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#### 1

# **Presentation of the DITP**

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## **Summary**

As of January 1, 2020, INSEE counted more than 3 million vacant homes in France1 . These "dormant" homes represent an opportunity for communities often deprived of the growing need for housing, and are a potential alternative to the (costly) construction of new homes. The Zero Vacant Housing tool was launched by the DGALN and beta.gouv.fr to enable local authorities to better identify and contact the owners of these homes.

In this context, the DGALN and beta.gouv.fr asked the DITP's behavioral sciences team, supported by the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), to explore the potential contributions of behavioral sciences to encourage owners to respond to the communications sent to them. The specific objective of the project was **to identify and test solutions to encourage more owners to respond constructively** to the first communications sent by the communities.

The exploration phase of this project made it possible to contextualize and clarify this objective in light of feedback from the communities surveyed and documentary research. This phase highlighted the highly local and heterogeneous nature of the fight against vacancies for communities.

This observation guided this work and, for the solution phase, required the development of **customizable and adaptable solutions for communities.** It quickly became apparent that for this project, there could be no single solution or "perfect first communication."

To address these challenges, a **practical guide** has been developed in partnership with volunteer communities to help communities:

· create impactful communications that apply the key principles of

behavioral sciences to address the barriers identified during the exploration phase (barriers that concern official communications and barriers specific to the vacancy context); • adapt these communications to their contexts and priorities; • convince hierarchies and elected officials, if necessary, of the importance of modifying (sometimes in depth) the communications sent to owners.

The feedback collected and the first tests carried out indicate that: • The guide seems to have been

used by the communities in the process of writing and validating their letters; • The levers which aim in particular to make the letters simple and attractive seem to

have

been widely adopted;

• The return rates reported by the communities seem to confirm the potential of the recommended levers, and support in particular the potential effect of simple, attractive letters, highlighting the guarantees and support available. The analyses that can be carried out are nevertheless still limited by the small number of campaigns and the great variability of the contexts. The ZLV tool should make it possible, thanks to its monitoring functionalities, to replicate the analyses carried out here, to confirm the trends observed, and finally to refine the advice given to the communities.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> INSEE (2020), 37 million homes in France as of January 1, 2020. Available at: https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4985385

## 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Context

More than **3 million** homes were vacant in France on 1 January 2020, representing 8.4% of all French homes 2. This represents an average annual growth of 1.3%, and a staggering increase of 55% since 2005. In addition, estimates suggest that more than 1.1 million of them have been vacant for more than two years in the private sector, and that more than 700,000 have been vacant for more than four years 3.

Vacant housing is problematic in several ways. First, there is a great need for housing across France and putting vacant housing back on the market is a "real alternative to urban sprawl4", allowing us to revitalise areas that are often deprived of the growing need for housing. Empty properties also have negative effects on the housing market, by increasing prices and reducing the accessibility of housing.

Additionally, research shows that vacant properties have negative impacts on the surrounding community, such as decreasing the value of neighbouring properties, and increasing crime rates and fire risks . 5 A recent study also linked the density of vacant properties in urban areas to adverse health effects on children. Children living near vacant properties tend to have higher blood lead levels (BLL) due to the dust that accumulates in vacant properties . 6

Reducing the number of vacant housing units is therefore a major public policy issue in France, as elsewhere.

### 1.2. Government strategy

In order to address this challenge, the government launched a National Plan to Combat Vacant Housing in January 20207. This plan, led by the Ministry of Housing and the Réseau

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> INSEE (2020), 37 million homes in France as of January 1, 2020. Available at: https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4985385

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> IGF <u>http://www.observationsociete.fr/modes-de-vie/logement-modevie/le-boom-des-logements-vacants.html</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> National plan to combat vacant housing (2021). Available at: https://www.ecologie\_gouv.fr/plannational-fight-against-vacant-housing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Center on Urban Poverty and Community Development (2017). Exploring the Relationship Between Vacant and Distressed Properties and Community Health and Safety.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Castro, I., Larsen, D., Hruska, B., Parsons, P., Palmer, C., & Gump, B (2019). Variability in the spatial density of vacant properties contributes to background lead (Pb) exposure in children.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> National plan to combat vacant housing (2021). Available at: https://www.ecologie.gouv.fr/plan-national-fight-against-vacant-housing

National Network of Communities Mobilized Against Vacant Housing (RNCLV), defines three key strategies to drastically reduce the number of vacant properties in France:

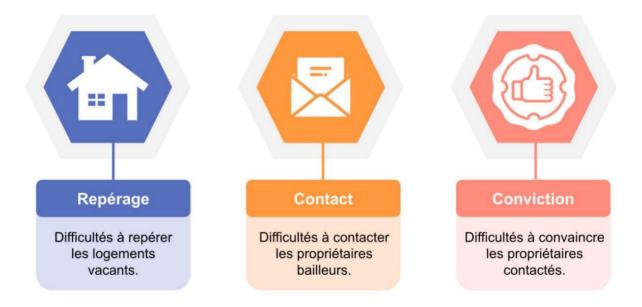
- 1. **Identify** vacant housing using previously untapped data.
- 2. **Encourage** rental by taking into account the point of view of owners of vacant housing.
- 3. **Requisition** vacant housing, particularly in areas under strain, where incentives to owners, particularly legal entities (banks, insurance companies, financiers) have failed.

In particular, these three strategies will be implemented by supporting and providing new tools to communities to enable them to identify vacant housing, characterize the profile of owners and adapt their communications.

## 1.3. The Zero Vacant Housing tool

The first of these new tools is the *Zero Vacant Housing (ZLV) platform*, which allows local authorities to 1) identify vacant housing, 2) contact owners, and 3) track files. This tool is currently being deployed by the DGALN and beta gouv.fr, adopting a "State Start-Up" approach.

During its development work, the ZLV team noted that the communities and operators of the National Housing Agency (Anah), even those most mobilized on the subject, were faced with three levels of difficulties:



The ZLV tool provides a practical solution to the first of these difficulties. However, the team realized, through contact with the communities piloting the tool, that the response rates

owners often remained weak, and difficulties persisted in contacting and convincing owners of vacant housing.

## 1.4. Project objectives

In order to respond to this challenge of "conviction" , The DGALN and beta.gouv.fr asked the DITP, which contacted the BIT, to explore the potential contributions of behavioral sciences to encourage owners to respond to communications sent to them, and to contact the administration.

## 1.5. Methodology

This project took place in 4 phases, following the ILO methodology:



targeting phase, organized around interviews with project stakeholders and an initial research phase to define the objectives and outlines of the project;



An **exploration** phase , which aimed to explore the context of real estate vacancy in depth in order to identify the obstacles that prevent owners from putting their properties back on the market as well as the levers that could be used to remedy the obstacles identified. The diagnostic report summarizes the main lessons of this phase;



A **solution phase**, during which were developed in co-creation with the DGALN, DITP and partner communities (see section 3 of this report) prototypes of standard communications as well as a practical guide intended for communities to support them in their contact with owners:



A **test** phase that aimed to understand the usefulness of the guide for communities in their contact with owners as well as to analyze, for initial contact campaigns, the relative potential of different behavioral levers to increase the impact of letters on owners. This report summarizes the main lessons from the solution and test phases.

#### Boundaries

In order to evaluate the solutions provided by this project, it would have been ideal to conduct a large-scale evaluation of the impact of the different levers. However, the methodology had to be adapted to the great heterogeneity of the territories and their priorities, and to the relatively small number of letters sent.

This report therefore takes stock of the impact of the solution that was developed, and

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proposes avenues of research for future work that would seek to rigorously test the causal impact of certain levers.

## 2. Lessons learned from the exploration phase

## 2.1. Target population

The targeting phase made it possible to define the specific contours of the project as well as to identify the characteristics common to owners of vacant housing, as established by previous studies:



## Répartition égale entre les sexes

49% de femmes



## Plutôt âgé

48% plus de 65 ans et 30% 50-64 ans



### Plutôt aisé

34% font partie des 20% des ménages français ayant les revenus les plus élevées



## Proche du logement

71% des logements sont situés dans le département de résidence de leurs propriétaires



## Ont plusieurs logements

Un tiers détiennent 4 propriétés ou plus

## 2.2. Diagnosis of behavioral brakes and levers

The diagnosis revealed that there were different types of barriers limiting the engagement of owners with the communications currently sent by the regions. These barriers

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> BVA (2015). Study on vacant housing. Report of November 16, 2015; DHUP (2020). Key figures relating to the housing vacancy.

can be summarized into two broad categories9:

- First, barriers related to the communications themselves, which are found in many official
  communications. These barriers are common, but can be exacerbated by contextual barriers, for
  example if a process is particularly complex, or a source of anxiety.
   For example, in some
  communications sent to owners, it can be difficult to
  understand the message and the action required.
  - The communication examples studied also showed that sometimes the communication lacked attractiveness.
- Then, **obstacles related to the issue of vacant housing management.** Indeed, it quickly became apparent that the response rates to the first communications were largely affected by: significant informational and
  - motivational barriers, such as a lack of knowledge of the support available and the advantages of putting the property back on the market for the owner and the community.
  - structural barriers such as difficult family situations or financial difficulties that prevent owners of vacant housing from put them back on the market.



# 2.3 Point of vigilance: the great variability of situations suggests solutions to variable dimensions

The exploration phase revealed a great heterogeneity in the vacancy rates and mobilisation of local authorities across the national territory. In metropolitan France, the available data indicate that the vacancy rate varies from 1.2% at the lowest (Hauts-de-Seine) to 10.9% at the highest

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> View the exploration report for the details of the barriers and the analysis of the behavioral levers likely to respond to them.

top (Creuse).10 Some territories are very mobilized and proactive (such as the territories of Vire and Strasbourg which participated in the first phase of the ZLV project), others are for the moment less facing this issue. There is also a significant diversity of reasons for vacancy (financial difficulties, problems of joint ownership and other complex family situations, major works to be carried out, etc.)11.

Interviews with local authorities in this exploration phase also allowed the authors to understand the central role of local authorities and their expertise in the local context in addressing owners of vacant housing: communications and support available to owners are defined and implemented at the local rather than national level.

These variabilities are important to grasp in the context of work to equip communities against vacancies. The highly local nature of the fight against vacancies as well as the disparities in terms of both context and profiles and motivations of owners of vacant housing indicated that the behavioral obstacles identified (see above) could not be resolved through a single solution. As mentioned in the diagnostic report, **there is no single solution or "perfect first communication".** 

An essential aspect of the work within the framework of the project was therefore to learn lessons from the experiences of stakeholders in territories already mobilized but also to propose possible solutions that could be adapted to less equipped or experienced regions as well as to contexts where vacancy rates differ greatly.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> INSEE (2020), 37 million homes in France as of January 1, 2020. Available at: https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4985385

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> See the exploration report.

## 3. Solutions

#### 3.1 Activities

Rather than aiming to produce a single solution for communities, such as a standard letter, the DGALN, beta.gouv.fr, the DITP and the BIT have decided to create a "toolbox" to help communities improve their contacts with owners while adapting their approach to the local context and their means.

This toolkit was developed on the basis of:

- · lessons from the exploration phase;
- roadmaps of the communities participating in ZLV support, in particular to better identify their difficulties in contacting owners as well as in their use of the ZLV tool;
- ZLV data made available, in particular on the types of housing (cadastral classification, age, size, etc.) and owners (age, single or multiple owners, etc.) in order to better understand the specific barriers to vacancy likely to be at work in the communities taking part in ZLV support;
- a review of simplification guides and the ILO's experience in administrative simplification and work to optimize the impact of official communications.

These lessons were supplemented by semi-structured interviews with 5 volunteer communities (Communauté de Communes Vallées et Plateau d'Ardenne, Roubaix, Vesoul, Porte du Hainaut and la Meuse), which allowed the authors to better understand their experiences in contacting owners of vacant housing, present them with the idea of a guide for use by communities and target their expectations for such a tool.

### 3.2 The guide for communities

The guide "Contacting owners of vacant housing: a practical guide for communities" was therefore created to respond to 3 issues identified by communities and the DGALN during the diagnostic and solutions phase:

 Equip communities to create more impactful communications that apply the principles of behavioral science to motivate owners to respond;
 Allow communities to adapt communications to their context, their priorities

in terms of housing as well as the type of owner contacted;

 Allow agents responsible for contact campaigns to convince their hierarchy and their elected representatives, if necessary, of the importance of modifying, sometimes in depth, the communications sent to owners.

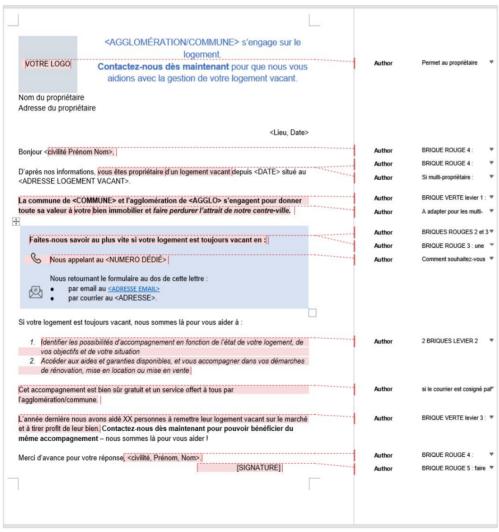
To meet these challenges, the guide is structured around 3 axes: • Fully

editable and commented letter, questionnaire and envelope templates to allow communities to visualize what communications that apply the guide's advice look like and to allow them to easily adapt the templates to their needs;

- An explanatory guide to the behavioral levers that can be used to create impactful communications. A system of "bricks" has been created to help communities build effective and adapted letters (see below);
- A detailed step-by-step guide to assist community agents in creating and tracking their letters, in addition to the ZLV tool. This step-by-step guide aims to enable agents to visualize the steps that precede and follow the sending process, as well as understand how to refine their letters as they take action.

#### contact.

• It also provides advice on data collection and analysis of return and activation rates based on the letters sent, in order to enable communities that wish to do so to obtain objective data to identify the most effective levers in their context and in light of their priorities. Finally, it contains advice on how to apply the lessons from the guide to reminder letters.



mail template

To meet the challenges of equipping communities, adapting communications and raising awareness among community administrations about the use of behavioral levers, a system of modular "bricks" was created:

"Red bricks" to make official communications more effective by simplifying them, personalizing them, legitimizing the contact and turning them towards the expected action of the contacted owner. These bricks aim to address the barriers identified during the diagnostic phase that concern all **official communications**. The guide lists 7 types of red bricks for which behavioral literature and previous ILO work indicate that their use can increase the impact of official communications.



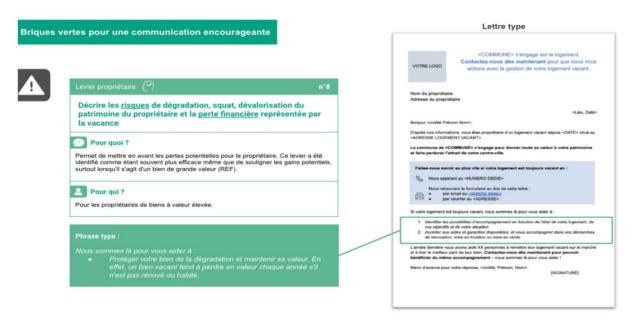
"Green bricks" to address barriers specific to the context of real estate vacancy. These bricks represent behavioral levers that are likely to be effective when deployed in the context of contacting owners of vacant housing. This involves adapting key lessons from behavioral sciences applied to the specific context of vacancy. For example, describing in the communication to the owner the risks of squatting or deterioration of their property that vacancy and/or the financial loss associated with it represent. In this case, the key concept of "loss aversion12" was applied to the context of vacancy. These bricks are divided into 3 distinct categories:

<sup>12</sup> Tversky, A. & Kahneman, D. (1981). The framing of decisions and the psychology of choice. *Science*, 211(4481), 453-458.

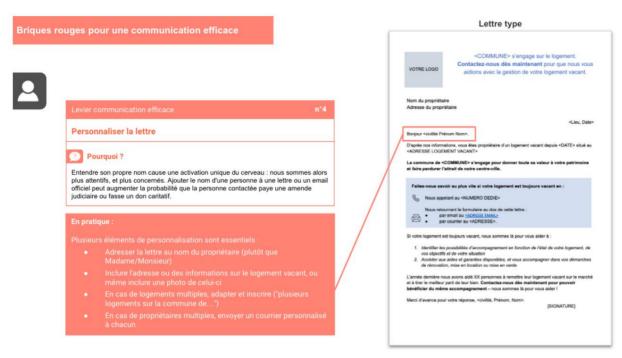


#### 3 categories of green bricks

For each of the 7 red bricks and 16 green bricks, the guide has a dedicated page, presented in the form of an explanatory card that allows the reader to understand when and how to use these bricks. The brick concerned is also put into context in a letter template to allow the reader to visualize how this brick can be deployed in practice.



Example of a "green brick" page



Example of a "red brick" page

## 3.3 Dissemination of the guide

The authors presented a first version of the guide during two workshops with a total of ten communities. These workshops allowed them to compare the prototype with community agents and to target additional modifications to be made to it. Following these interviews, for example, recommendations were added on reminder letters, a key step in contacting owners and a particular concern of the communities interviewed.

The authors then made an online presentation of the guide to around thirty communities, in order to disseminate the lessons of the guide to the communities that benefit from ZLV support and to answer their questions.13 This presentation was recorded and, with the guide, put online in order to be accessible to all communities that benefit or will benefit from ZLV support.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Participants in the presentation also had the opportunity to benefit from personalized support so that they could try to apply the recommendations of the guide to their communications and have personalized feedback on their new mailings.

Vidéo de présentation - 30 min' - 28.07.2021



The guide and its presentation video are freely available online .

They are intended to be shared with all communities involved in the fight against vacancies.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> https://zlv.notion.site/Guide-pratique-Courriers-BIT-8ddc5f022f8c499b8f6cc76b2dbefeb7

## 4. Feedback and initial tests

#### 4.1 Summary of activities

This phase sought to understand how communities used the guide and the scope it is likely to have in helping communities obtain constructive feedback from the owners contacted. This phase also sought, through initial waves of mailings, to identify empirical leads on the behavioral levers most likely to increase the rate of return from owners contacted.

#### To do this, the authors:

- started encoding the letters sent before and after the publication of the guide in August 2021 to observe the frequency of use of each lever;
- conducted an analysis of the correlations between levers used and return rates15 as reported in the platform;
   conducted
- additional interviews with 2 communities (Roubaix and Grenoble) that participated in the development and testing of the guide. These interviews allowed us to explore the experiences and perceptions of the usefulness of the guide, both in terms of the level of return from owners and in terms of their process for creating their letters. They also allowed the authors to identify avenues for improving the guide.

These activities provided some answers to the following questions:

- What are the levers preferred by the communities ? Do
- the levers used in the letters sent before and after the publication of the guide differ? This could indicate that the guide had an influence on the choice of these levers; Are certain levers used correlated with the return rates? An analysis of the correlations between the use of the levers and the return rate allowed the authors to identify trends in the potential effectiveness of certain levers. The scope of this exercise is nevertheless limited by the limited number of letters available for analysis as well as by the nature of the exercise itself, which does not allow the causal effect of a lever on the owners' responses to be isolated. (See section 4.3 for more details);
- Are the characteristics of housing and owners correlated with the return rates obtained? This
  would indeed make it possible to identify initial leads on housing or owner "profiles" that would be
  more likely to be mobilized by the letters sent, and therefore help during segmentation exercises.

### 4.2 Encoding and analysis of mail

In order to identify the levers favored by the communities and understand whether there was a change in the use of the levers before and after the publication of the guide, the authors analyzed all the letters available on the ZLV platform in November 2021. At that time, the ZLV platform

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> This rate is a binary variable taking 1 when the return is classified as "Activated" or "Neutral Return" and 0 otherwise. A "Activated" feedback corresponds to a positive or constructive response from the owner towards the support offered, for example, contacting them to request more information. "Neutral" feedback includes several responses, including those to indicate that the accommodation is no longer vacant or that the person contacted is no longer the owner. These responses allow communities to update their databases and better understand the extent of the vacancy in their context.

included 54 mailing campaigns, which took place between April 2020 and October 2021, carried out by 17 communities.

Among these 54 campaigns, the following had to be excluded:

11 campaigns for which the mailings were missing on the ZLV platform;
 3 campaigns for which the return data was missing;
 and 5 campaigns for which the return rates were associated with at least 2 different mailings (not allowing a link to be made between levers used and return rates for each mailing).

Thus, **35 letter templates** sent by 13 communities between April 2021 and October 2021 were able to be analyzed. The questionnaires attached to the letters could not be analyzed.

Of the 35 letters available, only 16 contained a questionnaire viewable on the ZLV platform. This did not represent a sufficient sample to be able to conduct a revealing statistical analysis (even purely descriptive).

The analytical reading of these 35 letter models made it possible to establish the levers used by the communities, their frequency of use in the sample (i.e. how many communities used a particular lever) as well as to identify whether the content of the letters appeared to be different for the 21 mailing campaigns that took place before the publication of the guide and the 14 that took place after.

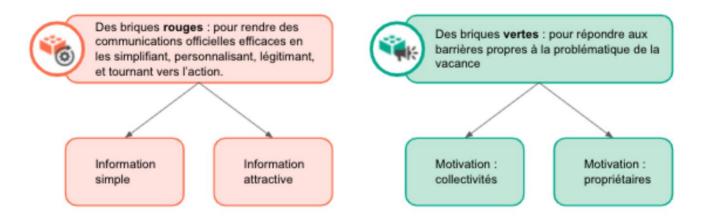
#### **Encoding of mails**

The analytical reading of these letters consisted of a categorisation of the arguments used by each letter according to the 18 "bricks" (red and green) identified by the guide as being likely to increase the impact of communications sent by the communities. For example, if a letter was addressed personally to the owner and referred to the exact address of his accommodation, this letter received a score of 1 in the "personalisation of the letter" category. Conversely, if the letter was addressed to "Madam, Sir" and did not specify the exact address of the accommodation identified as vacant, the letter received a score of 0. This exercise made it possible to systematically identify the levers used by the communities and to count their respective frequency of use.

The authors also grouped the bricks into 4 broad categories in order to be able to aggregate the use of certain levers and create a score to evaluate their use (see section 4.2 for more information). These 4 broad categories include: • Levers relating to simplification, which correspond

- to the red bricks that recommend sending short communications (less than one page) and without administrative jargon;
- Levers relating to **the attractiveness** of information, which correspond to the red bricks that recommend personalizing the mail, having a clear and visible call to action and having the mail signed by an influential messenger in the context of the community; Levers relating to the
- **consequences of the vacancy for communities,** which correspond to the first category of green bricks in the guide for communities.
  - This category of levers highlights the motivations and challenges of the community in the fight against vacancies and brings together recommendations such as highlighting the potential enhancement of the community's image represented by putting vacant housing back on the market or highlighting the impact of vacancies on the quantity of available housing.

Levers relating to the consequences of the vacancy for the owner himself. These levers correspond to the second category
of green bricks in the guide which aims to highlight the positive consequences for the owner of accepting the support
offered to him by the community to put his property back on the market or conversely the negative consequences for his
property and his assets that the vacancy represents.



## 4.3 Results - using the guide

#### The "red" levers have been relatively well adopted

To understand whether and how the levers proposed in the guide were used, the authors observed for each type of lever the proportion of letters that used it. In order to examine whether the levers proposed in the guide were used, they compared these frequencies before and after August 2021, that is, before and after sharing the guide with the communities.

These before/after comparisons are only indicative; nevertheless, they can help identify some interesting trends. The results are presented in Tables 1 (which summarize the frequencies of use of the levers that correspond to the "red" bricks in the guide) and 2 (for the "green" bricks).

Table No. 1: Frequencies16 of lever use (red bricks)	Before the guide	After the guide
Score: Simple Information	1.7	2.6
Avoid administrative jargon	81%	93%
Less than one page	62%	86%
Respect the graphic rules	31%	64%

 $<sup>^{16}</sup>$  In the tables, a frequency of 100% means that a lever was used in all letters and, conversely, a score of 0% means that none of the analyzed mails used it.

The "score" ranks allow us to compare in an aggregated manner the use of levers according to the 4 categories defined above (attractiveness levers, community motivation levers and owner motivation levers). For each lever used that falls into 1 of these categories, the mail obtains 1 point. It is then assigned a score representing the sum of these points by category. The scores reported in the following tables are the averages of these scores for the campaigns that took place before and after the distribution of the guide.

Simple GDPR Mention17	0%	14%
Score: Attractive Information	2.2	2.7
Signed by an influential messenger	67%	64%
Includes a clear call to action	67%	68%
Important information stands out visually	43%	79%
Personalized mail (name + address)	41%	61%
N	21	14

This table shows that following the introduction of the guide, the levers corresponding to simplification and attractiveness - widely highlighted in the guide as "essential levers" - seem to have been adopted: The "simple information" score goes from 1.7 before the publication of the guide to 2.6 after and the "attractiveness of information" score goes from 2.2 to 2.7. Some comparisons before / after the publication of the guide are particularly revealing of this adoption:

- Proportion of mailings of less than one page: 62% ÿ 86%
- Proportion of letters highlighting important information visually: 43% ÿ 79%
- Proportion of letters that apply graphic and layout rules to increase the readability of the letter (sufficiently large margins and font sizes, spacing of the text, etc.): 31% ÿ 64%

### "Green" levers seem to be used selectively by communities

#### Concerning the levers which relate to the consequences of the vacancy for the community:

- The most frequently used lever, before and after the publication of the guide (52% versus 50% after) concerns security risks, such as fires or collapses, of vacancy for communities. These concerns are likely to be major issues for communities for which their agents will know perfectly well which elements of the local context to highlight.
- The guide seems to have had a particularly positive impact on the following levers:
  - "highlight the impact of vacancy on the image of the community" : 36 ÿ 46%
  - "Highlighting the support offered by the community" : 29 ÿ 64%,
- An interesting trend concerns references to more global city policies.
  - During the exploration phase, the authors had noted a tendency in letters addressed to
    owners to mention, more or less at length, the local authority's housing policy. Often,
    these mentions were not directly relevant to the owner and were more a matter of political
    manifesto than a letter requiring a response from the owner. During the guide's
    dissemination activities, the local authorities had been encouraged to reduce these

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Most of the communications analyzed did not contain the questionnaire, on which it was recommended to insert the short GDPR notices

mentions as much as possible. The reduction in the proportion of letters that made this type of argument (70 to 57%) seems to indicate that this advice was followed.

- Certain levers seem to remain unpopular with communities:
  - A small proportion (increasing from 3 to 18%) of campaigns refer to the costs of vacancy on the environment and/or the environmental benefits of a

put back on the market (for example, it helps to avoid artificialisation of land). • A small proportion of campaigns (which went from 10 to 7%) refer to the **tax on vacant housing.** This low proportion is in line with the sensitive nature of this lever which underlines the coercive power of the community rather than its benevolent support18.

The guide also emphasizes **the use of green bricks that directly concern the owner.** Owners are more likely to respond to the call made to them if the consequences of taking action/not taking action are tangible to them. For example, the prospect of personal financial gain or loss can be a strong motivator to encourage or discourage behavior.19

- The proportion of campaigns that used this type of argument20 remained stable (33 to 36% for
  arguments around potential financial gains and 57% for losses).
   The presentation of the
  available support as being personalized (adapted to the owner's expectations) was adopted in 64% of campaigns after the
  quide was distributed (compared to 29% before).
- No campaign used two levers recommended by the guide:
  - highlight the beneficial impact of an energy renovation on the sale price or location21.
  - use testimonials from owners who have benefited from the support of the community22.

This study also identified an interesting avenue for additional leverage: one of the communities stressed in its letters the limited time during which its support is available. Highlighting the rarity of an opportunity is a lever frequently used to encourage people to take action. It could therefore be interesting to encourage communities to test this lever.

Table No. 2: Frequencies of use of levers (green bricks)	Before the guide	After the guide
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Several communities interviewed during the project expressed reluctance to "impose" this burden on their citizens. The guide also highlights the risk of a rebound effect if this lever is used in a context where the tax is little or not applied. 19 Loewenstein, G., & Adler, D. (1995). A bias in the prediction of tastes. The Economic Journal, 105(431), 929-937.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> For example, by highlighting the financial gains that could be made by a return to the market and/or by highlighting the financial loss that the vacancy represents for an owner (for example, by highlighting the decrease in the value of a property left vacant)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> A recent study by the DGALN has nevertheless highlighted the impact of a favourable energy label on the sale price of a house or apartment. It might be useful to add this information to the guide, as well as to see with the communities why this lever has not convinced them

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> One community interviewed said they wanted to test this lever in the future but had not received feedback from owners in time to include a testimonial in the letters sent. It is possible that this type of lever will be used in future campaigns, following support provided by the community.

Score: Motivation - communities23	1.2	1.2
Political mention of the community	70%	57%
Highlights the potential enhancement of the community's image/heritage	36%	46%
Highlights the security risks of the vacancy for the community	52%	50%
Highlights the impact on the quantity of available housing	33%	7%
Highlights environmental costs/benefits to the community	3%	18%
Score: Motivation - owners	2.8	2.9
Highlights the impact on individual wealth/financial benefits	33%	36%
Highlights the personalized nature of the support available	29%	64%
Highlights the risks of devaluation of the property/financial loss	57%	57%
Highlights potential costs of taxation	10%	7%
Highlights available guarantees	24%	29%
Highlights the special appeal of the property	33%	0%
Includes "social proof24"	5%	21%
N	21	14

## Usefulness of the guide for communities in their writing of letters

This statistical research was supplemented by 2 interviews which helped to enrich the authors' understanding of the use of the guide by the communities. The opinions of the agents interviewed on the guide as well as perspectives on the use they made of it were notably collected through this means.

These interviews revealed 6 key lessons:

- The importance of equipping communities with the guide from the start of their ZLV support to maximize the chances that the advice will be applied by the communities. One of the two communities had made little use of the recommendations in the guide because its hierarchy and elected officials had already validated a letter template the guide arrived too late for its advice to be taken into account in the writing of the letters.
- For the community that implemented a large part of the guide's recommendations, the elements
  justifying the usefulness of these levers were particularly useful. The agent interviewed
  expressed that these elements allowed her to develop effective arguments

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> This score excludes the "**Political mention of the city**" lever for reasons of consistency. Indeed, unlike the others levers, the use of the latter is encouraging if it tends towards 0%. <sup>24</sup>

Social proof, in this context, represents the mention of the number of owners who have already benefited from the community's support to put their property back on the market. This type of lever aims to allow the owner to visualize the support offered and to motivate him by knowing that other people like him have benefited from the system.

0.09\*

to convince her superiors. Thanks to these arguments, she was able to include a clear and visually striking call to action in the header of the mail and was able to use the city's colors to highlight key information and make the mail more visually attractive.

- Both communities interviewed expressed that they found the "bricks" system useful for building their letters and
  appreciated the variety of levers available as well as the educational explanations on when and how to use them. For the
  community that had already written and validated its letter template, future campaigns could be an opportunity to revise
  the letters and apply certain advice.
- Local authorities have different approaches in their contact with their constituents. One of the local authorities chose to
  ignore the advice on using a friendly tone in the mail and opted for a firmer tone. It stressed that it seemed more
  appropriate but also more effective for a local authority to express itself in this way to its constituents. Conversely, for the
  other local authority, a friendly tone was part of its habits for contacting its constituents. This observation on the difference
  in approaches

communities echoes the lessons of the diagnosis and reinforces the importance of **favoring customizable and adaptable solutions** rather than a single model.

#### 4.4 First results: correlations between levers and return rates

The levers concerning the simplification and attractiveness of information seem promising for creating effective mailings.

In order to identify initial empirical leads on the potential impact of the levers recommended by the guide on the mobilization of owners, the use of the levers was linked to the different return rates obtained for each campaign. To do this, the authors carried out a quantitative analysis (linear regression) to measure the strength and direction of the association between each lever and the return rates.



It is important to note that these associations cannot be interpreted as causal relationships25.

Table No. 3 - Correlations between levers (red bricks) and the return rate			
Mail Features: Simple Information			
Avoid administrative jargon	-0.01		
Less than one page	0.07*		

5

Respect the graphic rules

<sup>25</sup> In particular, since the use of levers is exclusively a matter of choice for communities, it is likely that the use of certain levers is strongly correlated with the characteristics and environment of the communities. In this case, the result of these regressions would be biased (because a difference in the return rate could not be definitively attributed to the use of a lever but could be explained by other factors such as the community's commitment to the vacancy, the existence of other campaigns, the popularity of the messengers, etc.).

Features of the mail: Attractive Information		
Signed by an influential messenger	0.06*	
Includes a clear call to action	0.09*	
Personalized mail (name + address)	0.1*	
N26	5680	

This table shows that the levers associated with the simplification and attractiveness of information are generally positively correlated with the return rates reported by the communities.

• Levers that simplify communication and make it more attractive, such as the "less than one page" lever or the one that concerns the application of certain graphics and layout rules (font size or sufficient margins, for example) are associated with increases in the return rate of 7 and 9 percentage points.

Note that the "Avoid administrative jargon" lever does not seem to have any effect on the return rate.

Levers that aim to make information more attractive, such as having a letter signed by an influential
messenger in the community context, a clear call to action, and personalizing the mail, are
associated with increases in the return rate of 6, 9, and 10 percentage points, respectively.
 The
magnitude of these increases is potentially

significant considering that the average return rate is 11.4%.

The relationship between green levers and return rates is mixed: the use of these levers needs to be explored further with local authorities

Table No. 4 - Correlations between levers (green bricks) and return rates

Characteristics of the letters: Motivation - communities

Mentions the community policy

-0.04\*

Highlights the enhancement of the community's heritage

0.02\*

Highlights security risks of vacancy

0.01

Highlights the impact on the quantity of housing

-0.07\*

Characteristics of the letters: Motivation - owners

Highlights individual impact/financial benefits

-0.01

<sup>-</sup>

The sample (N) contains all mailings for which it was possible to match the return rate with the levers used in the mail sent. The "\*" show coefficients that are statistically different from 0 (p=0.05). All coefficients are the result of a different regression, where the dependent variable is the return rate and the independent variable is the lever in question. All these regressions include the level of community tension as a control variable.

Highlights the personalized nature of the support	0.08*
Highlights the risks of devaluation of the property	0.01
Highlights potential costs of taxation	0.02
Highlights available guarantees	0.04*
Highlights the special appeal of the property	-0.04*
Includes social proof	-0.07*
N27	5680

The first part of this table shows that the levers which highlight the consequences for the community of the vacancy and/or of a return of the property to the market are either correlated

negatively or very little correlated with the return rate. For example, letters that mention city policy are associated with a 4 pp decrease in the return rate, and those that highlight the impact of vacancy on the quantity of housing with a 7 pp decrease. These results are consistent with the intuition communicated in the guide not to favor these levers, but rather to rely on levers directly concerning owners.

The second part of the table shows more mixed correlations between the levers that highlight the consequences of vacancy and/ or a return to the market for the owner and the return rate. For example:

- Letters that mention the **financial risks** of vacancy for the owner, such as mentioning a loss of income on rent collection or a sale, risks of devaluation of the property or even the costs of taxation, are not **correlated with the return rate.** This result contradicts the hypothesis that owners would be the most affected by their potential losses.
- Letters that rely on **the individual benefits of the support offered nevertheless seem promising** (such as letters that mention the personalized nature of the support or the guarantees available). This confirms the hypothesis of a need for support and guidance in the face of the costs and expected complexity of the remarketing process.

# 4.5 Profiles of owners and housing: avenues for reflection on the "profiles" of owners or housing most likely to be mobilized

Targeting communications sent to owners based on the "profile" of the owners and their homes is one of the objectives of the ZLV tool. The LOVAC database of the ZLV platform allows for the 13,499 letters sent28 (across the 54 campaigns in the sample) to have certain precise information on the owner (his age, whether he is a single owner or a

No manual matching between different databases used for the rest of the statistical analysis was necessary. This avoided possible data losses and allowed using more observations than in the previous exercise and thus having more statistical power.

<sup>27</sup> The sample (N) contains all mailings for which it was possible to match the return rate with the levers used in the mail sent. The \*\*\* indicate coefficients that are statistically different from 0 (p=0.05). All coefficients are the result of a different regression, where the dependent variable is the return rate and the independent variable is the lever in question. All these regressions include the level of community tension as a control variable. 28 Since this analysis could only be conducted on a single database (the data for each mailing),

multi-owner, if it is an individual) but also characteristics of the accommodation (cadastral classification, year of construction, start date of the vacancy, etc.).

The available data do not allow us to isolate a causal relationship between some of these characteristics and the return rates obtained by the letters. However, the connection29 in turn between the characteristics of the owner and the accommodation and the return rates30 offers some avenues for reflection:

- Multi-owners appear more likely to respond to communications than single owners (2.8 percentage points more)
- Private owners seem (largely) less likely (-53.7 percentage points) to respond than legal entities (including SCI). An interesting targeting avenue for local authorities could therefore be to target these legal entities. Although this remains to be tested, the effective levers would then probably be different, potentially more focused on financial benefits or linked to the valuation of the property.
- Housing classified as uncomfortable is associated with a higher return rate significant (4.2 additional percentage points).
- The analysis does not, however, reveal **any correlation** between the return rate and the following characteristics: The type of accommodation (whether it is an apartment or a house); whether the accommodation is subject to a vacancy tax, the date of transfer of the accommodation, the number of beneficiaries and the age of the owner.
- The age of the vacancy, the living area and the year of construction are very low correlated, positively, with the return rate.

<sup>29</sup> To do this, 2 linear regressions were carried out. The first uses the characteristics as explanatory variables of housing (Apartment, Housing vacancy tax (THLV or TLV), Multi-owner, Uncomfortable housing, Start of vacancy, Living area, Year of construction, Date of transfer of housing, Vacant housing in the building) and the return rate as the outcome variable. The second regression uses the characteristics of the owner as explanatory variables (Year of birth of the owner, Number of beneficiaries, Type of owner).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> This rate is a binary variable taking 1 when the return is classified as "Activated" or "Neutral return" and 0 otherwise.

## 5. Conclusions and perspectives

#### 5.1 Conclusions

This project aimed to explore the potential contributions of behavioral science to encourage owners to respond to communications sent to them. It focused exclusively on the first communications sent to owners, in the form of letters.

The highly local nature of vacancy and the great heterogeneity of communities in terms of political priorities, resources and contexts (particularly concerning real estate tension) led the authors to develop **customizable and adaptable solutions** for communities rather than a single solution. In response to these challenges, a practical guide was developed, in co-creation with the DGALN, beta.gouv.fr and partner communities, for communities to support them in creating their letters.

The encoding of the mailings and the statistical analysis of the 35 campaigns for which data on the mailings used and return rates obtained were available made it possible to draw the following key lessons:

• The levers relating to the simplification and attractiveness of information ("red bricks") seem to have been adopted by the communities in their letters, and the proportion of letters that used these levers seems to have increased after publication of the guide; • The use of the levers recommended to respond to the specific barriers of vacancy ("green bricks") seems more nuanced, the most promising levers seem to be those that mention the guarantees available and the existence of personalized support.

These lessons reinforce the importance of the highly local nature of the vacancy issue and the priorities and resources of local authorities in the choice of levers used. **Keeping a wide range of potential levers, as proposed in the guide, seems essential to enable local authorities to create letters adapted to their contexts and priorities.** 

The agents interviewed during the qualitative interviews corroborated this recommendation, emphasizing the importance of being able to create letters that "look like" their administrations. These interviews also made it possible to identify avenues for improving the quide, set out below.

#### Ways to improve the guide

• Include several examples of letters to allow communities to better visualize what the application of different levers looks like. It could be particularly interesting, if communities volunteer, to include in the guide letters actually sent by communities that apply the advice in the guide. This would make the advice in the guide more tangible and demonstrate to more reluctant communities that the advice has already been adopted by other communities. • Emphasize the importance of carefully selecting the means of contact provided in communications addressed to owners according to the processing capacities of the communities. For example, for one community interviewed, the inclusion of a telephone number in the means of contact available to owners led to the "loss" of some owners. They called the number, which is not a dedicated number but that of the agent who was not available at the time of their call. They left a

voicemail without identifiable information to allow the agent to contact them again and follow up on the file. The guide should take into account in this recommendation the difference between communities that have a dedicated operator who takes care of contact with owners (for which a dedicated telephone number is more appropriate) and those where an agent takes care of making contact among his other responsibilities.

• Remind communities to indicate the same means of contact in the mail and in the questionnaire if the latter is attached to the mail. Some communities appear to have included the contact details of their dedicated operator in the questionnaire and those of the community agent responsible for the vacancy issue in the mail. This may have been a source of confusion for owners and complicated the monitoring of files between the community and its operator.

### 5.3 Future prospects for letters sent by communities

The statistical analysis appears to support the guide's advice on the importance of **personalizing** mail as much as possible, **simplifying** its content, and **ensuring the readability and attractiveness** of the message through careful layout and graphics, as well as having the mail signed by a messenger considered influential in the community context.31 Indeed, the use of these levers is correlated with higher return rates. The application of "red bricks" in mail should remain a priority for communities wishing to increase the impact of their communications.

Analyses of the impact of green bricks are more mixed, particularly because these bricks have been used less frequently. In order to continue to refine the understanding of their impact, it could be useful to:

- Build on the growing number of observations with the use of ZLV: the more communities benefiting from ZLV support increase, the more observations the database will contain from which statistical studies such as those undertaken in this project could be carried out.
- Conduct targeted A/B tests with partner communities. Communities that wish to do so could send 2 different letter templates to 2 groups of owners of vacant housing in order to robustly identify the most effective levers in their contexts.

In addition, during this project, volunteer communities were invited to submit their letters to the authors of this report in order to provide them with personalized feedback on them. The communities interviewed greatly appreciated this feedback. **Individualized and** personalized support represents a promising way to improve the skills of communities.

on their contacts with the owners. However, such support is expensive. It might be interesting to explore with communities how an intermediary could be found.

For example, the ZLV tool could eventually offer a feature to allow communities to write their letters on the platform and receive automated feedback on them. Similar tools to help administrative agents communicate in writing with their beneficiaries are currently under development.

<sup>31</sup> It should be noted, however, that the scope of this statistical analysis remains limited, due to the limited size of the sample but also due to the very nature of the study, which, unlike the example of an A/B test, does not allow a robust correlation to be established between the levers used by the communities and the return rates obtained.

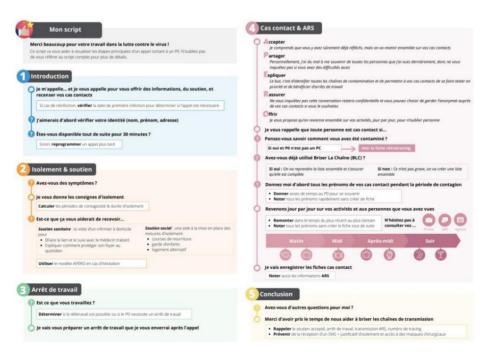
## 5.4 Beyond the guide and the letters

The work of this project focused on the first contact by the communities, in the form of letters. This contact by mail is a practical choice for the communities, both in terms of the resources that can be mobilized (a mailing campaign takes time but once the mailing is done does not require a strong mobilization of the teams, unlike telephone contacts or a fortiori home visits) and in terms of access to the owners' data: the LOVAC database gives them access to the owner's address but not to his telephone number or email address.

However, as noted in the exploration phase, letters are not the most likely means of communication to obtain a response. Letters that appear to come from a state body (with the exception of communications from the tax authorities or the judicial/police authorities) tend to be ignored. If local authority constraints allow, it might be interesting to explore alternative means of contacting owners.

Discussions with local authorities and the DGALN during the project, as well as the experience of the DITP and the BIT in encouraging behaviour, have raised the following avenues for reflection to help local authorities mobilise owners:

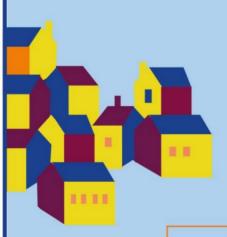
It might be interesting to develop additional tools to help communities reach out to owners, either by phone or by home visit. For example, it might be useful for communities to have **conversation guides** for their agents and dedicated operators that are tailored to the phone context and the context of the in-person visit while being adaptable by communities to their contexts and priorities. These guides could be accompanied **by job aids** to guide them through the process of engaging owners, reminding them of the key steps and important elements to discuss with owners at each stage. This type of conversation guide and job aid could, following the logic of the guide, be based on a framework that brings together key lessons from behavioral science regarding engaging communication that is fully modular and editable so that communities can adapt it.



Example of a conversation guide informed by behavioral sciences - assistance in identifying Covid-19 contact cases (guide developed by the ILO and the DITP for Health Insurance)



Liberté Égalité Fraternité



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