



SCOTTISH LAND COMMISSION
COIMISEAN FEARAINN NA H-ALBA

Summary: Key findings from the 2024 review of vacant and derelict land

LAND FOCUS

September 2024

What is Vacant and Derelict Land (VDL) and why does it matter?

“Vacant” land is land that is unused for its designated purpose and which is appropriate for redevelopment or productive re-use. “Derelict” land is so damaged by previous use that it is incapable of future use without rehabilitation.

Scotland’s industrial heritage and rapid transition from an economy based on heavy industry to services in the 1980s resulted in a significant legacy of vacant and derelict land.

Finding productive re-uses for vacant and derelict land matters. People living in poorer areas are more likely to live close to vacant and derelict sites, which can be harmful to physical and mental health.

Investing in the productive re-use of vacant land can help tackle climate change, reduce inequalities, improve health and well-being and deliver inclusive growth.

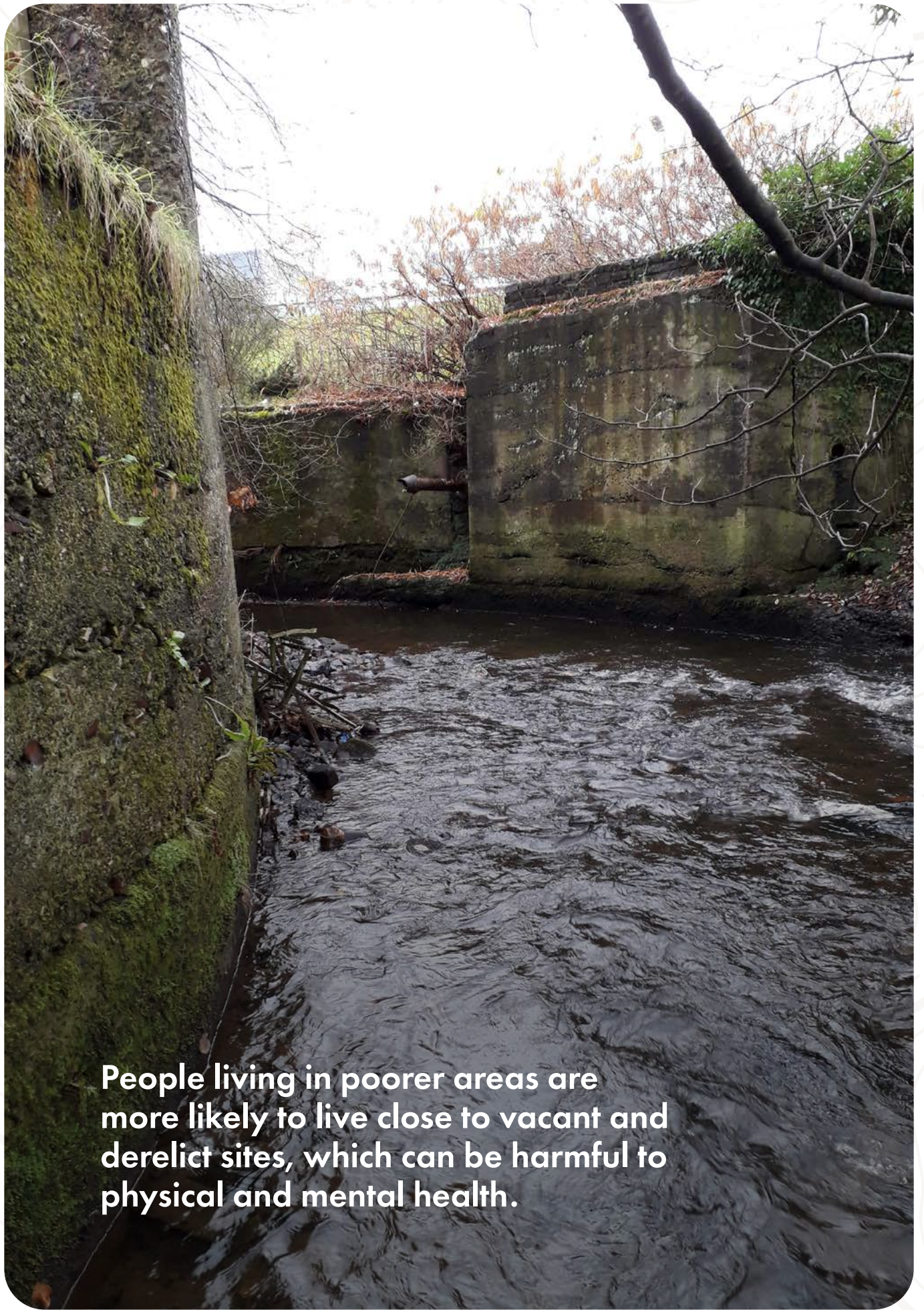
The Vacant and Derelict Land Taskforce

In October 2020 the Vacant and Derelict Land Taskforce published a series of recommendations to support productive re-use of land. This followed two years of work analysing the challenge of vacant land.

Time for a refresh

Four years since the publication of the Taskforce recommendations, the need to re-use land productively has intensified. [The Scottish Land Commission has commissioned Ryden to:](#)

- enable us to evaluate progress in tackling Vacant and Derelict Land
- to share good practice and successful approaches to land re-use
- to identify where further focus may be needed.



People living in poorer areas are more likely to live close to vacant and derelict sites, which can be harmful to physical and mental health.

Main findings

Re-use of Vacant and Derelict Land in Scotland

There has been significant progress with productive re-use of land in recent years.

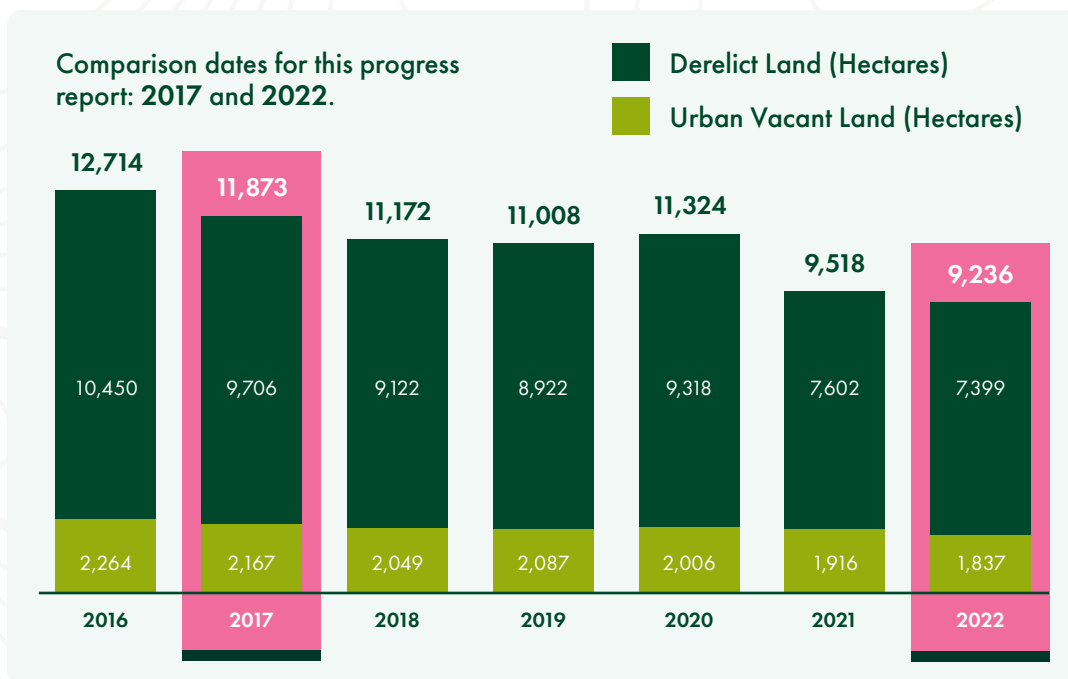
- A steady decline in VDL (the amount of land registered down 27% 2016-2022)
- High percentage of sites re-used for housing (51% of vacant and derelict sites)
- Challenging sites being re-used (20% since 2020) – the driver of this success is outlined below
- Re-use of sites funded by a mix of public and private capital.

Re-use is steady, but VDL is still a persistent issue. 50% of Scotland’s population lives within one kilometre of a VDL site, and the situation is markedly worse in areas high on the index of multiple deprivation. While housing has played a major role in re-use of VDL, cuts to the affordable housing supply programme coupled with a slowdown in private housebuilding is a serious concern – this is discussed further in *supporting private sector re-use of brownfield land*.

Our research highlights a danger that there are increased numbers of buildings in town and city centres that lie empty due to changes in shopping and work patterns. There is a need to be proactive to prevent a new legacy of VDL – discussed in adopting a wellbeing approach to land and investment decisions.

Overall, the research highlights that maintaining the recent progress on re-using vacant and derelict sites is likely to be challenging given tougher financial and market conditions.

Vacant and Derelict Land Reuse: Progress Report 2024, Ryden



Source: Scottish Government SVDLS 2022



The DUSTEs – the benefits of a targeted approach

The Taskforce identified a challenging group of VDL sites – the DUSTEs (Derelict Urban Sites) - urban sites unused (since 2000 or earlier). DUSTEs typically require remediation and are in poorer areas with less potential for economic re-use.

The Commission identified these sites and mapped them, drawing attention to their long-term dereliction and the harm that they cause local populations and creating a searchable online map of the then 589 sites.

Since then, 20% of DUSTEs have been re-used while a further 53 have been removed from the register having been naturalised. This demonstrates the benefit of having clear accessible information on the location of sites and their potential for re-use. Prioritising re-use of the most harmful and problematic sites has led to significant success.

Key takeaway: Since 2020, 20% of DUSTEs have been re-used while a further 53 have been removed from the register having been naturalised.

Supportive policy environment

Since publication of the Taskforce report there have been significant positive developments in land use and economic policy supporting land re-use:

National Planning Framework 4

The new National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4). NPF4 has two clear overriding objectives – to deliver net zero and to support biodiversity net gain. For urban development, this requires changes to the new places we create – land and buildings have to be re-used to create higher density 20-minute neighbourhoods.

Infrastructure Investment Plan

The Infrastructure Investment Plan (IIP) sets out priorities for major capital investment for five years to 2026, prioritising net zero. It provides a use hierarchy with re-use having precedence over new build.

National Economic Transformation Strategy

The strategy sets out plans to move to a wellbeing economy. Key elements are the transition to net zero and reducing inequality with land re-use an important part of the strategy.

Town Centre Action Plan Review

The review highlighted the changing nature of town centres. The decline of traditional retail was accelerated during the pandemic. Town centre living is key to regeneration and re-use.

Scotland's Biodiversity Strategy

The strategy sets out an aim for Scotland to be nature positive by 2030 and the urgent need to act decisively to address the twin crises of biodiversity loss and climate change.

Future policy reforms

Reform of Compulsory Purchase Orders and introduction of Compulsory Sales Orders

The Scottish Government has committed to review and reform Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) legislation in the Programme for Government, and to consider the proposal for Compulsory Sales Orders (CSOs). CPOs and CSOs have the potential to enable re-use of vacant and derelict land and buildings.

Masterplan Consent Areas

Masterplan Consent Areas (MCAs) are a mechanism to enable development. They could provide certainty for investors and support re-use of brownfield sites by providing a clear development plan.

Positive outcomes from Taskforce

Two notable positive successes that were Taskforce recommendations which will support re-use of VDL are:

King's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer Ownerless Property Transfer Scheme

The King's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer (KLTR) launched its Ownerless Property Transfer Scheme (OPTS) this March. OPTS can transfer ownerless properties to community groups who demonstrate the ability to bring vacant land or properties back into use in the public interest. The scheme is a direct result of work by the Scottish Land Commission with the KLTR and provides a tool to increase community ownership and productive re-use of land and buildings.

Scottish Vacant and Derelict Land Hub

The first recommendation of the VDL Taskforce was to Make Better Use of Data to Drive Decisions. This stated:

“The information on the Register should be fully digitised and brought together in a publicly accessible, map-based format. This should be presented in an accessible and engaging way and linked to information about funding sources and reuse potential to help promote investment opportunities to commercial, philanthropic and social impact investors.”

This summer, the Scottish Government launched the Scottish VDL Hub providing an online, searchable map that makes VDL sites visible as an asset for re-use.

Areas requiring further work

While there has been steady progress with re-use of vacant and derelict land over the past four years, some key areas require further action to maintain momentum on land re-use. These are set out below:

Support to enable land re-use by private developers

Scotland has a strong recent track record in re-use of VDL supported by funds allocated to local authorities. Public policy now provides a clear focus on land and buildings re-use to reduce carbon emissions and improve public health. Yet it is less risky and more profitable to develop on greenfield sites. Switching new housing to brownfield sites will be a significant challenge – there needs to be support to make this change.

Options to support land and building re-use include:

- A fund to support private developers to re-use land, making developments viable
- The public sector taking a more active role in land remediation and assembly
- Reform of land and buildings tax to incentivise land and building re-use
- Wider use of land assembly tools such as CPOs to support land and building re-use.



CASE STUDY

Bangour Village Hospital, West Lothian

A large former hospital (closed 1991). In 2023 the current owner received planning permission for phase 1 – 400 homes.

The site is large and complex, with a significant number of listed buildings and mature trees being retained in re-development. When complete, Bangour Village will provide:

- Over 1,000 homes
- A new commercial and retail centre
- A primary school re-using an A Listed building
- A district heating system
- Management and improvement of landscape and woodland including re-planting trees
- De-culverting and nature-based solutions to flooding
- Public access and footpath links
- Affordable housing on site.

While the final outcomes from the re-use will be positive, redevelopment has taken over 30 years. Could more be done to de-risk publicly owned sites? How can we level the playing field to support building and land re-use over greenfield development?

Long term regional funding to support land re-use

Five Scottish councils receive annual allocations from the Vacant and Derelict Land Fund. This fund has wider benefits than the cash invested, bringing a corporate focus to land re-use and increasing the capacity to develop plans and draw in other resources.

Challenge funds can be problematic- resource is wasted competing for funding while their link to specific projects prevents their use on long-term complex projects such as town centre regeneration.

Challenge funds could be replaced by long term funding, enabling groupings of local authorities to take a strategic approach to VDL re-use. If a new regional fund is provided, it should consider social benefit and community wealth building as core criteria.

A strategic regional fund could:

- Be administered by City Regions
- Prioritise land uses based on Regional Land Use Partnerships
- Use Regional Spatial Strategies as a basis to plan for land and building re-use.

Glasgow City Region

SPOTLIGHT

Glasgow City Region (GCR) has a significant legacy of VDL sites close to communities. GCR is taking a strategic approach to developing solutions for productive re-use of these sites. With 1600 sites covering 3200ha, it had to decide how to prioritise sites for re-use. Sites were selected based on:

- Over 1 ha
- Urban sites
- Sites without development plans.

This narrowed the list down to 263 sites. It has now commissioned an analysis of:

- Best future use
- Barriers to productive re-use
- Groupings of interventions for site types – services, access, flood alleviation, decontamination.

GCR will then develop a business case for groupings of sites and talk to major landowners about a collaborative approach to re-use.

Long term regional funding would allow GCR to take a more comprehensive approach to developing productive re-uses for those priority sites.

A report with further information on these sites, the barriers to re-use, potential re-uses and any funding gaps is expected to be published shortly by Glasgow City Region.

A wellbeing approach to investment decisions

If decisions on buildings are made purely on financial return, it is generally cheaper to build new than to re-use an existing building or site.

Land use decisions have wider impacts than financial return – closing a school in a town centre will impact how people feel about their area and will damage the local economy.

While land use will always be fluid, there are steps that public land and building owners can take to limit the creation of a new legacy of vacant and derelict land.

The Commission previously published guidance on a wellbeing approach to decisions on land and buildings.

A **wellbeing approach to public decisions on land and buildings** would support building re-use and limit the creation of new vacant land and buildings. This could be supported by:

- Supplementary guidance that supports public bodies consider wider issues when making decisions on land and buildings
- Guidance on Community Wealth Building.

Support for community led re-use

The pilot led by the Development Trusts Association Scotland and Scottish Land Commission demonstrated the impact of providing early stage pre-feasibility support to communities. Small sites often have a disproportional impact on local communities, who are also well-placed to lead regeneration but need expert support and capacity.

The Community Land Hub led by Community Land Scotland (CLS) also found a strong desire for community re-use of land and buildings, especially in lower income neighbourhoods. But there are barriers to community ownership and re-use of VDL including fragmented ownership of sites, a lack of expert support for urban communities and a complex legislative landscape. These remain gaps that can be addressed.

The CLS report recommended changes to support productive re-use of VDL by urban communities:

- Improved transparency on land ownership with all land to be logged on the Land Registry, which should become open access
- Reform and simplification of community empowerment and right to buy legislation
- Expert support for urban communities looking to re-use land equivalent to that provided for rural buy outs in the Highlands and Islands.

Supporting communities can lead to positive re-use of land and buildings – particularly the smaller sites that are most harmful.

National support to re-use VDL as greenspace

The importance of access to nature and green space became clear during covid, as did inequalities in access depending on where people lived and their re-use of VDL has the potential to widen access to nature networks if there is a programme of work to turn derelict sites into green space. This would provide health and wellbeing benefits.

Nature-based solutions and the restoration of nature are vital to mitigating climate change. VDL re-use can support delivery of the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy (SBS) and Scotland's National Climate Adaptation Plan (SNAP). But re-using VDL as greenspace has challenges – it can be expensive, while owners with unrealistic ideas on site value may stall plans.

Given the benefits green space provides, there is a case for a national programme to support local authorities, communities and landowners to convert VDL into greenspace.



Levern Water Restoration Project

CASE STUDY

This project restored parts of a small river which flows through East Renfrewshire and Glasgow. A former council depot had become degraded land. It now provides enhanced biodiversity and access to green space and has restored blue and green networks in East Renfrewshire.

The project:

- Removed barriers to fish migration, enhancing biodiversity
- Provided 380 metres of footpaths – supporting access to nature and enabling active travel
- Planted 600 mature trees were (rainforest) plus 0.75ha wild meadow
- Restored wetland habitat
- Delivered nature based solutions to flooding – providing increased resilience to extreme weather events.

Funding - £1.6 million Water Restoration Fund (SEPA), £1.1 million VDL Fund, £0.1 million Sustrans.

Potential approaches to support re-use

Survey and Analysis of Sites – analysis of VDL sites to identify which are unlikely to be redeveloped. The creation of the Vacant and Derelict Land Hub with its open access map, should help support this. Assessing and filtering sites on a regional basis could help define which could be used for green space.

Prioritisation of Sites for Biodiversity – a regional assessment of the biodiversity value of VDL sites, applying a consistent methodology, could prioritise sites for restoration.

Prioritisation of Sites for Access to Green Space – Glasgow City Council overlaid mapping of vacant land with areas scoring high on the multiple deprivation index, using the information to select sites for nature reserves and green space. Climate Ready Clyde used a similar approach to choose sites for nature-based solutions in areas of flood risk. These approaches could be replicated across Scotland.



Ma tha sibh ag iarraidh lethbhreac den sgrìobhainn seo sa Ghàidhlig, cuiribh post-d gu commsteam@landcommission.gov.scot no cuiribh fòn gu 01463 423 300.

If you would like to request a copy of this document in Gaelic, please email commsteam@landcommission.gov.scot or call 01463 423 300.



SCOTTISH LAND COMMISSION
COIMISEAN FEARAINN NA H-ALBA

Contact us

Scottish Land Commission
An Lòchran
10 Inverness Campus
Inverness
IV2 5NA

 info@landcommission.gov.scot

 01463 423 300

 www.landcommission.gov.scot

Image copyrights

Cover, pages 3, 5, 10, 11 and 12 – East Renfrewshire Council
Page 7 and 8 – Ambassador Group

Published September 2024

Ryden

This is a summary of the Vacant and Derelict Land Reuse: Progress Report 2024, Ryden

Find us on:

