

every home matters

Annual Report 2019 – 2020

June 2020

scottish
empty homes
partnership



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Executive Summary

This is the 10th annual report of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) and covers the period 2019-20. The Partnership is funded by the Scottish Government, and hosted by Shelter Scotland, with the remit to support a wide range of organisations and individuals to bring long-term private sector empty properties back into use.

Over the past year, Empty Homes Officers, supported by the Partnership, reported 1,412 empty properties that have been brought back into use: the highest number ever and an increase of 25% on the second highest figure the previous year. The total number of empty properties brought back into use by Empty Homes Officers is now 5,756, 44% of which have been in the last two years.

Empty homes are brought back into use with different outcomes. From the 15 completed survey returns we established that: 26% were for private rent and 23% for sale. 17% were brought back by council buy-backs, much higher than in previous years. 25% of empty homes reported brought back into use were earmarked for “affordable” use.

There are now 24 empty homes staff working in 21 local authorities, with a further 3 seeking to recruit in the near future. Work continues to encourage and support all 32 local authorities to provide a dedicated empty homes service.

31 of the 32 councils use council tax powers as a means of incentivising owners to bring long-term empty properties into use; the SEHP works with councils to encourage those powers to be used in a nuanced rather than blanket fashion.

The SEHP supports a network of empty homes practitioners through a range of methods: online learning, best practice groups, knowledge hub and an annual conference. At this year’s annual conference a new SEHP brand and website was launched and well-received.

Over the last year the Scottish Parliament’s Local Government and Communities Committee conducted an inquiry into empty homes, and supported the work of the SEHP, saying, “We support the valuable work that the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership provide at a national level and the high quality of the advice, training, guidance and workshops they provide to the network of Scotland’s Empty Homes Officers.”

Within the SEHP, the Scottish Empty Homes Advisory Service was revamped and dealt with 277 queries last year, the majority of which were from owners and people within the community concerned about empty homes.

The report covers the period up to end of March 2020 just as the impact of the coronavirus pandemic was being felt. That has prompted innovative ways of working and new thinking about how bringing empty homes back into use can help drive recovery, themes which will be critical over the next year.

Highlights of the Year

1412

empty homes
reported
back into use

7514

unique page
views to the
website

277

contacts to the
Advice Service

21

councils report
having an empty
homes service

Introduction

The SEHP was set up in 2010 to support a wide range of organisations and individuals to bring long-term private sector empty properties back into use.

Benefits of investing in empty homes work

The benefits to local authorities of investing in empty homes work include:

- Restoring confidence in the property market
- Community Regeneration
- Sustaining fragile communities
- Town Centre Renewal
- Addressing mismatch in housing supply
- Contributing to delivery of housing supply and carbon emission reductions

The SEHP is hosted by Shelter Scotland and funded by the Scottish Government. The report covers the year 2019-20 which is the second year of a three-year contract to deliver the service, with the following objectives:

1. Have a dedicated Empty Homes Officer in every local authority in Scotland;
2. Support the national network of Empty Homes Officers;
3. Encourage councils, Registered Social Landlords and other private and community bodies to engage in empty homes work; and
4. Encourage councils to mainstream empty homes work.

The report draws on data collected from various sources. Primarily, the data has been collected from an annual survey that was sent out in April this year to empty homes practitioners across Scotland. Due to the coronavirus pandemic, 15 complete responses were received.

In addition to this a range of other materials have been used including:

- Information collected from Scottish Empty Homes Officer Best Practice Meetings
- Feedback forms from officer workshops and events
- 2019 National Empty Homes Survey - Independent research undertaken by Dan Cookson Consulting on behalf of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership
- National statistics from Scottish Government and National Records of Scotland

Background

This report marks ten years since the establishment of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) in 2010. How far the SEHP has come in that time, is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by looking at the number of empty homes that have been reported brought back into use by Empty Homes Officers (EHOs) over the last ten years.

This year EHOs have already reported a record number of 1,412 empty homes brought back into use through direct intervention with the owner.

Over the first ten years of the SEHP, EHOs have helped to bring 5756 homes back into use. 44% of these have been in the first two years of SEHP’s current three year contract with the Scottish Government.

This is a fantastic achievement that reflects the successes we have had in delivering on the four objectives that underpin the SEHP’s work. We have seen the number of local authorities employing dedicated EHOs steadily increasing, which has played a significant part in delivering the record numbers. We have also seen the number of homes brought back into use by many of the more long-standing EHOs and empty homes services increasing year on year.

This year we have also seen an increase in the number of very long-term empty properties that have been brought back into use through the commitment, resilience and determination of Empty Homes Officers as they work to overcome the more complex barriers and difficulties that arise in these cases.

The record figures are a testament to the increasing expertise and knowledge of practitioners within the partnership, the way this knowledge is shared across the network to help officers solve problems and progress difficult cases, and the continued, unrelenting efforts of all EHOs to bring more properties back into use.

Number of homes brought back into use



Why do homes become and remain empty?

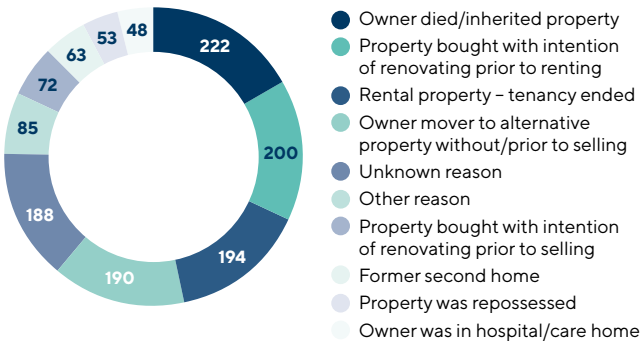
As part of the annual survey, EHOs are asked to list the reasons why homes in their caseload become empty and why they remain empty. The chart below highlights that life circumstances cause homes to become empty with the primary cause being death of an owner.

The number of instances where properties were bought with the intention of renovating prior to selling or renting, perhaps highlights the number of times where owners underestimate the cost, or amount of work required to renovate a property. This demonstrates the importance of carrying out a full assessment of the work that will be required when taking on a property in need of renovation and setting realistic budgets and timescales, including being aware of the potential for a council tax levy being applied while the work is ongoing.

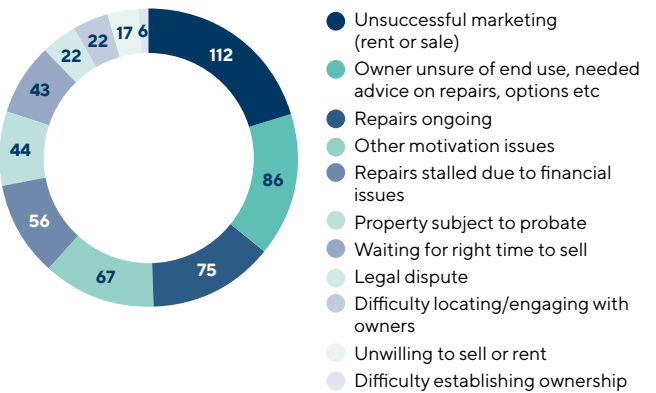
In all cases, the intervention of an EHO can be the impetus to the owner finally bringing the property back to use, whether that is through encouraging them to lower the asking price (the costs of maintaining an empty home can exceed any nominal increase in value if they are waiting for an upturn in the market before selling), helping them to market the property more effectively or consider options for bringing the property back into use.

Evidence suggests that homes are seldom empty and/or in decline because the owner chooses to leave them empty.

Of active cases, how many became empty for the following reasons



Of homes brought back into use, what was the main reason for remaining empty



Common reasons for homes then remaining empty, include owners being unable to sell or rent them, being reluctant to sell or rent them or waiting for the right time to sell them. These are often by-products of a sluggish housing markets or lack of demand in the area where the home is located, leading to owners either waiting for the market to pick up before trying to sell, or holding out for unrealistic prices when the property is on the market. In other cases, however, it may just be a result of the way the property has been marketed to potential buyers or tenants.

Case Study



A property in the west of Scotland was referred to the Empty Homes Officer after complaints had been received by the Environmental Health department. On making contact with the owner, the EHO discovered that the property had been left empty for five years after a relationship breakdown, when both previous owners had left. In the aftermath, legal issues surrounding the ownership of the property that were left unaddressed, leaving the property to deteriorate.

Ongoing engagement with the owner allowed the EHO to provide the appropriate advice and encouragement to be able to begin addressing some of the outstanding issues. The owner advised that due to their financial position they were unable to carry out required repairs or to renovate the property.

Due to the owner’s personal circumstances, the officer worked with them to provide support to carry out repair work, as and when they could. This method of gentle encouragement, motivation and persuasion meant that the owner could get the property into a condition to be marketed, and later sold privately.

This property had become a long term empty due to the personal issues faced by the owners and had become lost in the complex legal and emotional issues being faced. **Through patient understanding of the difficulties faced by owners, Empty Homes Officers can help turn properties that are stuck back into homes.**

Where are empty homes?

Although there is a lot of data available on long term empty homes and housing as a whole, the extent to which the data is being used to drive empty homes strategies at local or national level has often been questioned. Some have said that the data is often confusing or contradictory, while it has also been noted that large amounts of the data needed isn’t routinely collected.

At the start of last year SEHP began to take forward work to close the data gaps and support local authorities in identifying and analysing the data available to them, and to use the data to build a bigger picture of the empty homes landscape in their area.

We commissioned Dan Cookson Research to carry out a survey that was sent to Chief Housing Officers at all 32 Local Authorities to gain further insights into the reasons why homes become long term empty and the barriers to bringing empty homes back into use.

We asked respondents to identify three areas with large numbers of empty homes and look at housing stock, distinctive features of the neighbourhood, impact of empty homes on the communities, and what they perceived as the greatest challenge to reducing long term empties in these areas. Alongside this we asked them to look at what tools they were currently using to tackle empty homes across the local authority as a whole as well as what they considered to be the main barriers for owners looking to bring homes back into use.

The findings of the survey were combined with national data on empty homes, the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation and other data that may link in to the prevalence of empty homes in specific areas and presented at our annual conference in November.

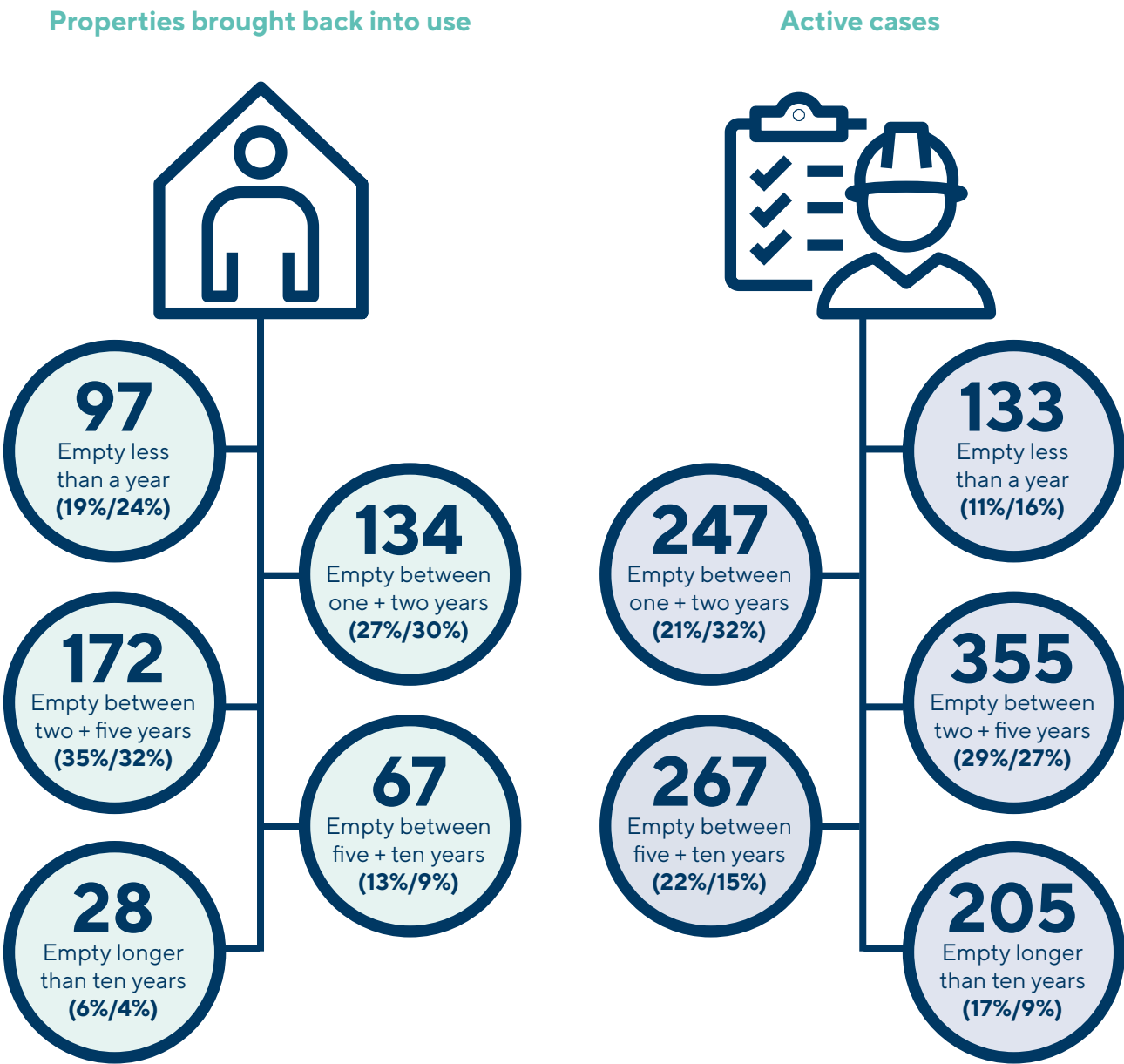
While there were several broad conclusions that could be taken from the survey, it was also the case that there was no such thing as a typical empty homes location. Large numbers of empty homes can be found in a diverse range of areas, from places defined as ageing rural and coastal communities to hard pressed urban communities and prosperous and accessible suburban market towns. Other local and national factors can also play a part in determining why seemingly similar areas in different parts of the local authority or country have very different levels of empty homes.

In this respect, an immediate follow on from the survey has been the publication of data zone level information on empty homes by National Records of Scotland. This breaks down the national data into the almost 7,000 data zones used across the country and will play an essential part in the next stages of our data analysis work, allowing us to drill down into each area to see where there are concentrations of empty homes and to build a better understanding of the defining features of each of them on a local authority by local authority basis.

Bringing Homes Back into Use

This year EHOs recorded 1412 properties brought back into use. Following on from our 2019 annual survey, we asked officers to break down both their completed cases and active workload into the lengths of time they had/have been empty for.

Both charts also show the percentage of homes falling into each category this year and last year.



Caution is needed when comparing figures from last year’s annual survey with figures from this year’s due to the limited returns we have received at the time of writing. We currently have information on 28% fewer completed cases than in 2019 (498/687), while for active cases we currently have information on 70% (1,207/4,074) fewer cases than in 2019.

Nevertheless, what is noticeable from both sets of figures is a shift in the age profile of empty homes workload, with an increase in the percentages of older cases in both categories.

In 2019 54% of cases completed had been empty for two years or less, while 13% of cases had been empty for more than five years. This year, the former figure has fallen to 46% while the latter figure has risen to 19%. There is a similar shift in active cases. In 2019 48% of cases had been empty for two years or less, while 24% of cases had been empty for more than five years. This year, the former figure has fallen to 32% while the latter figure has risen to 48%.

This is positive for a number of reasons. It suggests that an increased focus on older cases has not come at the expense of a reduction in overall number of homes being used, and also shows that with the right amount of intervention over a long period of time, it is possible to return some of the most difficult, long standing empty properties back into use. Three examples of this are included in the 2019 Howdens Scottish Empty Homes Champion of the Year Awards section of this report.

Nonetheless, it remains the case that the longer a home has been empty, the harder it becomes to bring it back into use, something that is clearly highlighted by the disparity between the percentage of active cases and the percentage of cases brought back into use that have been empty for over five years. Typical issues faced by Empty Homes Officers and owners include; the property deteriorating thereby making it less attractive to potential buyers and more expensive to bring back up to standard, difficulties tracing the owner or their next of kin if the owner has died, and demand for homes in an area falling as a result of increasing numbers of properties becoming long term empty.

At the other end of the scale, the contribution Empty Homes Officers make in helping to bring homes back into use within two years cannot be underestimated.

The figures published by Scottish Government in 2018 recorded 14,639 properties that had been empty for 6 to 12 months as part of the 39,100 long term empty homes. If all of these properties had remained empty, we would have expected to see a massive increase in the number of homes empty for longer than 12 months when the 2019 figures were published. Instead, this total rose by 2,675, suggesting that the vast majority of the 14,639 homes had been returned to use.



What happens to homes brought back into use?

Empty Homes Officers were asked to provide information on how empty homes are brought back into use. The responses illustrate the wide range of options that can be available to owners of empty homes to bring their property back into use. While the response rate to our survey was roughly half that of the previous year, there are still some notable findings.

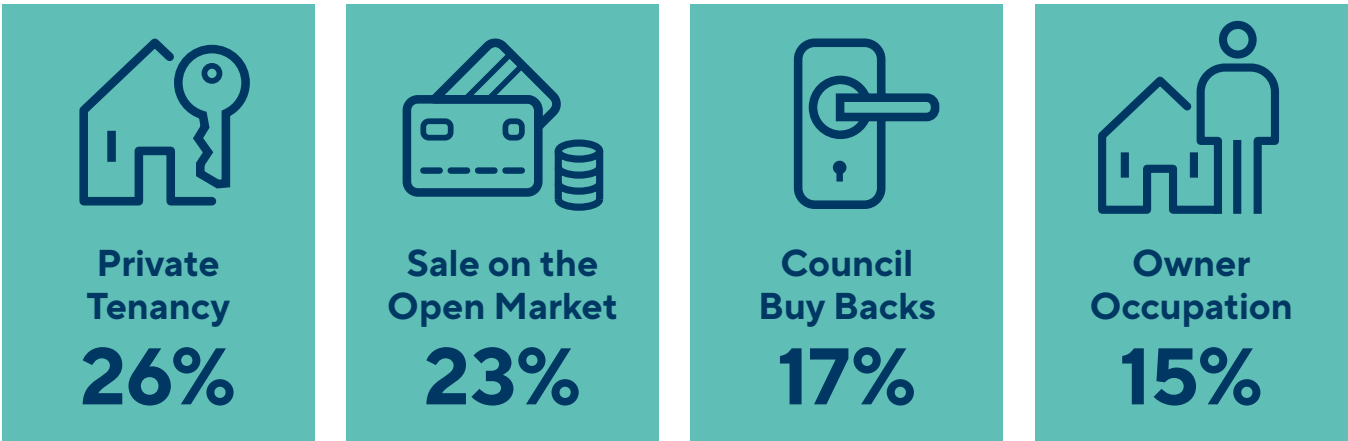
The most common outcome from our survey responses was for properties to be let out as a private tenancy (26%). This was closely followed by sale on the open market (23%). Together, these accounted for almost half of all of the outcomes recorded in responses received so far.

A striking difference this year is a substantial increase in homes brought back into use through council buy-backs. With 17% of properties reported brought back into use through this method, it is the third most common outcome reported in the survey.

Overall, just over a quarter of the properties reported back into use in our survey have provided affordable housing of some form, in both the social and private sectors.

This is an encouraging trend at a time where the challenges of meeting housing demand have never been greater.

The only other outcome recorded in more than 10% of cases was owner occupation (15%). These are likely to include properties that the owner originally bought with the intention of renting, selling, or refurbishing prior to moving into themselves. It may also include properties inherited by the current owner following the death of a previous owner.



Case Study



As part of the council’s Local Housing Strategy South Ayrshire have been able to purchase properties on the open market with the assistance of Scottish Government Affordable Housing Supply Grant funds. The council has focused on securing properties that are of strategic importance, either allowing the council to have full ownership of a block, and/or properties in an area with a high demand for council housing.

An ex-local authority property in the village of Mossblown came to the attention of the Empty Homes Officer. The owner contacted the officer for advice on selling their empty home. The owner had moved to alternative accommodation and was concerned about incurring the long term empty premium on their council tax bill.

The Empty Homes Officer recognised that the property met with conditions for the council’s Open Market Purchase Scheme, including being in an area of high social housing demand. The EHO liaised with the Head of Housing Services to discuss potential purchase. After viewing the property with a Technical Officer to establish the cost of renovation, including bringing the property condition to the Scottish Housing Quality Standard, an offer was made to purchase which was accepted by the owner.

Having purchased the property, work was carried out to bring it back to standard and to become part of the council’s mainstream stock.

The Empty Homes Officer has assisted the council to meet other strategic objectives by using empty homes to meet social housing supply challenges and help reduce housing waiting lists.

Delivering a dedicated service in every local authority area

It is evident from the number of homes reported brought back into use each year, that in areas where there is a dedicated Empty Homes Officer (EHO) or proactive empty homes service, more homes are brought back into use.

97% of empty properties reported brought back into use this year, are in areas where there is a proactive empty homes service. This is because turning an empty property back into a home requires sensitive but pragmatic engagement with an owner and the opportunity to present options.

The proactive, investigative nature of the EHO role can unlock homes that otherwise would remain vacant.



Case Study



Some of the most challenging of empty homes cases can be caused by difficult circumstances for the owner. This is where a skilled, personalised approach from an Empty Homes Officer can be the key to unlocking the property and bringing it back into use.

West Dunbartonshire’s Empty Homes Officer case-load included a long term empty property, which had been inherited in 2015 following the death of the previous owner. The owner had their own health issues to deal with, as well as a strong emotional attachment to the property. The officer was able to pursue a patient and understanding approach, taking time to communicate with the owner through their preferred means, while offering advice and assistance on how to sell the property.

This approach resulted in the owner being persuaded to sell on the open market, the officer using their local knowledge and expertise to identify that this would be the best outcome for the owner, although they still required practical assistance to do so. Their financial

situation meant that they could not yet afford the associated costs of selling the property, however rather than allow this obstacle to derail the process, the officer was able to negotiate deferred payment with the estate agent on the owner’s behalf.

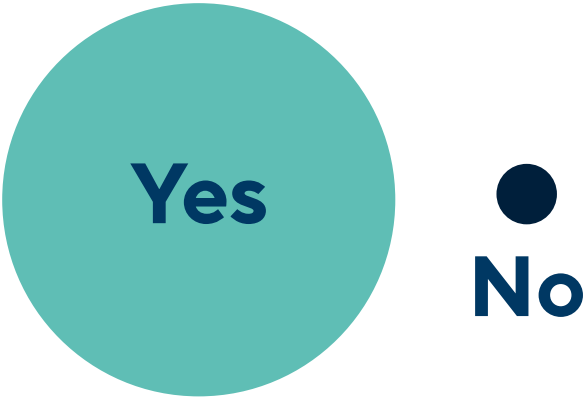
The property was sold for a higher amount than was originally budgeted for, freeing the owner from the burden of responsibility for the property, as well as clearing council tax debt that had accumulated. In addition, the new owner was contacted by the officer enabling them to access VAT discounts to renovate the property. **From having lain empty for 5 years, the property has now been brought back into use as a family home, thanks to the patient and understanding approach employed by the officer.**

Questions we asked?

This year, we asked councils the following two questions, we did this as we know that although some councils have a successful empty homes approach, it is not necessarily one dedicated EHO.

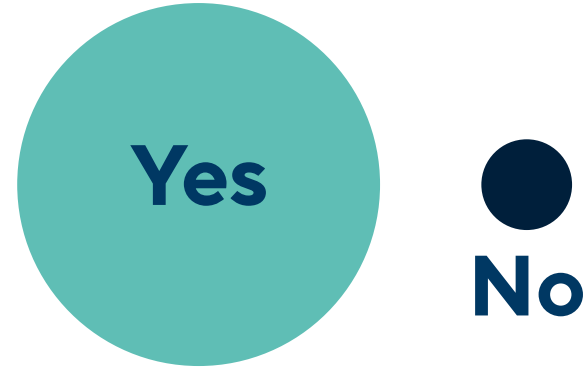
Does your council have a proactive empty homes service?

13 councils replied Yes
2 councils replied No



Does your council have a dedicated Empty Homes Officer?

12 councils replied Yes
3 councils replied No



24
EHOs

21 councils

Recruiting
EHOs

3 councils

We estimate from our ongoing engagement with councils that there are 24 Empty Homes Officers working across 21 councils, with a further 3 councils hoping to complete recruitment after lockdown. This is a positive landscape; however, we know that more needs to be done.

Case Study



The Empty Homes Officer at Western Isles Council has been working to bring the isles’ empty properties back into use for the past 18 months. The scale of empty properties means that in this location, almost a third of the properties empty. The risk of depopulation is close at hand for remote island communities, so when bringing properties into use, it is important if these can contribute to ensuring that community sustainability is maintained.

The officer proactively notifies owners of the service by including their details when council tax bills are sent out. In one such example, the owner of a property responded by seeking help for their property, which had been empty for four years. The owner of the property had moved from the islands and for financial reasons needed to sell. The offer of advice and practical assistance from the Empty Homes Officer was invaluable, and was the impetus needed to begin bringing the property back onto the market, so that it could again be occupied.

The officer then supported the owner to contact an auction company, who achieved a prompt sale of the property, aided by its location and setting. The sale price also recouped more for the owner than they had expected.

The new owner of the property has since moved in with their family, having come to the Western Isles to be closer to family already living there. They were also assisted by the officer to access discounted products to renovate the property.

Thanks to the proactive approach adopted by the Empty Homes Officer, a neglected remote empty home has now been turned into a new start for a family seeking to lay down roots in the community, which will help it continue to flourish into the future.

Supporting councils to test the value of empty homes work

Since 2012, the SEHP has instigated and run several Kickstarter and Shared Service projects across Scotland. This involves the SEHP supporting a council, and in the case of a shared service, a partner, to submit a proposal to attract seed fund money. This part funded grant can then be used to set up an empty homes service. The overall aim of the project is to provide local evidence of the need for an empty homes service over a two-year funding period. The desired outcome is that after the pilot period, the council will continue with the post and self-fund.

Case Study

The SEHP is currently part funding Kickstarter projects across 3 local authorities in Scotland including Aberdeen, Western Isles and Edinburgh. As well as this, we are at contract stage with South Lanarkshire.

Aberdeen City Council Kickstarter started in November 2018. The council had completed their City Centre Masterplan, a regeneration blueprint to transform the city centre. It was, and is still, recognised that since the collapse in oil prices and the economic downturn in 2015, the city of Aberdeen faced a sharp rise in empty residential properties in the town centre and surrounding areas. At the same time, the council are grappling with a need to meet housing waiting lists, a decline in population and changes to household sizes.

The Empty Homes Officer works in the Strategic Place Function and invested a lot of time in the first year establishing the service and linking empty homes work to the council's Masterplan. This groundwork included putting digital systems in place, an internal and external communications plan, a comprehensive draft empty homes policy, which includes discretionary leeway on the vacant dwelling council tax, engagement with third sector partners and a ground-breaking Matchmake to Rent scheme. This scheme allows the council to facilitate a match between owners of empty homes and people on council housing waiting lists.



The EHO engaged with a local investor who had bought a city centre building with the intention to refurbish and had become interested in the matchmake to rent scheme. This building was made up of a hotel lying empty for up to 5 years, and a serviced apartment complex empty for 2 years. This engagement allowed the refurbished properties to be made available as affordable housing, helping to tackle supply challenges in the city. The owner was also assisted to have council tax calculated at the correct level for the properties whilst the renovation work was ongoing.

This joined up approach from the council, with the EHO at the heart of it, assisted the owners to convert the properties into a total of 13 dwellings. All were let out with rents of 5-10% above Local Housing Allowance level, which is still below market rates in Aberdeen. This meets the council's strategy of town centre public realm, with increased footfall in the city as well as meeting challenges to affordable housing supply. The owners have been so impressed by the service offered by Aberdeen's Empty Homes Officer that they have helped facilitate contact with other developers in the city, strengthening the relationship between owners and the local authority, which will serve to encourage further investment in the city's empty properties in the future.

The Western Isles project was set up in October 2018, after seeing the success in Orkney. The council were planning to implement the vacant dwelling council tax levy and recognised the need for local assistance prior to the charge being applied. The isles have relatively high percentages of homes lying empty with unique challenges ranging from the geography of the homes, building conditions due to weathering and many of the empty homes typically the 'old family home' left vacant when a new modern house – often built through the Crofter Housing Grant Scheme – was built on the same croft.

The roll out of the Empty Homes Project started in January 2019 with the EHO almost immediately, contacting homeowners on an area by area basis. The high response rate, at approximately 40%, signalled that owners were keen to engage with the service. The EHO was quick to respond to the demand and started off with, what turned out to be a trailblazing year. Critical to the success of this project has been the EHO, who brought a vast amount of technical knowledge from his construction background to the role, strong connections with the community, local intelligence and tenacity. This combined with comprehensive training from the SEHP, internal management support and forged links with community organisations has led to the EHO making a significant impact on bringing empty homes back into use in the Western Isles. A record number of properties have been brought back into use within the first year and the second year is proving to be as successful.

The City of Edinburgh Council Kickstarter started in November 2019, with the service being launched in January 2020. The housing market has been incredibly buoyant, but the city still has challenges with empty stock. At a time of significant pressure on housing supply, it makes absolute sense for the city to take a proactive approach to bringing every empty home back into use.

The most recent Kickstarter project in South Lanarkshire is at contract stage. While the council have a lower than average percentage of empty homes across the region, it is recognised that in areas of high demand for housing, more must be done to encourage owners to bring these properties back into supply. The council has taken a strategic look at empty properties, considered the urban and rural nature of their stock and will look to implement appropriate empty homes policy.

Support the national network of Empty Homes Officers

A key objective for the SEHP is to support empty homes practitioners across Scotland. We advise on complex cases, provide ongoing training and consultancy to new and existing officers, and help local authorities make the case for empty homes work in their area. We do this in several ways. We facilitate best practice meetings, deliver face to face training, produce online learning content, host workshops, maintain the Advice Service and run an annual conference.

Our best practice meetings bring officers together to share learning.

We do this by encouraging a council to host a meeting and set a relevant topical agenda. We support this by inviting other EHOs that show an interest in the topic. We provide advice and guidance where needed, as well as facilitation before and on the day. We use feedback to continuously assess how we work and make improvements.

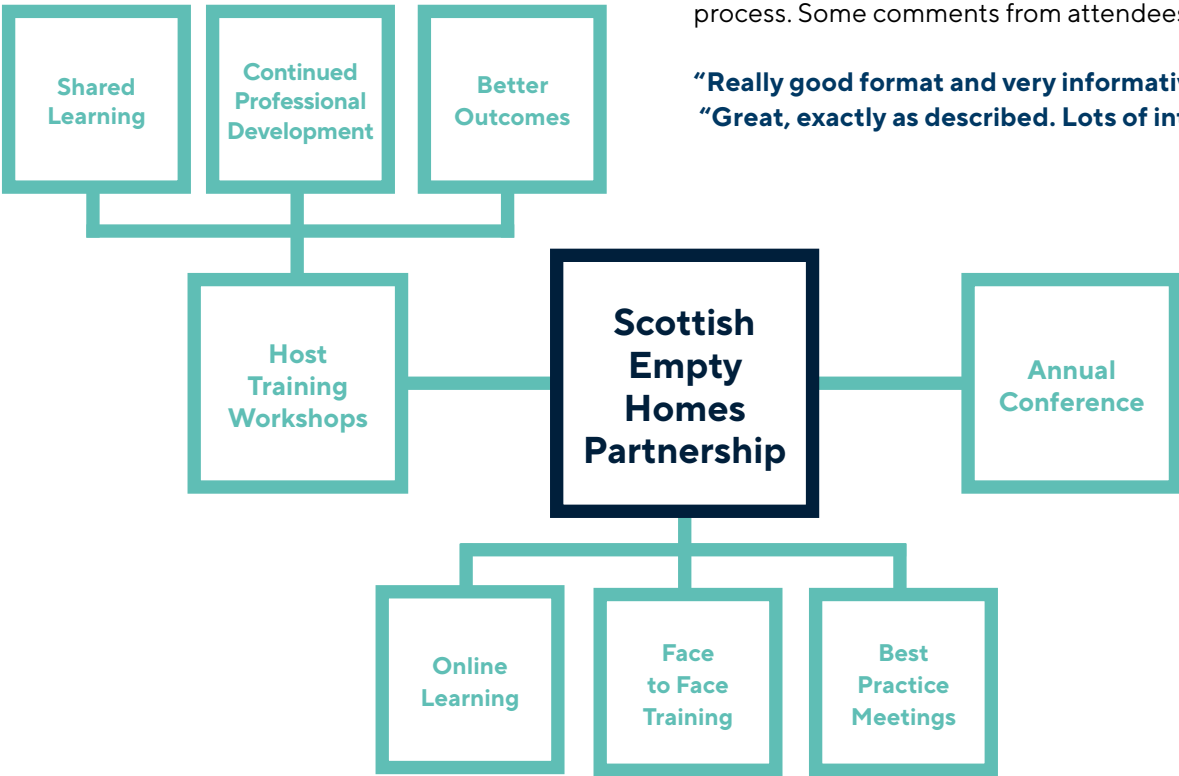
14 of the 15 officers responding to our survey question said they found the Best Practice Groups either ‘useful’ or ‘very useful’.

The onset of the pandemic brought challenges to our ability to support the network, with IT access varying between officers. We reacted quickly by consulting the network on their views to online meetings. So far 11 councils have participated in an online best practice meeting.

During 2019-20 we provided our officer network with 4 training workshops, focusing on areas of knowledge and expertise that reinforced their impact. We aim to deliver workshops that EHOs request, in convenient locations and to use experienced speakers from other organisations.

One example is the Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) workshop we hosted. We recognise that CPO can be an effective tool for EHOs to use and that there was demand for this type of knowledge sharing. The day looked at when this type of action is appropriate, what the EHO involvement is, evidence gathering and a case study from an EHO who has been through the process. Some comments from attendees are below.

“Really good format and very informative”
“Great, exactly as described. Lots of interaction.”



Our specialist workshops are hosted on topics called for by EHOs.

The Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network Knowledge Hub is a valuable resource for officers to communicate with each other and the SEHP regarding any major issues affecting their own work, as well as for sharing case studies and best practice. We have reviewed the library of information that is stored on the hub, as feedback from last year suggested that it is difficult to find resources. The library was difficult to navigate, and many documents were duplicated in several places. The number of folders has now been dramatically reduced and simplified, whilst unnecessary documents/duplications have been deleted. The update also provided a timely reminder for officers to store their case studies in the appropriate folder within the library, so that they can be easily located in future. This helps with the wider remit of trying to encourage more officers to share case studies by making the process clearer and easier to carry out.

We notice that the platform has taken on renewed importance since lockdown, allowing the SEHP to communicate with the network collectively, and share guidance and best practice on a range of issues faced by the network of officers.

The Knowledge Hub is a useful platform to easily connect with other EHOs.

Training of officers and maintaining standards are an ongoing process. With a view to this, SEHP launched its new online training portal at our conference last November. This is available to all practitioners with an interest in empty homes work. It provides an excellent grounding in the principles and methods most utilised in bringing empty properties back into use.

The course has five initial modules. Four of these are now available, with the remaining one being finalised. The modules are;

- Introduction and the benefits of empty homes work
- Database and casework management
- Working with council tax
- Enforcement
- Empty homes strategies

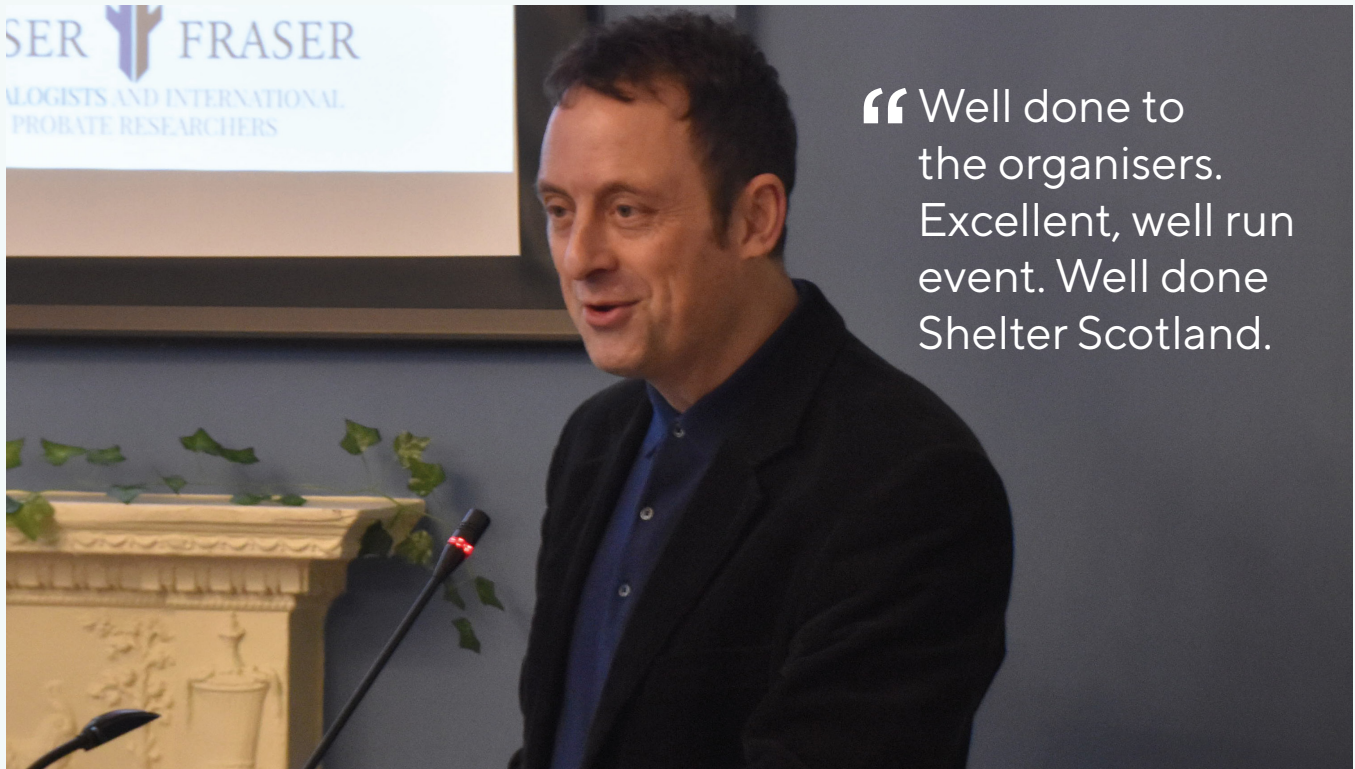
The training is offered free to the Network and is fully accredited by Shelter Scotland and counts towards Continuous Professional Development hours.

49 participants have signed up for our Online Learning.



2019 Scottish Empty Homes Conference and Awards Winners

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership’s 2019 annual conference was held at Riddle’s Court, in Edinburgh on 20 November. Riddle’s Court is a historic jewel in Edinburgh’s Old Town and a major conservation and interpretation project led by Scottish Historic Buildings Trust. The theme of the conference was Opening Doors, Unlocking Potential and focused on how empty homes can be used to help to meet local housing challenges as well as helping to deliver the long-term vision for housing in Scotland.



COSLA cabinet member for Housing & Communities, Elena Whitham chaired the conference with passion. We ran three workshops in the morning to appeal to a variety of audiences, from community solutions to local empties, reinventing the High Street and creating social tenancies from private sector empty homes.

TV presenter and journalist, Matt Allwright, was invited to be our guest speaker. His interest in empty homes work is highlighted in the TV show that he presents on the BBC, “The Empty Homes Scandal”. The afternoon focused on the national survey results, which aimed to show how economic factors can affect the distribution of empty homes across Scotland and to brainstorm and share effective solutions.

Feedback from the conference was varied and will be used to inform next year’s event.

The conference was also an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of Empty Homes Officers across the country after a record number of 1,128 homes were brought back into use during the last financial year, taking the total number of homes brought back into use since SEHP began to above 5,000.



2019 Howdens Scottish Empty Homes Champion of the Year Awards

The Scottish Empty Homes Champion of the Year Awards celebrate Empty Homes Officers, housing associations, community groups and others who recognise the role that empty homes play in tackling the housing emergency and work tirelessly to bring properties back into use. 2019 was the fourth consecutive year where the awards were sponsored by Howdens Joinery, and saw a wide range of projects, services and people receiving nominations, across five categories. The winners received their award from Housing Minister Kevin Stewart MSP at the conference. Over the next four pages we look at the winners and some of the shortlisted entrants from each category.

Outstanding Individual



Winner: Murdo Macleod, Western Isles
Murdo has been the Empty Homes Officer for Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar since October 2018. He covers the whole of the Outer Hebrides archipelago from Lewis in the north, to Vatersay in the south, a distance of some 130 miles. Very much a ‘one man band’ in delivering the Empty Homes Service, Murdo was directly involved in getting action taken by owners on more than 60 properties within his first year in the role, far exceeding the Comhairle’s original projections of 10 houses being brought back into use.



Shortlisted: Lesley Cockburn, South Ayrshire Council
Lesley worked for South Ayrshire Council for 20 years in front line positions before joining the Housing Policy and Strategy Team in 2016, where she used her extensive knowledge to achieve success which gained exposure in both local and national media and saw her win the award for Outstanding Project at the Scottish Empty Homes Champion of the Year Awards in 2018.



Shortlisted: Emma Anderson, North Ayrshire Council
Emma has worked in housing for over 25 years. She is currently the Private Sector Housing Manager with NAC and has responsibility for empty homes. Always tenacious, resilient, positive and optimistic, she has led her team so that they are now bringing more empty homes back into use than any other council in Scotland.

Outstanding Service

Winner: Private Sector Team, North Ayrshire Council

The North Ayrshire Private Sector Team has introduced a fresh perspective to improving property conditions and increasing housing supply, turning the service from reactive to forward thinking, innovative and proactive. They are now one of the top performing local authorities for bringing empty homes back into use. In 2019 they shared their success stories along with the challenges they face when encouraging owners to bring empty homes back into use for a BBC documentary about the great empty homes work being carried out within the UK. The programme aired at the start of this year.



Shortlisted: Kingsmith Property 1000 Homes Initiative

Formed in 2017 by husband and wife partnership, Mary Ann Smith & Paul Kingham, Kingsmith Property have brought 31 empty homes back into the private residential rental market in the last 24 months working with other UK and international investors who have shared their vision to provide quality Scottish homes.



Shortlisted: Glasgow Empty Homes Service, Glasgow City Council

Working closely with colleagues in the Council Tax Office the service encourages and supports owners to bring empty homes back into use. They have also established relationships with RSLs across the city identifying empty properties in strategic areas where empty homes could be brought back into use for social housing.



The winning team from Campbeltown tenement transformation.



Best Collaborative Project

Winner: Campbeltown tenement transformation, Argyll & Bute

This is the fourth and largest individual project in Campbeltown under the Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme (CARS) in conjunction with Housing Services. The work needed included complete replacement of the main roof, stonework repairs, rot works, leadwork, chimney repairs and rainwater goods. Staff in Economic Development and Housing worked to support owners to save this building and bring empty flats back into use. The project improved the streetscape for the community; and crucially improved the quality and sustainability of private sector stock in an area which has an oversupply of poor condition tenement flats.



Shortlisted: Gravir Housing, Pairc, Western Isles

The Care Unit had been empty for eight years when the Pairc Trust bought it. It was damp and derelict, the ceiling had come down where the roof had been leaking and it was a dark and unwelcoming sight on a dated housing scheme. Four years later, it has been transformed into two separate houses, and given the community a renewed confidence that the Trust will make Pairc a better place to live, work and visit.



Shortlisted: North Ronaldsay School House, Orkney Islands

This project has seen the North Ronaldsay School House returned to use to provide an additional housing unit on an island that has an ageing population and requires more families to move into the island to increase sustainability. The momentum from the project has built the feeling on the island that other properties can be now be brought back into use or developed.



Oldest Long-Term Empty

Winner: Gardner Street, Glasgow

The property had been empty since 1995. In July 2018 a member of the public reported an open back window to Glasgow City Council Land & Environmental Services. The EHO visited the property, talked to neighbours looking for anecdotal evidence, phoned Police Scotland and contacted colleagues in other departments, to try and find the owner of the property. The owner was aware that the property was accruing massive debts but didn't know where to begin sorting it out. With the help of the EHO, they put the property on the market for sale. The sale concluded a year after the property came to the EHOs attention, and 24 years after it became empty.



Shortlisted: School Road, Lochearnhead

The Property had been empty since 1999, when the head teacher moved out. A new owner purchased the school house and the school in 2017 but didn't realise the mammoth task he'd taken on. The empty homes officer took on the case and provided help and guidance that enabled the owner to complete the work and return the property to use.



Shortlisted: Property in Campbeltown, Argyll and Bute

This property had been empty since December 1996 and remained empty for over 22 years. The empty home owner contacted the new owners after seeing an advert they had placed to enquire if anyone was considering selling a property they could adapt to suit their family needs. When they viewed the property they knew that, despite the extent of works required, it would be perfect for them and brought it back into use as a wonderful family home.



Best Before & After

Winner: Main Street, Glasgow

These two properties had been empty for over 25 years initially due to legal disputes, when the EHO saw the property while in the area. They made contact with the person responsible for Council Tax. The owner agreed to work with the EHO as the disputes had been settled. The property was put up for sale with an auction house but sold prior to auction. The new owner has carried out extensive renovations and one property is now occupied while works are ongoing on the smaller property.



Before



After

The winning team from Glasgow City Council



Supporting others to unlock empty homes

We recognise that there are a range of organisations that may not have considered empty homes as part of the solution to meet their housing needs. We would like to encourage them to make best use of existing stock as they may be in a place to attract grant and loan funding not available to councils.

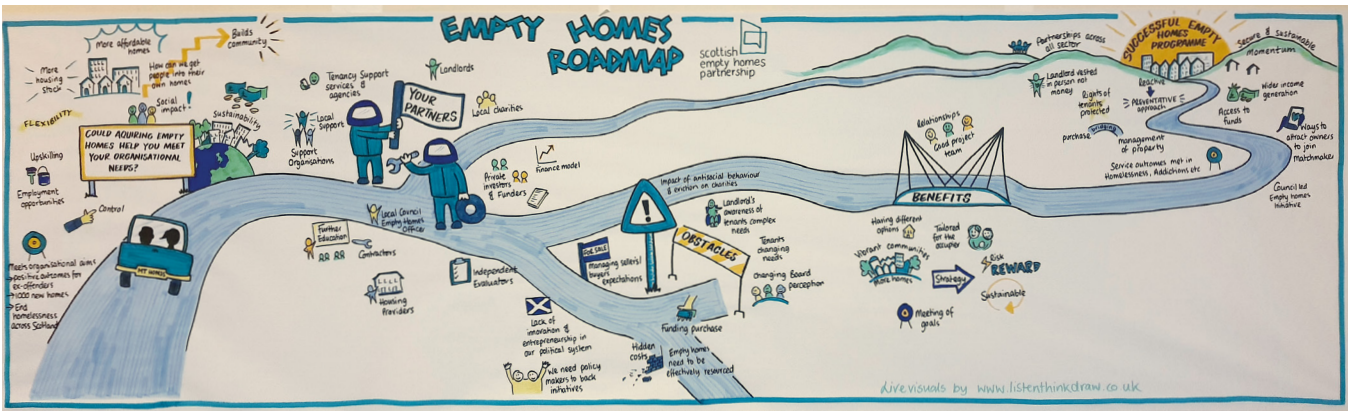
The SEHP have looked at examples of work across Scotland and other parts of the UK to help create an operational model. One of the projects we looked at is the Together Group. They create full-time jobs for ex-offenders by employing them to renovate empty properties and build new homes, in the communities where they live. We think this can be replicated, so we are in advanced conversations with the Scottish Prison Service.

We have had a series of meetings with other organisations that are also interested in this type of work to meet their housing supply challenges. Often these organisations are unaware of the extent of private sector empty properties in their local area.

We delivered a workshop at the SFHA conference on ‘Using Empty Homes to Deliver Affordable Housing’ to promote this message, met with several third sector bodies and community groups.

With this as a context, we thought it would be useful to host a roundtable event showcasing what a successful project could look like. The event was well attended, and it is likely that further conversations will take place.

We created an empty homes road map to inspire other organisations.



This road map is intended to be a starting point for others looking to take on empty homes work and poses some of the questions that we identified as important.

Case Study



Before



After

Glenrothes

YMCA Glenrothes is actively responding to the issue of homelessness in Fife through its 'Empty Homes' renovation programme. Through this initiative, with support from grant makers and trusts, YMCA refurbish empty properties and transform them into longer term tenancies for Fife people who have experienced homelessness. Since 2016, YMCA Glenrothes have purchased and renovated five properties. The properties are renovated to a high standard, are energy efficient and are owned and managed by the charity. YMCA works closely with the local council EHO and other departments.

This property had been empty for approximately four years. The house was in a poor state of repair and the landlord had been using the property as somewhere to store items. YMCA purchased with the intent to make it a home again, through partnerships with various organisations including Trust in Fife and Fife College. The renovation works included the full replacement of the kitchen, partial works to the bathroom, a complete replacement of the rear entry porch, new doors and double glazing, flooring and carpets and redecoration.

The garden is in a bare state but the new tenant plans to fill the flower beds with flowers during 2020. The property has an enclosed safe garden for a family and a bright positive easy to maintain walled paved area to the front.

As well as housing, the project provided additional benefits for the YMCA and the local community. Work experience has been provided for 29 Fife College construction students as part of their Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) Level 1-4 to gain valuable experience and course credits.

Empty homes work has provided volunteering opportunities for prospective tenants who want to improve practical DIY skills and gain valuable experience for employment. This project aims to help tenants progress within their local communities and feel more confident in making positive life choices and attaining goals. Residents of YMCA renovated homes have been introduced to agencies that provide specialist support, including employability services, further education and training.

Our ambition to mainstream empty homes work

Empty homes are an asset on our doorstep. They can play a key role in helping to meet the demand for housing in areas where there is a shortfall in affordable housing, and in reviving town centres and sustaining fragile communities. The best way to make full use of the contribution that empty homes can make to dealing with the housing emergency and tackling other social issues is for empty homes work to be mainstreamed into wider housing strategies.

Of the 15 local authorities that completed our annual survey in full, 10 reported that they had a dedicated empty homes strategy, and nine of these said that the strategy was linked to town centre renewal.

This is encouraging to see, and across the country we are seeing many great examples of where empty homes are being used to deliver wider initiatives.

This would be enhanced by security of employment for EHOs, with officers being funded on permanent contracts. Experience shows us, that when an individual officer leaves, the knowledge gained can be lost and with stringent council budgets, vacant posts are at risk of becoming obsolete. However, if empty homes work is linked to wider goals, the EHO's contribution is linked to key strategic objectives and learning more likely to be retained.

We have continued to raise the political profile of empty homes work. It is hoped that this will reinforce the message of the importance of using existing stock to support our housing supply challenges.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership submitted detailed responses to the Local Government and Communities Committee inquiry into Empty Homes in Scotland and National Assembly for Wales's Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee inquiry into empty properties. The responses addressed issues including; the causes of empty homes; impact on communities where there are large numbers of empty homes; how areas have addressed the issue of empty homes; the effectiveness of current tools and what additional powers may help local authorities to deal with the issue.

The National Project Manager gave evidence to hearings of both committees and follow up papers were provided to give committee members further evidence to assist with the inquiries.

The SEHP also gave considerable support to the Scottish inquiry in; raising awareness of the call for evidence across the empty homes network; contacting empty home owners to seek participants for a public meeting; facilitating initial contact with East Ayrshire for a fact finding visit by the committee. The partnership's work throughout was highly praised by both inquiry teams, helping to raise the profile of the team and of the importance of local authorities pursuing active empty homes strategies with dedicated EHOs.

The National Project Manager gave a presentation to the COSLA board meeting on 'Private Sector Empty Homes' last year setting out the case for employing a dedicated Empty Homes Officer in every council in Scotland. The presentation was focused on sharing best practice that can be replicated in other local authority areas. This was followed up by councillor questions and answers. The SEHP can offer targeted advice and support to all councils and are keen to work closely with COSLA to spread this message.

Council tax and empty homes

To encourage property owners to bring their properties back into use and discourage properties being left empty for long periods, the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.) (Scotland) Act 2012 and its subsequent regulations, allow councils to both remove the discount on certain types of unoccupied homes and increase the level of council tax payable on these properties. This gives local authorities the power to apply a surcharge of up to 100% when properties have been empty for 12 months or over.

All bar one local authority applies the long-term empty premium, and the vast majority of these operate a discretion policy of some description, allowing owners some financial leeway. We would like to see all councils applying flexibility to the charge by taking into account the circumstances of individual owners. This is in line with guidance issued to councils in 2018.

Of the 15 local authorities that completed the survey, 13 noted that they have a policy to apply discretion when applying the council tax levy.

Comments about how this policy worked in practice included;

‘We have a policy called Manager’s Discretion Policy. The policy allows for a halt on charging the premium levy on eligible properties where the owner is actively and continuously engaging with the Empty Homes Officer.’

‘If the property owner is actively bringing the property back into use, we will help them but if there is no or little correspondence with the owner, the levy is instantly applied’

One local authority that did not apply discretion noted that

‘We automatically apply the levy after 12 months and there is no scope for discretion even when the owner is engaging with the EHO. The offer to apply discretion cannot be used as an incentive by the EHO to encourage the owner to work on their property’.

While we recognise that the application of the levy may be an appropriate tool to use where owners are unwilling to engage with Empty Homes Officers, we believe that blanket application, irrespective of conditions of the local market or steps the owner is taking to return the property to use, can be counter-productive, often making it harder for owners to complete the work needed for the property to become a home again.

Case Study

The Advice Service took a call from an empty home owner who had, with her sister, inherited her father’s property after he passed away. The property was being marketed for sale, but difficult market conditions meant there was little interest from buyers. The client had been notified that their council tax would increase to 200% as of December 2019 and they were very concerned about mounting costs.

The Advice Service contacted the council for assistance to apply for discretion on the basis that death of the owner and difficult market conditions had caused the property to become and remain empty. The owners were actively trying to sell the property but struggling due to market conditions.

The council tax team initially responded that all discounts had been exhausted and no further discretion could be granted. However, it was argued that in this case, the increased charge would do nothing to help bring the property back into use and would instead penalise the owners for circumstances outwith their control.

The Advice Service built a case for further discretion over several weeks as information became available and upon reviewing the case, council tax agreed to grant a further 12 months’ discretion from the 200% council tax charge.



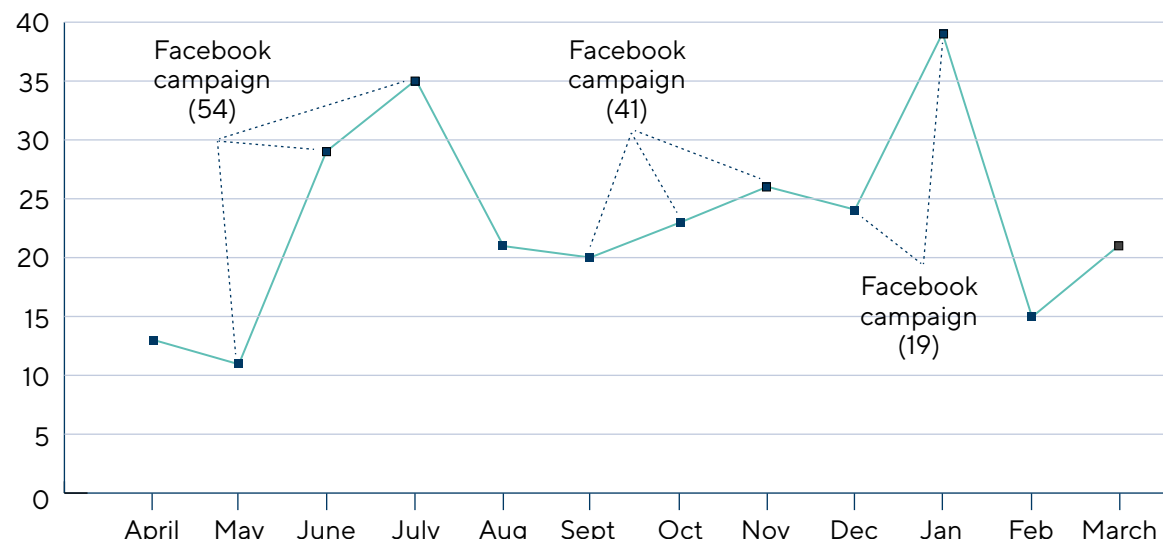
Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service

The Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service (SEHAS) uses specialist knowledge to provide advice and information to anyone concerned about empty properties, be they an owner, neighbour, empty homes practitioner or anyone in between. The service works collaboratively with empty homes practitioners, local authority private sector teams and other organisations to drive forward empty homes work.

The service was part of the wider SEHP rebrand and a new website was unveiled at the 2019 conference in November. The website brings together information for owners, neighbours and practitioners seeking help. From its launch until 31st March 2020 the website had received 9688-page views with 7514 unique page views. 28 reports of empty properties were made to the service through the website forms.

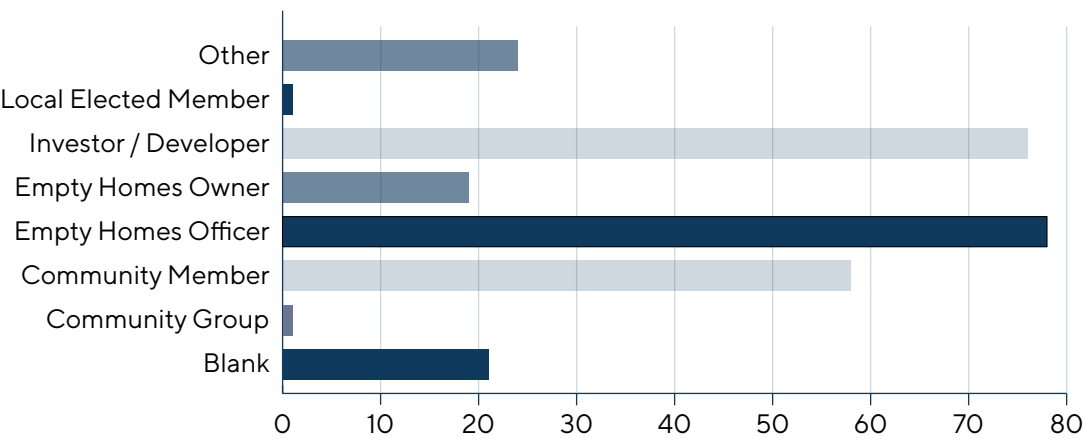
Following a review of the service in 2019 we refined the definition of what counts as an advice case. Under the new definition, SEHAS reported 277 contacts for advice in 2019. The graph below sets out the monthly contacts to the service.

Contacts to the Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service 2019/20



Social media advertising has been utilised over the year to promote the service. Seven Facebook campaigns were run and are illustrated on the graph above. 41 percent of all contact to the service in 2019/20 happened during these campaigns. On average there were approximately 23 contacts per month.

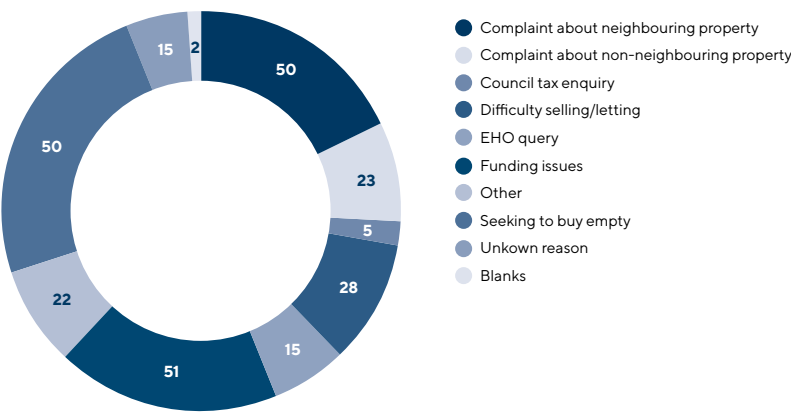
Contact by type



An objective was set for 2019 to increase enquiries to the service from empty homes owners and community members. These groups now account for 55% of all contact to the service. Other significant volumes of contact were from investors seeking to buy an empty home with 30 contacts made through the completion of the online matchmaker form.

Most of the contact to the service has been regarding a complaint either of a neighbouring or non-neighbouring property. These accounted for 26% of all contact to the service. 24% of enquires were made by those seeking to buy an empty home, and advice was sought in relation to funding issues in 18% of cases. Difficulty selling/letting accounts for 10% of all enquires to the service.

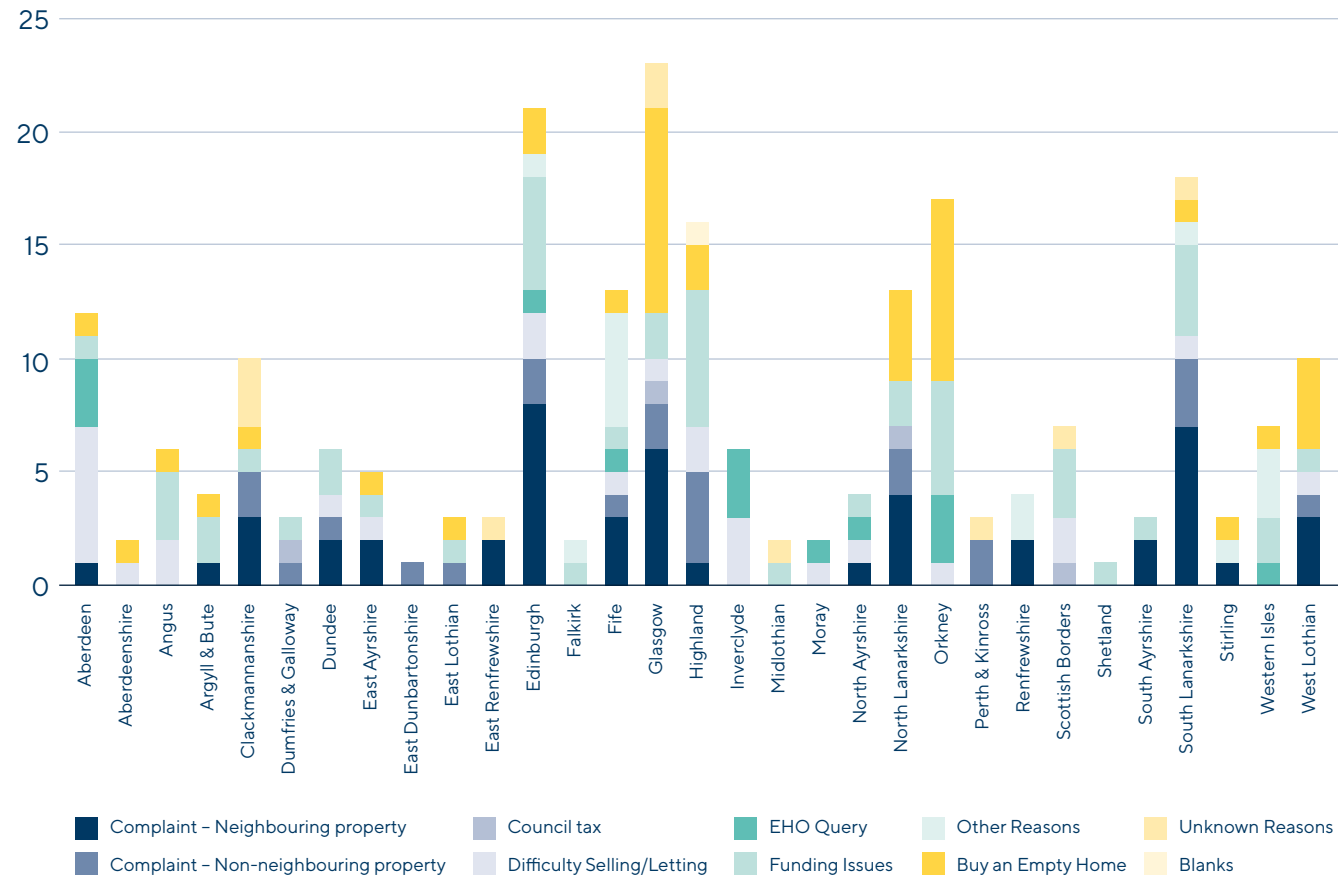
Presenting problem



The service has received contact from all 32 local authority areas. The two local authorities generating the largest number of contacts were Edinburgh and Glasgow, a reflection of their status as the local authorities in the two largest cities in the country. Significant contact (18 enquiries) was made from South Lanarkshire who currently do not have an

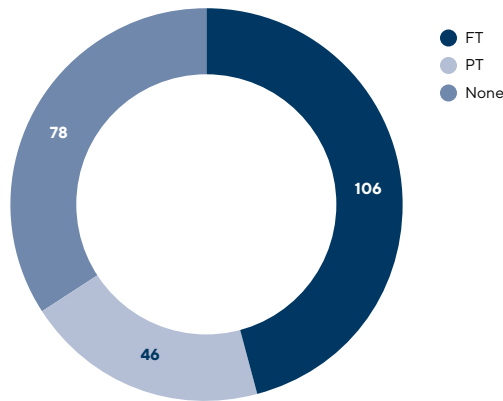
Empty Homes Officer however, there are plans to recruit. Edinburgh recruited an empty homes officer in November 2019 and following their appointment 12 out of the 21 enquiries were made from the area. The graphs below set out contact by Local Authority and presenting problem.

Local Authority by Presenting Problem



Of the local authority contacts 34% came from the 11 areas where there is no Empty Homes Officer including Orkney (where an Empty Homes Officer has not been in place since June). All 17 enquiries from Orkney were made on or after June 2019, when the EHO left their post and clients were diverted to contact the SEHAS. These areas do not currently dedicate any full-time equivalent resource to empty homes work. However, the majority (46%) of contact to the service came from areas where they have full time service.

Contact by level of Empty Homes Service



Service Aims 2020/21

- To continue with social media marketing of the service. Ensuring that campaigns are targeted and generate appropriate contact to the service.
- Explore contact from those seeking to buy and work together with the Partnership officer and EHOs to refine Matchmaker.
- Review outcome pick to ensure they are relevant and to develop a standardised recording procedure
- To develop an empty homes tool kit demonstrating the cost to an owner of leaving the property empty

The Year Ahead

This report marks ten years since the establishment of the SEHP in 2010, and celebrates achievements such as the highest number of empty homes brought back into use in a twelve-month period, and further progress against all SEHP’s four key objectives, including more local authorities employing dedicated Empty Homes Officers.

However, the report has been written against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic which makes the future a very uncertain place for all of us, as we head into the last twelve months of our current three-year contract with the Scottish Government.

An immediate impact of the pandemic is that, at the time of writing, only 15 councils have been able to fully complete the annual survey that normally provides the majority of the statistical data used in the report, and the figures for homes brought back into use is still provisional, as many Empty Homes Officers have been unable to access the databases they rely on for much of their work and some have been redeployed into coronavirus related work. All Empty Homes Officers have seen the visits they make to inspect properties and speak to owners halted, limiting the progress on casework since lockdown began. We know that this is affecting what officers can achieve in the short term, and we also know that it’s only a small part of the way that the virus will impact the empty homes landscape in the coming year.

People who were in the process of renovating an empty home as a first step towards bringing it back into use have seen their plans put on hold, because of social distancing requirements or reduced income that prevents them from completing work on their homes.

People looking to sell or rent properties have also seen their plans thrown into doubt and uncertainty as housing market activity has ground to a standstill with house moves and viewings effectively ruled out. Looking longer term, it seems likely that the economic downturn will affect the housing market as a whole, job losses and lost income amongst the self-employed will mean taking on an empty home will no longer be financially viable for many people, and the loss of life that has occurred will in itself mean that more homes become empty.

This report has demonstrated the immense contribution Empty Homes Officers have made to bringing homes back into use over the past twelve months as well as looking at some of the wider issues that have always affected what they can achieve. Coronavirus will amplify those issues and add to them. Going forward, the need for local authorities to provide empty homes services and to offer advice and support to members of the public looking to bring empty homes back into use, is paramount if we are to tackle the number of homes becoming, and remaining, long term empty as a result of the pandemic.

We hope to be able to end our 2021 annual report on a more upbeat note.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership
is funded by the Scottish Government
and hosted by Shelter Scotland

emptyhomespartnership.scot

Registered charity in England and Wales (263710) and in Scotland (SC002327)

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