. The latter can contribute to local life through cultural activities, artisan industries, services and third places (Cerema, 2018a; 2018c).³⁹

Creating reasons to visit the town centre, for example through differentiated offerings such as events, local currencies, special opening hours, can increase vitality and support the revitalisation (Cerema, 2018c). These initiatives often use public spaces and vacant premises. With a central management office for the town centre it is possible to coordinate opening hours, support different products and services, and develop connected town centres, for example with online sales collection stores or public wifi (Cerema, 2018c).

To encourage the creation of new activities and reduce vacancy, preferential rates and legal conditions are provided for business incubators, fab-labs and pop-up and experimental shops to test a new concept or product, often in partnership with building owners (Cerema, 2018c).⁴⁰ In certain cases, coercive mechanisms have been used to encourage owners of vacant properties to take part in these initiatives, for example with a tax on vacant premises or sites (Cerema, 2018c).

Challenges:

Identified challenges include:

³⁷ Saint-Méloir-des-Onides in Brittany has renovated public spaces in collaboration with trades-people and inhabitants, including raising the level of the public spaces to provide level access to commercial premises (Cerema, 2018c).

³⁸ The town of La Chapelle-Grain in the Pays de la Loire region, has a walking strategy to guide coherent actions relating to planning and movement, based on an understanding that good infrastructure for walking increases footfall to local shops (Cerema, 2018c).

³⁹ In Boussac, in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region, a third place has been created that combines culture, interaction and creativity, comprising a library, a co-working space and a business incubator (Cerema, 2018c).

⁴⁰ In La Rivière, in the Nouvelle-Aquitaine region, following the closure of the last town centre business, a mixed-use project was created combining a tourist information centre, a multi-purpose room, and associated services around a forecourt that is regarded as a living space for the town centred around a restored bread oven (Cerema, 2018c).

- Bringing the community along with the revitalisation project: it is necessary to understand the perspectives of those living in the centres-bourgs and what their financial capacities are (Cerema, 2018a).⁴¹
- Tensions exist between rural and urban areas as most of the funding is going to centres-bourgs. For example, 80% of ANAH interventions are in urban centres with the remaining 20% in rural areas (Bathellier 2017b).⁴²
- There is a need for better regulation of commercial planning at a regional level (Bathellier 2017b). For example, the CDAC (Department of Commercial Development Commissions) often grants permissions without having a long-term perspective (Bathellier 2017b).
- Parking can be a divisive issue. For traders, it is not so much about numbers but about rotation of vehicles, and there is a need to differentiate between types of parking and to integrate parking areas with pedestrian links to the centre and the network throughout the municipality (Cerema, 2018c).
- The project manager role can require influencing decisions at multiple levels (national, regional, local) of government and scales of planning. It can be difficult for one person in one centre-bourg to coordinate all the different policies, dynamics and actors.

Revitalisation des centres-bourgs example:

Bathellier (2017b) cites the example of Joinville, in the Champagne-Ardenne region, which has suffered economic and demographic decline. This is most evident in the town centre. Since 2012, a local Public Policy Acceleration Committee has worked with an OPAH to renovate housing. More recently, as part of the Revitalisation des Centres-bourgs programme the mayor has used 'coercive tools' on about 40 buildings that were vacant or derelict and without an owner; an architectural conservation area has been established; and 155 houses will be restored in five years.

For images of the transformed buildings in Joinville please see an online document from Cerema [here](#).

⁴¹ Cerema (2018d) sets out why it is necessary to go beyond mere consultation and create stronger links to the project, in effect creating a sense of being part of, or a member of, the project. This entails empowering citizens to define the living environment and facilitate change to suit their needs and aspirations.

⁴² Bathellier (2017b) notes this can be problematic for the revitalisation project and there is a need to provide some complementary support to rural communities so that they do not feel left behind.

Town Centre Revitalisation Case Study: Giromagny

Background

In November 2014, the rural commune of Giromagny was awarded €2million from ANAH to revitalize the town centre as part of the Revitalisation des Centres-Bourgs programme (Bathellier, 2017a).

Giromagny is one of the Communes of La Haute Savoureuse, Territoire de Belfort, the Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region. Giromagny is a small town of 3,200 inhabitants at the centre of an intercommunality of another 8600 inhabitants (Cerema, 2017).

In 2013, Giromagny recorded a housing vacancy rate of 9.36% (of 1736 dwellings) and the wider area a rate of 8% (of 4386 dwellings) (Cerema, 2017). The Mayor of Giromagny acknowledges, in the information and application leaflet 'Rehabilitation Logement Vacant', that degraded and derelict buildings have a negative impact on the image of the town and that rehabilitating unoccupied dwellings not only helps keep the buildings in good order, but contributes to the vitality and general interest of the municipality (Mairie de Giromagny, 2016a). Bathellier (2017a) notes that the supply of housing in the town centre suitable for older people looking to downsize does not meet the existing demand.

Giromagny Town Council is using the ANAH funds in an OPAH mechanism to address vacancy, helping private owners who wish to renovate their properties with the intention of putting it on the market (for rent or sale) (Mairie de Giromagny, 2016a). The OPAH is a six-year programmed operation for improving housing in the eight Communes of La Haute Savoureuse in partnership with the National Housing Agency (ANAH) (Maire de Giromagny, 2016a). The OPAH agreement was signed in April 2016 in the presence of the Prefect, the Caisee des Dépôts and the Parc Naturel Régional des Ballons des Vosges. It will run until March 2021 (Giromagny, 2016a).

In addition to the OPAH, the Revitalisation des Centres-Bourg programme provides a focal point, bringing together numerous studies, initiatives, programmes and funds in the communes together into a coherent plan.

The Revitalisation des Centres-Bourgs programme in Giromagny is primarily aimed at housing through the OPAH mechanism, and sets out to:

- address housing that is in poor condition;
- reuse vacant houses for affordable rent housing;
- address fuel poverty through improved energy efficiency of buildings;⁴³
- adaptation of housing for universal access and home care.

(Maire de Giromagny, online)

As a consequence the programme will create more accessible housing and public spaces; preserve the built heritage and character of the town; support more viable local businesses; attract people of all ages to the Belfort region; accommodate the demand from older people looking to downsize to town centres close to shops and

⁴³ The Giromagny website states that energy-efficiency work by owner-occupiers will be supported if consumption can be shown to have been reduced by at least 25%, and for landlords by at least 35% (online).

services; and help people on low incomes who would not otherwise be able to invest in improvements to their home (Bathellier 2017a).

Governance and resources

The OPAH is run by URBAM Conseil,⁴⁴ associated with URBANIS.⁴⁵ Stakeholders include:

- Municipality of Giromagny,
- The Housing Agency (ANAH)
- URBAM Conseil
- Caisee des Dépôts
- Parc Naturel Régional des Ballons des Vosges
- Private owners of single family houses and residential buildings

ANAH has put up €2million to support the OPAH in reusing 180 dwellings through the OPAH,⁴⁶ with average grants of around €13,000 (Bathellier, 2017a). The subsidy rate varies between 25% and 60% of the costs of work depending on the individual case (Maire de Giromagny, online).

The OPAH grants are intended for private owners and apartment block syndicates wishing to carry out major renovations:

- in their principal residence;
- in housing intended for renting;
- in common areas of a dwelling.

(Maire de Giromagny, 2016a)

There are 3 types of grant under the OPAH:⁴⁷

- grant for restoring unoccupied housing to the market;
- renovation grant for facades;⁴⁸
- grant for transforming vacant commercial premises into housing (change of use).⁴⁹

(Maire de Giromagny 2016a; online)

Permitted works can range from home improvements to the rehabilitation and reuse of vacant and derelict buildings. The works include:

⁴⁴ URBAM Conseil is a private, independent multi-disciplinary company that provides services to local authorities and the State related to urban regeneration, housing and development. The URBAM Conseil is put at the disposal of applicants under the OPAH.

⁴⁵ URBANIS is an independent consultancy that specialises in the areas of housing rehabilitation, policy and development. The company works mainly for local authorities.

⁴⁶ While the primary focus of the OPAH is on the small town of Giromagny, the OPAH also applies to eight rural communes in the former Commune la Haute Savoureuse.

⁴⁷ Application forms are available online for each option on the [information page](#).

⁴⁸ It is noted that this is conservation work that benefits property values and improves the living environment for all (Maire de Giromagny 2016a).

⁴⁹ It is noted that the project does not aim to get rid of the shops that characterise the centre of Giromagny. The grant applies only to a specific area and is only available to business owners whose property has been vacant for more than 12 months (Maire de Giromagny 2016a; online).

- standard services installations (electricity, plumbing, sanitary facilities, security, etc.);
- energy efficiency works;
- accessibility works;
- renovation of common areas in an apartment block.

(Maire de Giromagny, 2016a)

The work must be carried out by professionals and there is a minimum value threshold of €1500. There are exceptions for people with resource constraints. Minor maintenance or decoration works are not eligible (Maire de Giromagny, 2016a).

The grants come with conditions:

- Owner occupiers of at least 15 years are means-tested and must agree to live in the home as their principal private residence for a further six years at least;
- For landlords of at least 15 years, there are no resource requirements but an initial diagnosis (survey) of the housing and its energy rating must be carried out. This is provided for free under the OPAH. On completion of works the dwelling must be rented out as a principal residence and not sold. Landlords must sign an agreement with ANAH committing to set rent ceilings (for affordable housing) and meet standards for living conditions for a minimum of nine years.
- For degraded common areas in shared ownership, assistance may be granted to the apartment block syndicate if 75% of the dwellings are principal private residences and a complete diagnosis (survey) is carried out.
- Works cannot have started before the agreement is in place.

(Maire de Giromagny, 2016a)

Energy efficiency grants:

There are also additional grants available for energy efficiency retrofits. For example, the 'Positive energy territories for green growth' programme from the Parc Naturel Régional des Ballons des Vosges supplements the ANAH budget by €120,000, representing a 10% increase to a grant where appropriate (Bathellier, 2017a).

Complementary aid can also be sought from Habiter Mieux ('better Housing') from ANAH, mentioned previously, for energy retrofits (Maire de Giromagny, 2016a).

Municipality of Giromagny grants:

The municipality of Giromagny offers an additional and cumulative grant specifically for restoring vacant housing to the market (Maire de Giromagny, 2016b).⁵⁰

The additional and cumulative grant is to incentivise and help citizens organise and finance works. The application of the grants applies to a defined area of the town centre, and they are available to homeowners and landlords from the territory of the Communes of Haute Savoureuse.⁵¹

Works must meet criteria set out by ANAH and can include:

- Preparatory work (site works including demolition, cleaning);

⁵⁰ The additional and cumulative grant is provided using the funds from ANAH.

⁵¹ Within the first six months of the programme there were 60 official requests for this funding (Cerema, 2018).

- Structural works;
- Mechanical and electrical works;
- Sealing of the external envelope;
- Façade interventions;
- Accessibility works;
- Interior fit out;
- Specific treatments for lead, asbestos, radon etc.;
- Fire safety;
- External spaces.

The conditions for the grant include:

- Work must not have started or been completed prior to notification of the award of the grant;
- Planning permission, building permits⁵² and the grant agreement must be in place;
- Work must be started within one year of notification of the award of the grant;
- Works must be carried out in accordance with the approved project, instructions and advice;
- Registered building professionals must be used;
- Eligible houses must have been vacant for more than 12 months prior to the application;
- The conservation methodology must be in line with best practice and required permits for the Service Départemental de l'Architecture et du Patrimoine (Architecture and Heritage);
- Once works are complete it is necessary to prove occupation by an owner-occupier or a tenant (using utility bills or a dated and signed lease).

(Maire de Giromagny, 2016b)

The grant may represent 20% of the total cost of the works, excluding taxes, up to a maximum amount of €3000 per project. In the case of an entire apartment building, the maximum amount is €2500 per unit and €500 for each additional unit, with the total not to exceed €5000 (Maire de Giromagny, 2016b). Applications are decided upon within one month.

The Mayor of Giromagny can carry out checks at any time and if there is any deviation from the agreement the funds can be withheld. Grant agreements are calculated on the quotations provided in the application. If additional works are needed new quotations are required. Payment is made only after production of invoices and a favourable review of the works by the Commune de Giromagny. Invoices must be produced within 2 years (Maire de Giromagny, 2016b). The grant affords the Council some control over works being carried out in the town, ensuring things are done properly.

A broad range of initiatives:

The programme supports a broad range of initiatives including:

⁵² Building permits are required for anything that changes the exterior, increases the size of accommodation, or a change of use.

Surveys:⁵³

Baseline data has been gathered to help diagnose challenges and to inform remedial actions. Examples include:

- Studies on inclusive housing (l'habitat participatif); tourism; citizens' expectations for the commercial offering in the town.
- Consultation workshops with shop-owners and businesses in the town centre by the School of Landscape Engineers in Angers.⁵⁴
- Survey work by students analysing pedestrian and automobile traffic, public spaces and parking, to establish data on which to base informed design decisions that leave more room for pedestrians, terraces and shared spaces.

(Bathellier, 2017a)

Housing:

Property owners are able to avail of free advice from l'Architecte des Batiments de France⁵⁵ if the dwelling is located above a business and needs special planning to provide separate access, or within the perimeter of the area of Historic Monuments as set out in the Local Urbanism Plan (PLU) of Giromagny.

Studies were carried out on challenging residential buildings. For example, 15 apartment blocks with an average of 10 units were identified as being in difficulty. The Council is now considering rehabilitating five of them (Bathellier, 2017a).

Cerema (2017) provides an example of the rehabilitation of a 900sq.m heritage presbytery building in the town that is to be converted into housing for the elderly, pooling various funds and supports.⁵⁶

Urban interventions:

A new energy efficient socio-cultural centre is planned, aimed at attracting audiences from the surrounding communities and providing a varied programme with the aim of helping to retain and attract young people to the Belfort region (Bathellier, 2017a).

A pop-up shop ('trial shop') has been launched in the town as part of a national initiative that enables people to test business propositions for a limited period in a central vacant retail unit (Cerema, 2017). Giromagny municipality provides practical support and is now considering introducing a tax on vacant premises to encourage owners to take part (ibid.).

Process

Applicants for grants first contact the Town Hall and receive advice as to their eligibility and that of the proposed project. An initial application form asks when the

⁵³ Survey work helped the town succeed in the "Call for Expressions of Interest" (AMI) which will be funded by the Regional Council, alongside other partners such as the Regional Directorate for Enterprise, Competition, Consumer Affairs, Labour and Employment, and the Commissariat for Equal Territories (CGET).

⁵⁴ This student project with the French Landscape Federation included meeting with the Territoire de Belfort Urban Planning Agency, the Parc Naturel Régional des Ballons des Vosges and the Direction Départementale des Territoires' consulting architect. The exhibition and consultation exercise supported the drafting of a call for a formal study of the town centre (Bathellier, 2017a; Cerema, 2018b).

⁵⁵ The national (civil service) architecture and urban planning office responsible for heritage. This service is listed for the Town Council grant. For more information see [here](#).

⁵⁶ For example, from the Urban Planning Agency of Territoire de Belfort and Gaïa habitat, and a technical and financial feasibility study from an architectural firm (Cerema, 2017).

work is to be carried out and what type of work is envisaged. Options provided for the works on the form are:

- insulation (walls, roofspace, windows);
- heating (replacement, new installation, other);
- adaptation (bathroom, wc, window shutters (external), stairlift).

(Maire de Giromagny, 2016a)

To find out quickly if they are eligible, homeowners fill out a questionnaire and submit a copy of their latest tax statement. Once eligibility has been established, URBAM Conseil visits the dwelling(s) or building(s) to provide assistance with initial preparatory work, including:

- informing citizens about all the support they can access;
- assisting citizens with a feasibility study, estimates of the cost of the work, and estimates of the amount of a potential grant;
- performing a pre-construction diagnosis (survey) and assessment of potential post-construction energy performance;
- assembling a personalized file covering all aspects of the project: technical, administrative, financial and legal.

(Maire de Giromagny, 2016a)

Financing agreements are then put in place to allow the applicant to start the works, and on completion of the works professional certificates and grant claims are completed and submitted (Maire de Giromagny, 2016a).

Challenges

Bathellier (2017a) records that the project has found it easy to engage owner-occupiers but more difficult to mobilise landlords;⁵⁷ landlords can be dishonest or in denial in relation to problems or underlying issues; and finding funding and regeneration instruments that are best adapted to a particular territory and local context can be difficult.

For images of the transformed buildings in Giromagny please see an online document from Cerema [here](#).

⁵⁷ Bathellier (2017a) references H el ene M etivet, the project leader.

Observations

This section identifies common themes and points of interest from the programmes in Scotland, Denmark and France.

Background:

All programmes are part of an evolving timeline or sequence of initiatives aimed at revitalising urban centres and reusing vacant or derelict buildings for housing and sustainable communities. Future iterations of the programmes are either in place (France) or in planning (Scotland and Denmark). A wide range of organisations are focused on supporting the reuse of buildings and regeneration of towns, including some that are dedicated to towns or vacant buildings, such as Scotland's Towns Partnership and the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership respectively.

Cost-benefit:

Diverse environmental, social and economic benefits are cited in all cases, from the social cohesion of the nation (France) to the well-being of the individual (Scotland). The reference to embodied carbon savings over a significant period of time from the reuse of existing buildings (Scotland) provides an important quantifiable benefit that is generally ignored or perhaps not appreciated.

Collaboration and cooperation:

All programmes involve collaboration between multiple government departments, agencies, semi-state bodies and communities, pooling knowledge and resources to achieve results that would not be possible with a sectoral approach, and with a broad range of benefits including typically elusive issues such as fire safety and accessibility in heritage buildings. For example, Revitalisation des Centres-bourgs brings together multiple stakeholders, initiatives and funding streams into a coherent whole, acting as a catalyst or enabler to achieve physical and social urban renewal beyond the immediate funding constraints of the programme.

Supporting the private sector:

The focus is often on helping the private sector to reuse their buildings for housing, subject to strict criteria and conditions. This approach effectively devolves agency and responsibility for regeneration to the private sector. It also recognises that owners may not have access to sufficient funds required for often very expensive restoration work, and that the potential benefits of this work are shared with the wider community, for example in terms of more housing, the vitality of the town, cultural and architectural heritage, the viability of businesses, and visual amenity. The programmes are often an attempt to make 'doing the right thing' as easy as possible, for example with the multiple national and local support agencies provided in France.

Helping vulnerable people:

The funds ultimately aim to protect or assist the more vulnerable in society, for example by ensuring rental properties are of a good standard (Denmark); there are more affordable homes in central locations (Scotland); and affordable homes are energy efficient, close to amenities and accessible for an aging population (France).

Ensuring best practice:

The conditions of funding awards provide a mechanism for ensuring best practice is adhered to, for example in relation to conservation and energy efficiency in Denmark.

Thinking in systems:

The issue of vacancy is not viewed or treated in isolation from the myriad interconnected and interdependent issues and challenges facing urban centres. Vacancy is seen as a symptom of systemic problems in all cases, and an opportunity to address many diverse challenges. A cross-sectoral and systems-thinking approach is evident, particularly in the Revitalisation des Centres-bourgs programme.

Communities adapting to change:

The programmes relate to aspects of the community resilience discourse, building adaptive capacity to change in communities through a sense of belonging and attachment to place; nurturing social memory (for example through heritage) and social cohesion; giving people the agency to imagine and self-organise (Wilson, 2012); citizen participation processes that actively involve the community in solving problems and achieving objectives (Pelling, 2003); and the collaboration of diverse actors at all scales to focus on common problems (Olsson *et al.* 2007).

Appendix A:

Members of the Collaborative Working Group for Housing and Sustainable Living
(March 2019):

Heritage Council of Ireland	Alison Harvey
Housing Agency of Ireland	Isoilde Dillon Daragh McCarthy
Mayo County Council	Tom Gilligan
Space Engagers	Philip Crowe
University College Dublin	Orla Murphy*
Environmental Protection Agency	Tadgh O'Mahony*

*from January 2019.

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