

Annual Report 2020 – 2021

June 2021



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Executive Summary

This is the 11th annual report of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) and covers the period 2020-21. The SEHP is funded by the Scottish Government, and hosted by Shelter Scotland, with the remit to encourage private sector long-term empty homes back into use. The recent publication of the “Housing to 2040” Scottish Government report, acknowledges the important role that empty homes have to play in meeting the demand for housing across all sectors over the next twenty years.

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the numbers of homes becoming long-term empty. Figures published in December 2020 showed a 16% rise in long-term empty homes bringing the overall number to over 47,000. The full impact is still emerging, and the figures may continue to rise.

Covid-19 has amplified and added to the challenges of bringing homes back to use. Many Empty Homes Officers (EHOs) started working from home and had varying access to IT equipment. This improved over the course of the year, but Covid-19 lockdown restrictions to construction and challenging operating conditions have impacted on the numbers of homes being brought back into use; this year officers reported 851 properties back into use, in contrast with the 1412 homes reported in 2020.

Our ambition is to see empty homes services in every local authority in Scotland. Currently, we have 25 officers across 22 councils, with some councils employing more than one officer. We know that having an officer on the ground is an effective way to bring empty homes back into use. This work should be underpinned by an empty homes strategy that will allow councils to take a planned approach to bringing empty homes back into use to meet their unique challenges. 14 councils have reported that they have a specific empty homes strategy.

It is heartening to see more homes that are empty over 24 months or more, reported back into use. However, we know that for many of the really “stuck” homes, more legislative options are needed. We are calling for Compulsory Sale and Compulsory Rental Order powers giving councils the ability to tackle empty homes that are causing a blight on the community.

We also note the continued role that financial reasons play in homes remaining empty. We continue to call for more councils to have an active policy of not applying the council tax surcharge where owners are taking active steps to return the property back to use and where the imposition of a 100% financial surcharge may affect their ability to do this and mean that the home continues to remain empty.

Highlights of the year

851 properties
brought back
into use

25 EHOs
across
Scotland

2 new councils
sign up for
Kickstarter
funding

14 councils
have an empty
homes strategy

Joint
partnership
announced
with Homes
for Good

100 delegates
attended our
3-day digital
conference

Introduction

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (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.

The SEHP is hosted by Shelter Scotland and funded by the Scottish Government. This report covers the year 2020-21. This was the final year of a three-year contract to deliver the service. A new one-year contract commenced in April 2021. The following objectives apply to both contracts:

1. Encourage every local authority in Scotland to employ a dedicated EHO
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, including;

- Responses to the 2021 annual survey of Empty Homes practitioners across Scotland
- Information collected from Scottish Empty Homes Officer Best Practice Meetings
- Feedback forms from officer workshops and events
- National statistics from Scottish Government and National Records of Scotland

Empty homes are an asset on our doorstep. They can help local authorities respond to the housing emergency in areas where there is the greatest demand for housing. Bringing empty homes back into use can also provide a vital income stream to businesses and the local economy.

Where someone is repairing or renovating an empty home, they are likely to hire local builders and contractors who purchase materials from local suppliers. This money is then further invested in the local economy. At a time when sole traders, independent businesses and local retailers have all been severely affected by Covid-19, the importance of this income stream cannot be under-estimated.

Other benefits 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, and
- Contributing to delivery of housing supply and carbon emission reductions

Background

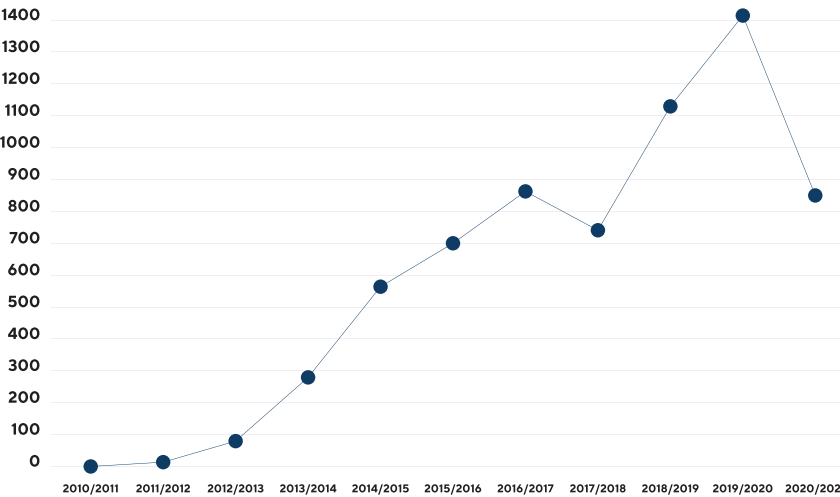
This year Empty Homes Officers (EHOs) have reported 851 empty homes brought back into use through direct intervention with the owner, bringing the total number of homes that EHOs have helped to bring into use to 6,607.

Just over half of these were during the SEHP’s most recent three-year contract with the Scottish Government which ran from April 2018 to March 2021.

While the 2020/21 total was down by 40% on the record-breaking year we enjoyed in 2019/20, this was against the backdrop of the pandemic. This led to more homes becoming long term empty and more homes remaining long term empty as renovation work was put on hold, rental properties stood vacant, people put off house moves and private sector landlords held back on further investment in the property market.

The pandemic also severely impacted the ability of EHOs to do much of their normal day to day work. At the start of the year, as they switched to homeworking, many had little or no access to the IT equipment and databases that much of their work depends on. While this improved over the year, they were still prevented from doing the site visits, face-to-face meetings and exploratory work that is often vital to developing an action plan to bring a home back to use.

The resilience and determination of the network of EHOs is highlighted by the number of homeowners they still supported in bringing their properties back to use this year. The continuing increase in the number of very long-term empty properties that have been brought back into use also demonstrates this as we see EHOs consistently overcoming the complex barriers and difficulties that arise in these cases.



Why do homes become and remain empty?

As part of the annual survey, we gather information from EHOs on why homes became empty and why they remain empty. EHOs provide this in relation to their active caseload where known.

In 2020/21 the death of the previous owner was the most common reason why homes became empty, accounting for 30% of EHOs active caseload. A further 7% of homes became empty as a result of owners moving into care homes or hospitals.

In contrast, only 5% of properties remained empty because of probate proceedings and a further 3% were empty for legal reasons that may include contested estates.

The largest single reason for homes remaining empty was difficulty locating or engaging with the owner, which was cited as the main reason in 21% of cases. Difficulty establishing ownership was cited in 11% of cases. These will often be homes that have been empty for 5 years or longer, where the original owner may have died, and where a new owner may have little or no interest in bringing it back to use.

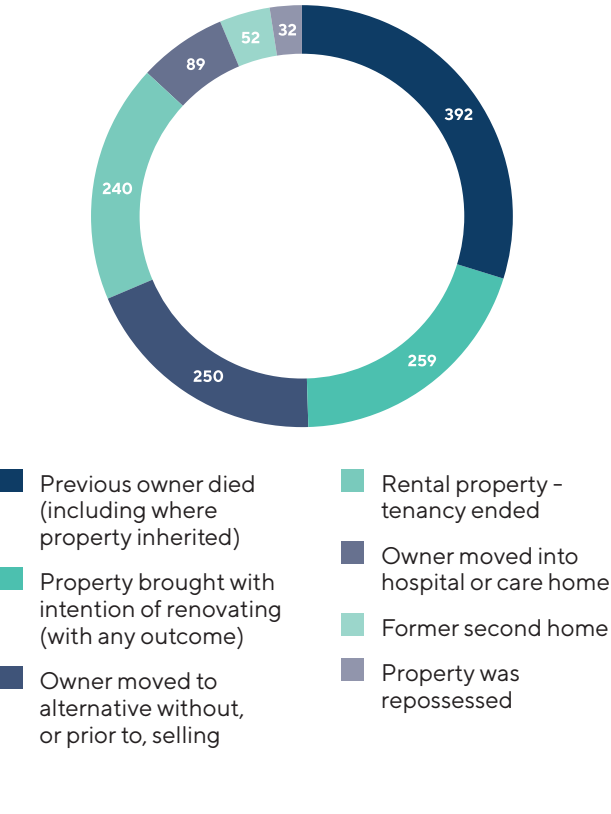
In such cases, the imposition of the council tax surcharge can be an ineffective tool, with increasing unpaid arrears, or the prospect of large bills while

they work to bring the home back into use, acting as an active disincentive to people who have been unaware or uninterested in a property for several years already.

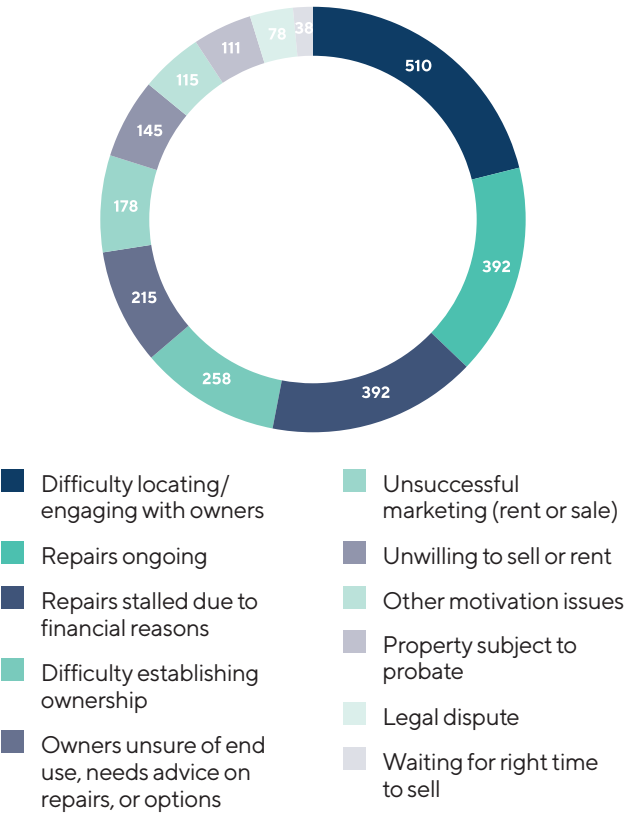
Compulsory Sale and Rental Orders
We believe that councils need to have greater powers to take on management of these properties. We propose a Compulsory Rental Order power that could sit alongside Compulsory Purchase Orders and the proposed Compulsory Sale Orders to support local authorities work to manage local housing need and reduce the blight of empty homes.

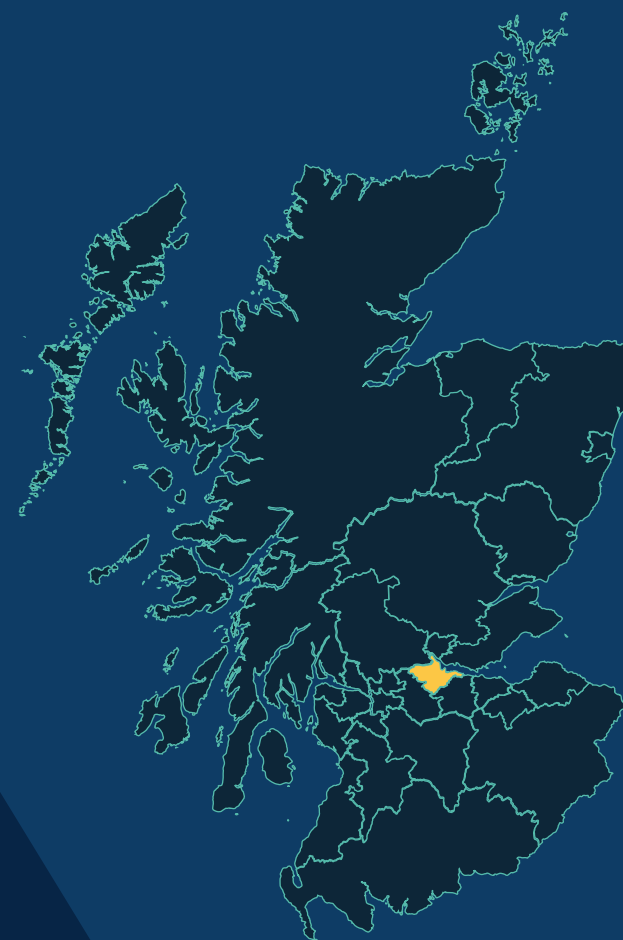
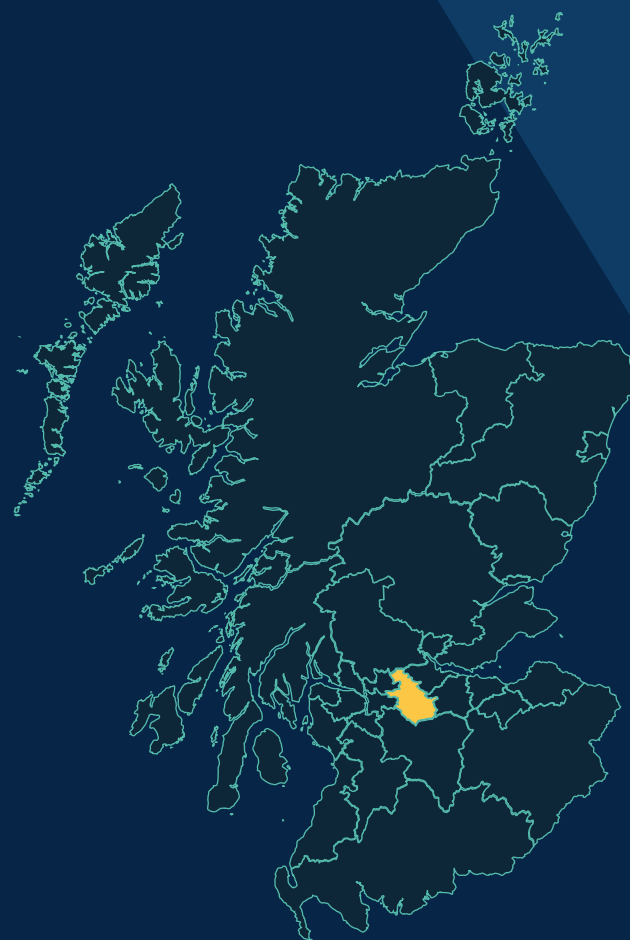
We also note the continued role that financial reasons play in homes remaining empty. We continue to call for more councils to have an active policy of not applying the council tax surcharge where owners are taking active steps to return the property back to use and where the imposition of a 100% financial surcharge may affect their ability to do this and mean that the home continues to remain empty.

Why homes become empty



Why homes remain empty





Case study – unexpected inheritance

Empty since 2001 – inherited property and owner unsure what to do with it.

This property is situated in a high demand housing area in North Lanarkshire. It had been empty for 18 years and was referred to the EHO in 2019 by an elected representative who had received complaints from local residents.

The EHO carried out investigations and was able to establish ownership of the property and the reason for the house remaining vacant. The owner had inherited the house and had been unsure of what to do with it, but had been making regular visits to the property to keep it maintained. The officer contacted the owner with offers of advice and assistance and they discussed options available, including the council's buy back scheme. This prompted the owner to sell the property privately. It was sold within 3 weeks of being put on the market. The EHO supported the buyer to access discounts and the new owner moved in after renovations.

Case study – cost of renovations

Empty over 10 years – owner struggling to fund renovations to bring back into use

This property is situated in a popular rural setting and operated as a local pub with living accommodation attached. After the establishment closed, a developer purchased it, over 10 years ago, with the intention of converting it into one residential unit. However, this new owner ran into financial difficulty and was unable to complete the renovations.

The property attracted anti-social behaviour and was referred to the EHO after contact from Police Scotland and a local elected member. The officer carried out internal investigations and was able to trace the owner and reached out to offer support. The owner was initially quite reticent to discuss plans for the house but after building trust and rapport, the owner was persuaded to put the property up for sale. This was sold as seen and the EHO supported the new owner with information, advice and assistance. The house is now let out and no longer a blight to the small community.

Bringing homes back into use

EHOs this year recorded 851 properties brought back into use.

Since 2019 we have been asking EHOs to record how long properties had been empty for prior to being returned to use. A similar question is asked in relation to their active caseload.

The graphic on the right shows the breakdown of properties by number of years empty (where known) and also changes in the percentage of homes falling into each category since 2019.

Since 2019 there has been a noticeable shift in the age profile of empty homes workload.

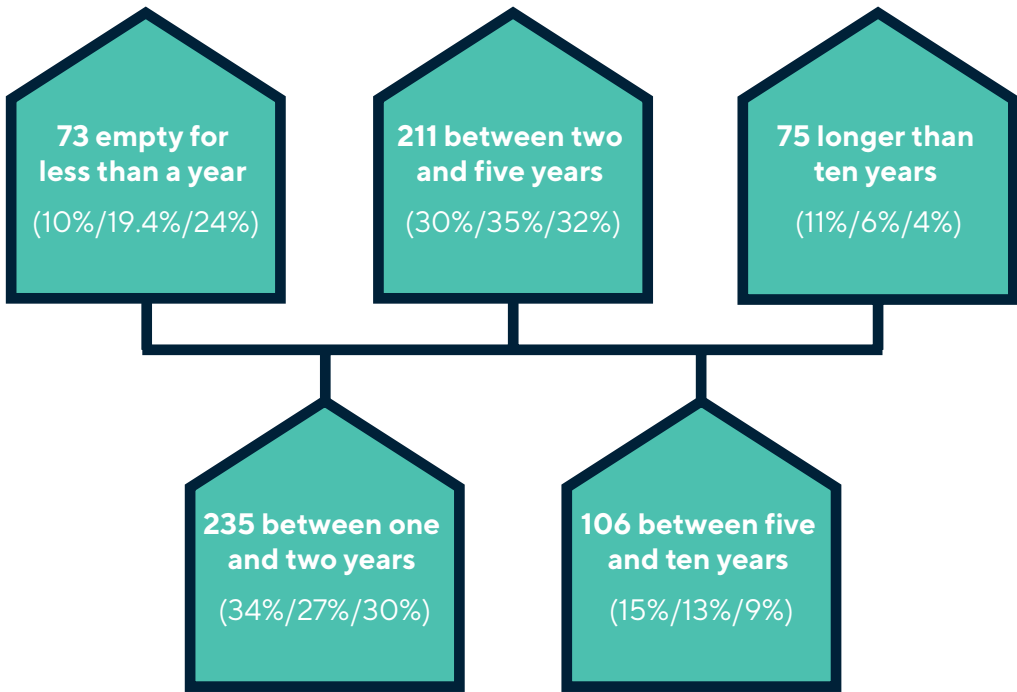
In both active caseload and properties brought back into use, there has been continued increases in the numbers of very long-term empty (5 years or more) homes that EHOs are helping to return to use. At the same time, there has been a continued fall in the proportion of their workload that has been empty for less than a year.

The longer properties have been empty, the harder it becomes to bring them back into use. With homes empty for five years or longer, there are likely to be more complex issues to address than in cases that have been empty for two years or less. As such, they will require lengthier initial investigation and increased levels of advice and support as options for returning the property to use are progressed.

This means that the increased prevalence of older cases in EHOs workload will have an adverse effect on the number of cases they are working on at any point in time. However, as these are homes that may have been causing long-term problems for communities and would be unlikely to be returned to use without the active intervention of an EHO, the additional work required to bring these properties back to use is time well spent.

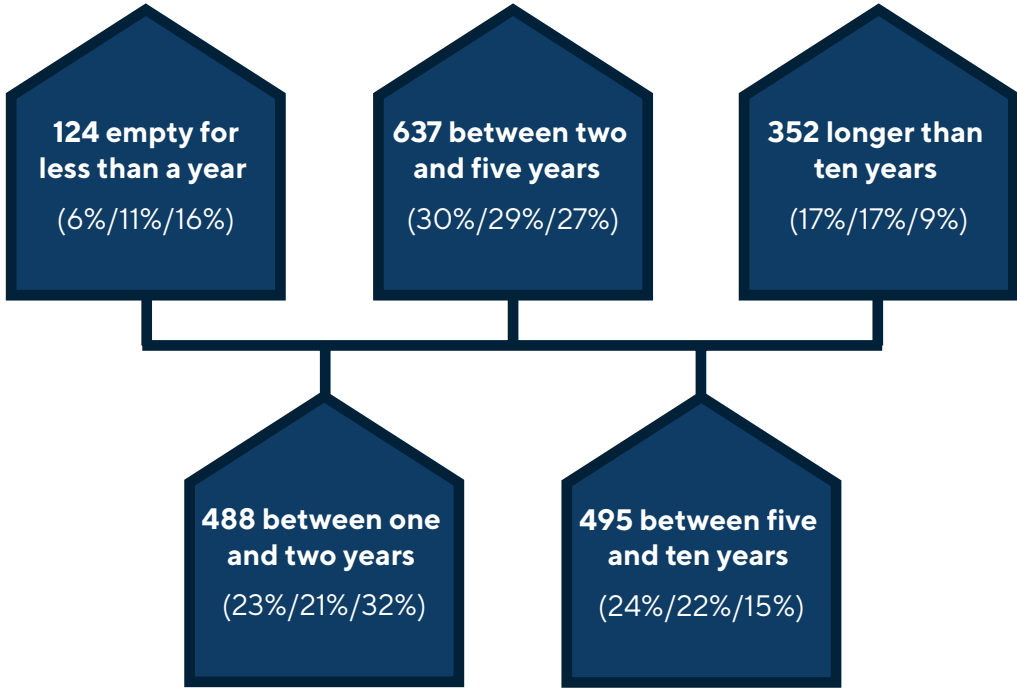
Properties brought back into use

(%’s show 2021/2020/2019)



Active caseload

(%’s show 2021/2020/2019)



National, regional and local empty homes figures

2020 saw record increases in the number of long-term empty homes across the UK.

Figures published by the Scottish Government in December showed that the number of homes empty for six months or longer had increased by almost 16% from 40,963 in 2019 to 47,333 in 2020.

Almost two thirds of these (30,551) had been empty for one year or more. This was an increase of 3,405 from the 2019 total, indicating that while a lot of empty homes are returned to use within a year, a significant percentage are not. With the number of homes empty between 6 and 12 months also increasing (from 13,817 to 16,782) in 2020, there is the danger of a further significant increase in homes empty for more than a year when this year's figures are published.

The pandemic has been a big driver of the increases, with more homes becoming empty and more homes remaining empty, as renovation work was put on hold, rental properties stood vacant, people put off house moves and private sector landlords held back on further investment in the property market.

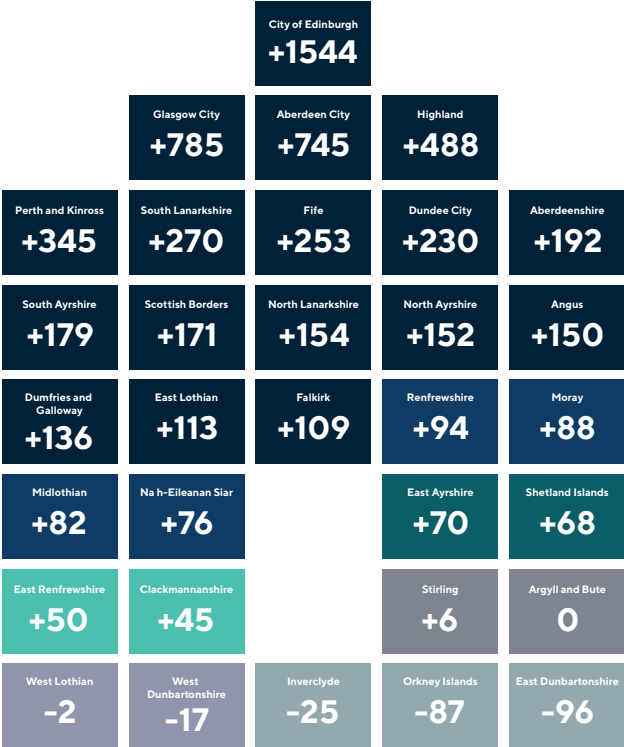
However, the impact of the pandemic was not uniform across the country. While seven local authorities saw more than a 25% increase in numbers of long-term empty properties, five saw a reduction in their overall total. Nonetheless, this was still eight fewer than in 2019 when 13 local authorities reported a fall.

Looking beyond the pandemic, in any given year, the empty homes landscape varies significantly, both across and within local authorities.

There are 6,976 data zones in Scotland. These vary in geographical size and number of dwellings. National Records of Scotland began publishing data zone level information on empty homes in 2019. The most recent statistics, published in the summer of 2020, showed that while more than 10% of data zones had no long-term empty homes, in 245 data zones (3.5%) more than 5% of residential properties were long-term empty. Our 2020 paper on Empty homes in Dundee City found that two thirds of the city's empty homes were concentrated in data zones covering a third of its housing stock.

Change in numbers of long-term* Empty Homes in Scotland by local authority between 2019 and 2020

*Properties empty for more than 6 months

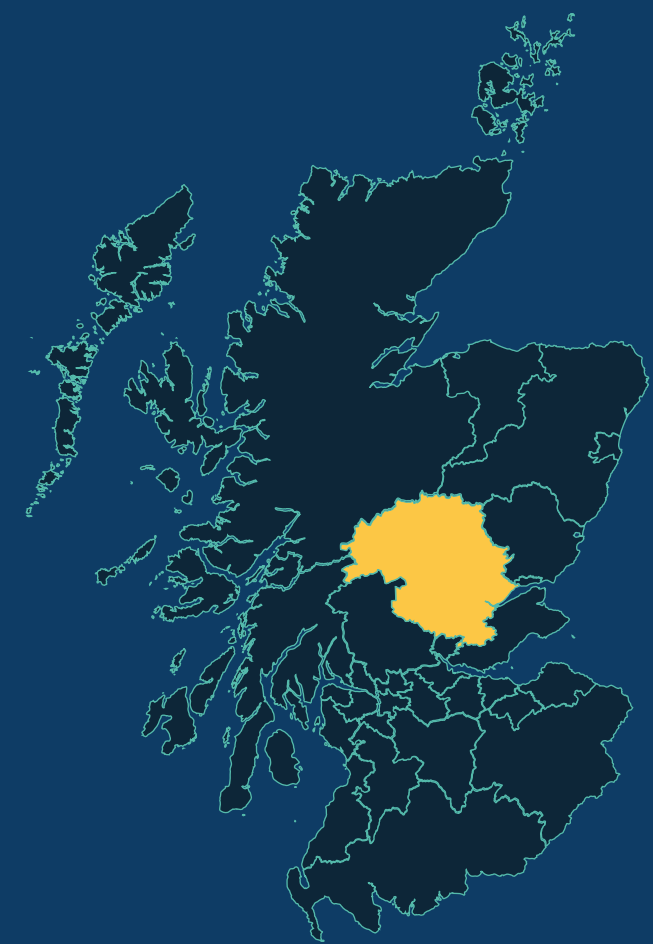


Local authority	% of properties LTE	Total data zones	Data zones with no LTE homes	Data zones with 5% or more LTE Properties
Aberdeen City	3.17	283	4	53
Aberdeenshire	2.52	340	10	22
Angus	2.37	155	6	11
Argyle and Bute	2.75	125	5	10
City of Edinburgh	2.22	597	20	38
Clackmannanshire	0.63	72	19	0
Dumfries and Galloway	2.36	201	5	11
Dundee	1.59	188	28	5
East Ayrshire	1.31	163	24	4
East Dunbartonshire	0.37	130	43	0
East Lothian	0.77	132	18	0
East Renfrewshire	0.30	122	54	0
Falkirk	1.06	214	27	1
Fife	1.50	494	36	14
Glasgow City	0.87	746	105	7
Highland	1.76	312	10	3
Midlothian	0.73	115	19	0
Moray	2.02	126	5	7
North Ayrshire	1.45	186	17	3
North Lanarkshire	1.04	447	48	2
Orkney Islands	2.54	29	0	3
Inverclyde	1.73	114	17	7
Perth and Kinross	1.77	186	10	5
Renfrewshire	0.71	225	41	0
Scottish Borders	2.46	143	4	8
Shetland	4.63	30	0	12
South Ayrshire	1.35	153	9	1
South Lanarkshire	0.82	431	72	4
Stirling	1.44	121	13	4
West Dunbartonshire	1.19	121	14	2
West Lothian	0.78	239	41	0
Western Isles	3.75	36	0	8
Scotland	1.59	6976	724	245

SEHP will be continuing to work with local authorities during the coming year to analyse empty homes data and support the development of empty homes strategies and other initiatives targeted at bringing homes back to use and increasing available housing stock.

What happens to homes brought back into use

EHOs provided us with information on the outcomes of the cases that they had concluded during the year. Whilst the volume of work able to be done by owners had been somewhat restricted for a time due to the pandemic, the responses received have allowed a snapshot of how properties have been utilised when back in use.



Case study – providing effective support

Empty over 7 years – brought back into use through EHO intervention

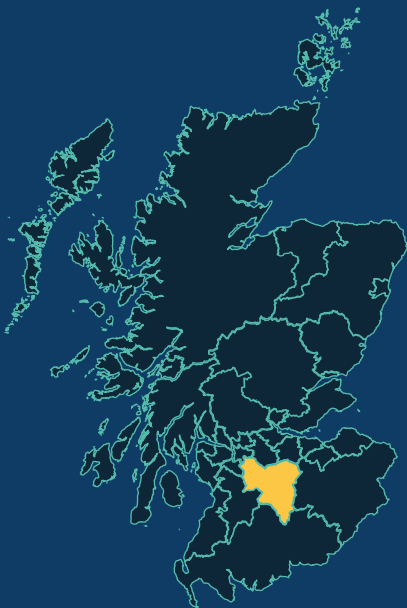
Two semi detached cottages on the outskirts of Perth had been empty for seven years when they came to the attention of the EHOs through their interrogation of council tax records. Contact with the properties’ original owner was made, through which the officer was able to establish that the buildings had remained empty after a previous tenancy ended. With no new tenants to let the properties out to, they fell into disrepair, further diminishing their value.

Having persuaded the original owner to sell the properties, the officers reached out to the buyer, who was provided with VAT and merchant discounts to assist with renovation of the property. They were also provided with discretion from the long-term council tax levy, allowing additional financial relief to assist their efforts to bring the properties back onto the market.

The properties were returned to the rental market, and have now been let out to new tenants with council tax returned to the standard rate for the property band. Situated in a semi rural area with a strong agricultural economy, these new homes have made a valuable contribution to housing supply and continue to ensure the viability of the local community.

Dedicated EHO in every local authority in Scotland

EHOs play a vital role in bringing empty homes back to life. The regular, proactive contact made to owners of empty properties can nudge them into action. This combined with practical guidance and support is often the catalyst needed for the home to be brought back into use. In instances where the owner cannot be traced, the EHO can start investigative enquiries that can lead to results, and importantly, can be the single point of contact for a distressed neighbour or community member.



Case study - unlocked with EHO intervention

Empty since 2009 - unlocked with EHO intervention

A one-bedroom flat in South Lanarkshire had been lying empty for over 12 years. The executor of the estate had emigrated to Canada without dealing with the property and there were over £11,000 of council tax arrears that had accrued. The EHO uncovered the elderly owner’s contact details and wrote out offering advice and assistance. This prompted the owner to take action and a family friend got in contact on the owner’s behalf. The EHO, with the owner’s permission, was able to discuss options available and confirm the position on council tax arrears. The family friend subsequently bought the flat, and with the EHO’s support, accessed VAT discounts for renovation works. The property has been repaired, is now let out and council tax arrears have been cleared.

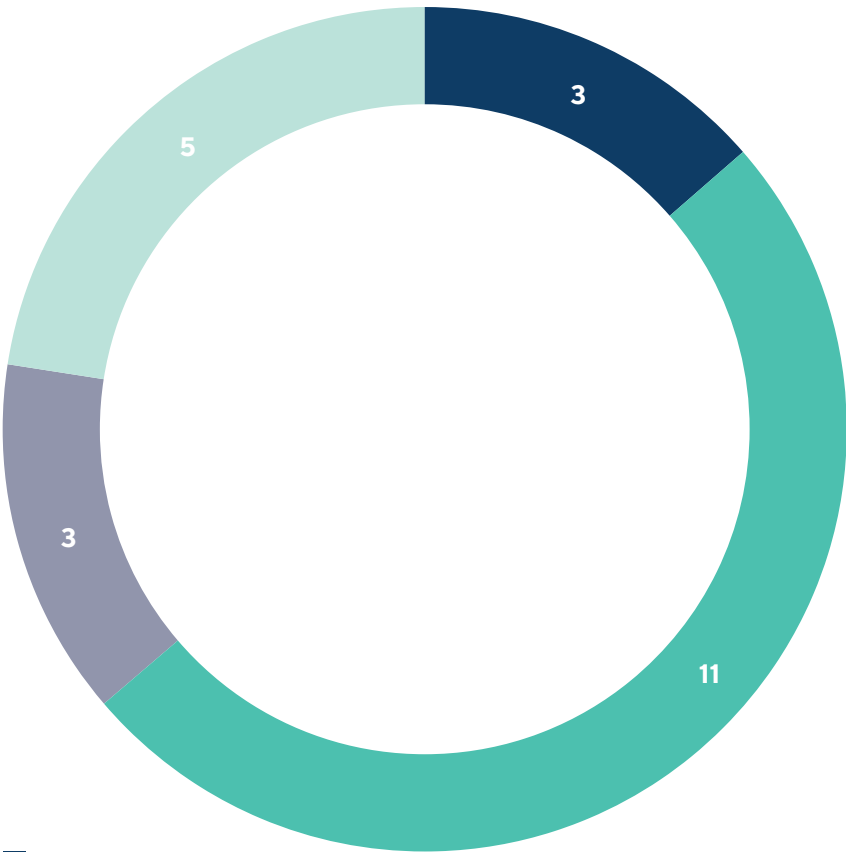
This approach combined with an empty homes strategy cannot be overstressed. It is crucial that any strategy considers the broad spectrum of empty homes issues and identifies the problems and opportunities that exist in a local authority’s area, including a clear view of where suitable empty properties may help to address housing need.

We asked councils the following question in our survey:

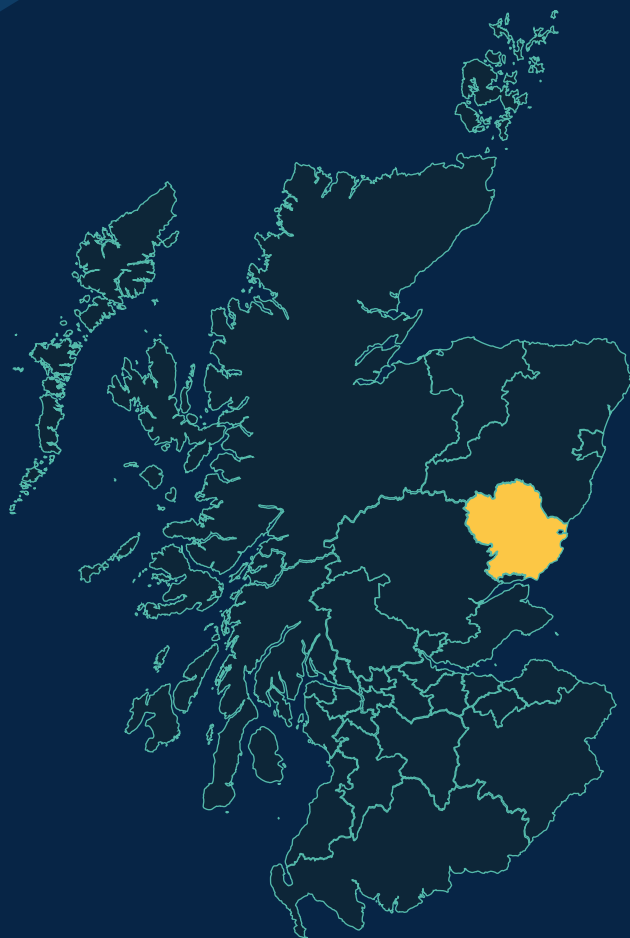
“Please tell us what % FTE (full time equivalent) is dedicated to empty homes work in your council?”

This is important, as an officer with competing priorities will have little time for the proactive engagement with owners that sees results.

We would like to see smaller councils have at least 50% FTE as a minimum but think in many authorities there is scope for more than 1 EHO. This is reflected in the large caseload that each officer holds, and it is positive to note that 3 councils now employ more than one officer for empty homes work. We are pleased to announce that since the survey, 2 new councils have committed to full time empty homes work and recruitment is underway.



- FTE >100%**
3 councils replied they had full and part time posts
- FTE 100%**
11 councils replied they had a full time post
- FTE <100%**
3 councils replied they had a part time post
- FTE <50%**
5 councils replied that empty homes work was part of role



Case study – working with social housing providers

Industrial mill empty over 20 years – linked to council’s strategic plan and converted into social housing

Baltic Mill, a former industrial building in Arbroath, had been lying vacant and unused since 1990. Having been built in 1861, the building was later used as a whisky bond after its use as a working mill ended. The property was identified in 2016 as a potential site for redevelopment as housing and was bought over by developers who offered the property to Hillcrest Homes for provision of social housing.

Angus Council, in their role as strategic housing authority, identified the building as being in an area of sufficient housing need, warranting inclusion of the project in their 2016–2021 Strategic Housing Investment Plan. This gives additional priority to buildings which are being brought back into use, allowing funds to be allocated to the development from the Scottish Government’s Affordable Housing Supply Programme.

The redevelopment of the building has resulted in an additional 24 homes being made available for social rent in the town, which was made possible through partnership working between Angus Council and Hillcrest Homes. This partnership working also enabled joint working between all parties to overcome obstacles, the most significant of which was a flood risk which was identified at the planning stage, resulting in modifications being made to the original plans for the development.

The conversion was completed in early 2021 after a short delay caused by the pandemic and has made a significant contribution to the number of properties brought into use by Angus Council during the last financial year, and has also resulted in the preservation of a prominent local historical landmark. All 24 housing units are now occupied, the building taking on a renewed purpose providing additional social housing for housing association tenants in Arbroath.

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. During the period of this report the SEHP, part funded Kickstarter projects across 4 local authorities.

The funding comes with consultancy support from the empty homes team as well as an advisory steer. Any council that does not have an EHO can be provided with tailored empty homes information that can help to make the case for a service. Most recently, 2 new local authorities, Highland Council and Scottish Borders Council have signed a contract to employ a dedicated EHO.

Aberdeen City

The part funding for the Aberdeen EHO post ended in January 2021 and subsequently the postholder has been made permanent. There have been some notable achievements from the service, from 175 properties reported back into use over a 2 year period, to the ground-breaking Matchmaker scheme which will be covered separately, as well as the joined up working with third sector organisations across the city. This has led to Aberdeen Cyrenians planning to renovate and refurbish about 70 empty properties over the next few years to meet their specific temporary accommodation challenges. The EHO has successfully linked council strategic priorities to empty homes work and has set up a working group with other internal teams to progress any stuck homes.

Western Isles

The EHO in the Western Isles was part funded until September 2020 after which the council continued with the post. The immense success over this period includes 110 empty properties back into use, sustainment of fragile areas, engagement with local community groups and agreed discounts with merchants across the isles. There have been challenges with the service specifically empty homes becoming holiday lets and vice versa. An internal decision was made to encourage support for owners creating homes for people that want to live on the islands.

South Lanarkshire

The EHO post started in South Lanarkshire in August 2020 under lockdown restrictions, but despite this, the service has been established and benefits from clear direction and support from line management. The EHO has reviewed all letters that can be sent to owners, has set up a database for enquiries and has started to engage proactively with owners. A new web page has been created to make the service visible as well as the option for members of the public to report an empty home online.

The EHO has recognised the limited options available to owners so has proposed initiatives that have worked elsewhere to complement advice and assistance. This includes a policy that has been approved to include empty homes in the council's Open Market Purchase Scheme (OPMS) as well as the introduction of a small enabling budget to support owners to bring empty homes back into use.

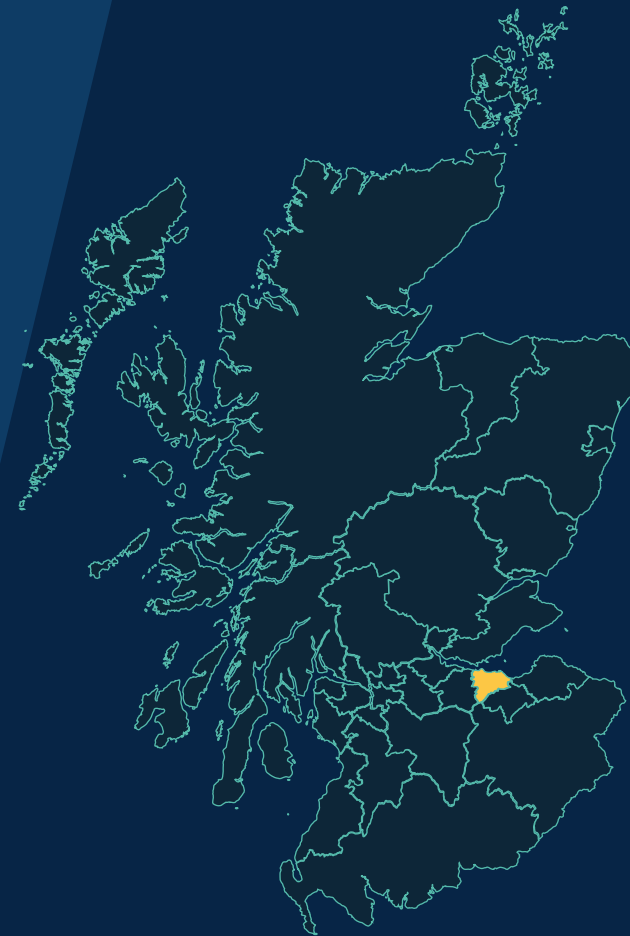
City of Edinburgh

The City of Edinburgh Council Kickstarter started in November 2019, with the service being launched in January 2020. The council has its own unique challenges, but at a time of significant pressure on housing supply, the local authority recognised the importance of bringing empty homes back into use.

The initial empty homes work, focused on dealing with an ongoing backlog of historic cases that had been empty for a significant period, needed considerable time and possibly enforcement. This combined with on average 5 new reports being made by the public weekly, and significant numbers of reports coming from the Edinburgh Shared Repairs Service, left little effort for proactive engagement or the opportunity to link empty homes work to the housing challenges faced. Despite this, the EHO has built up relationships with the Assessors, Edinburgh Shared Repairs Service (ESRS), Pest Control, Environmental Health & other internal teams to support the empty homes work and increase awareness of the service. New policies for the service are being reviewed, such as the recommendation to waive the Council Tax premium, where it can be evidenced that steps are being taken to bring an empty home back into use.

Recently, there have been meetings with colleagues in the Homelessness Team to discuss how empty homes work can help support the Council's need to find more accommodation for homeless households through a private sector leasing scheme and/or a buy back policy. There have also been discussions with Link Housing Association that may lead to an option for repair and lease. Empty homes is now included on the agenda for the Council's internal Private Housing Working Group meetings, to ensure the work is captured and reported on within a wider strategic forum.

A review of the published empty homes strategies of other authorities has been carried out and a draft created of a proposed policy for Edinburgh reflecting the Council's priorities and aims for the empty homes role.



Case study - unmotivated beneficiary

Empty since 1998 - unlocked with EHO intervention

This detached property situated in a desirable area of Edinburgh, had been left empty for over 23 years. The previous owner passed away and the beneficiary was not motivated to take any action. The property had caused a significant blight to the local community, the unattractive overgrown gardens had become homes to pests and the house was a magnet for anti-social behaviour.

After some investigation, the EHO managed to trace the owner and advised of the consequences of not bringing the property back into use. This led to debt recovery proceedings and finally, 20 years later the property was repossessed. The property was sold but although the garden was tidied, the new owners had not moved in. The EHO reached out to the new owners, and it was discovered that work had not started on the property as there was an issue with the electricity supply. 14 months later, with the support of the EHO, the electricity supply issue was resolved. The EHO also made a case for the council tax premium to be waived during this time. At the last visit, works had nearly completed and the family were excited to be moving in soon.

Support the national network of Empty Homes Officers

The SEHP supports the national network of EHOs. This includes providing comprehensive training and introduction to empty homes work for newly recruited officers, advice on complex and difficult cases, ongoing consultancy and advice for the officer network, as well as supporting the case for empty homes work in authorities which are not yet part of the network. To achieve these aims, we organise regular Best Practice Groups, provide topical workshops, deliver face-to-face training and host an annual conference.

The pandemic has presented a challenging environment in which to provide support to the network of officers. Many officers have been working from home and in some cases have had varying access to IT equipment. We reached out to all EHOs at the start of lockdown and had varied responses as detailed below.

“Work laptop has been requisitioned for essential services, with own service effectively shut down for now. Will update when back up & running.”

“We are both currently working from home. We are still managing to engage with empty home owners over the phone but to be honest their empty homes are not their priority at the moment, which is understandable”.

However, after an initial pause in core empty homes work, most EHOs were able to pick up casework in the latter half of the year. There was a clear appetite from officers to engage with their peers, so Best Practice Groups, which were previously held quarterly and split by region, are now held online on a 6-weekly basis. This has provided an opportunity for the officer network to discuss the shifts in their working requirements, to share their learnings and successes, and provide mutual support to each other.

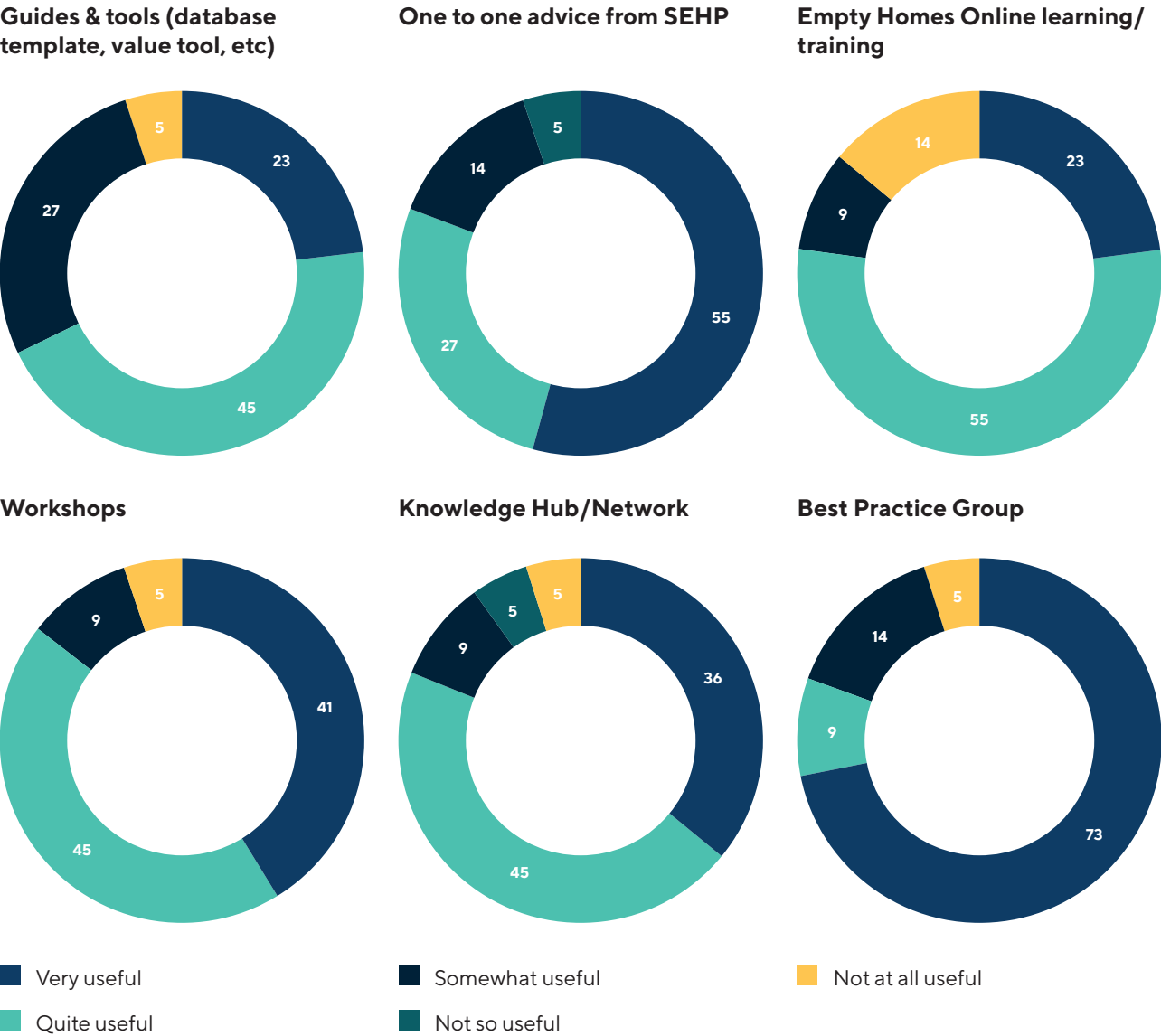
There has been a notable strengthening of the officer network throughout the year with engagement both between officers and with SEHP now at unprecedented levels, which will provide a valuable platform to build upon when pandemic related restrictions are eased.

Feedback obtained from the annual survey revealed that over three quarters of the full time officer network found the Best Practice Groups useful or very useful, echoing predominantly positive responses to all of the work to support the officer network. The feedback received also highlighted some areas for improvement with our guides and tools, whilst empty homes online training and learning was seen as not useful to a small group of senior officers.

Over the course of the year, training was provided for the newly recruited officers in South Lanarkshire and Edinburgh, with eight training sessions provided in total, augmenting the online self study training courses already available. Five supplementary training sessions were also provided to officers where additional training requirements were identified and requested. These included responding to the demands of high caseloads as well as implementing proactive empty homes work as a strategy to increase numbers of properties being brought back into use.

In response to requests from the officer network, a workshop was held in November aimed at providing a comprehensive overview of the repossession process. The workshop was held in conjunction with Aberdeen Considine and UK Finance, and provided an opportunity for common questions and problems to be answered from the perspective of mortgage lenders and their representatives

Feedback on support to EHO Network



Empty properties subject to repossession proceedings account for some of the most complex and challenging cases for Empty Homes Officers, in particular due to the importance of respecting GDPR requirements. The session provided an insight into the legal process, increasing understanding of the legal terminology involved and the options available to both lenders and owners at all stages of the process.

This has been followed up with the publication of reference guide for use by the officer network, which has been published on the SEHP website and made available to the network of Empty Homes Officers. The provision of this resource is intended to provide an additional layer of support for the officer network when their investigations reveal that a property may be subject to repossession proceedings.

With the network set to increase in size in 2021, the support we provide to Empty Homes Officers continues to play an important role in ensuring that connections are established and maintained with their peers across the country. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will continue to play a key role in continuing relationships with the network as a whole and with individual officers.

2021 Scottish Empty Homes Conference

The Scottish Empty Homes Conference moved online and expanded this year with a digital event held over three mornings at the start of February.

While the new format was a direct consequence of the pandemic, it meant we could expand our range of speakers and topics as well as welcoming new audiences from across the country who had found it difficult to attend previous conferences.

The theme of the conference was Providing Homes, Helping Recovery and was an opportunity for us to reflect on what has been achieved across the first decade of the partnership as well as to look at current challenges.

Housing Minister Kevin Stewart MSP opened the conference, reaffirming the Scottish Government’s commitment to tackling the problem of empty homes, before a wide range of experts spoke about the way the pandemic had transformed the empty homes landscape, the challenges and opportunities of the year ahead, and the achievements of empty homes services across the country.

Presentations from the Vice President of COSLA and the National Policy and Advocacy Manager for Shelter Scotland, both emphasised the important role that bringing empty homes back into use has to play in addressing the shortage of social housing that was brought into sharp focus by the pandemic.

Looking wider than Covid-19, the conference heard how empty homes work was helping to rebuild and sustain communities in the Western Isles, how, elsewhere in the UK, empty homes were being used to help victims of domestic violence transition to independent living, and how many Scottish councils are already using previously empty homes to provide good quality social housing to people at risk of homelessness.

All of this demonstrated once more the role that empty homes can play in transforming communities and improving the lives of some of the most vulnerable members of our society.

Scottish Empty Homes Champion of the Year Awards

Over the past 10 years the Scottish Empty Homes Champion of the Year Awards have showcased and celebrated the achievements of Empty Homes Officers, housing associations, community groups and other individuals and organisations who have worked to bring empty private sector properties back into use.

The awards this year were sponsored by Fraser & Fraser Genealogists and International Probate Researchers.

The four award categories were:

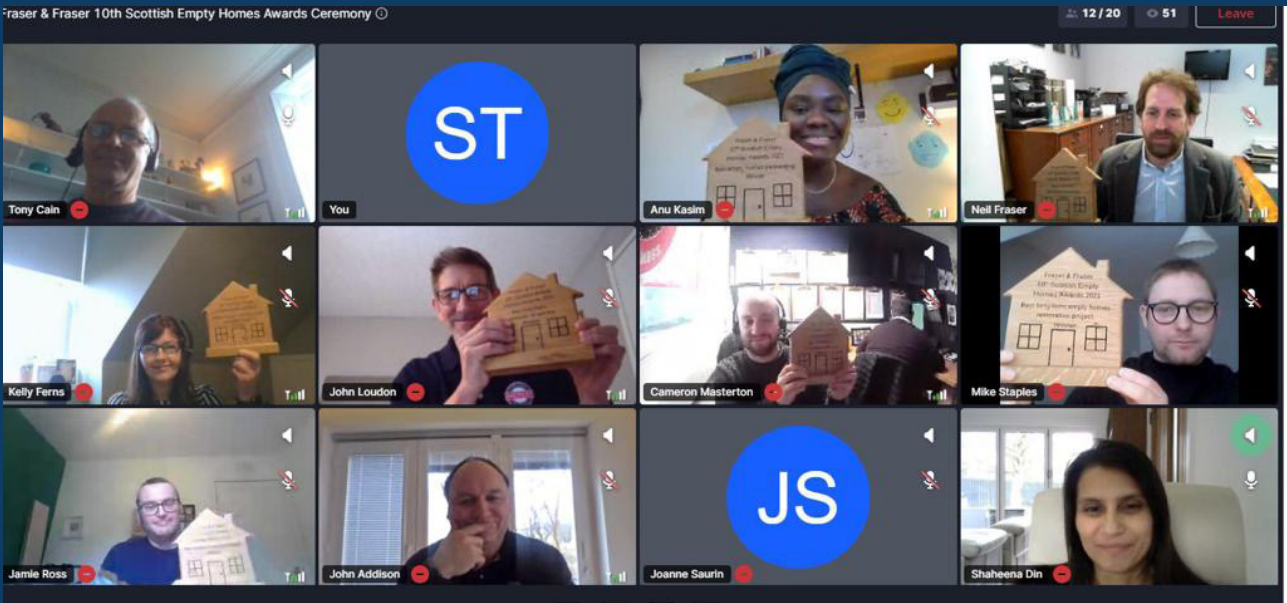
Outstanding Empty Homes Officer – for an individual EHO or other local authority employee who has contributed the most to bringing empty homes back in to use.

Best Empty Homes partnership – for a partner organisation or team that has made an outstanding contribution to reducing the number of empty homes.

Best Long-term Empty Homes Restoration Project – for the best long-term empty property brought back in to use, and;

Best Merchant, Contractor or Service – a new award for a company or individual who has gone above and beyond to bring empty homes back in to use.

Over the next two pages we look at the winners and shortlisted entrants from each of the categories.



Outstanding Empty Homes Officer

Joanne Saurin: Empty Homes Officer, Fife Council
The judges recognised Joanne Saurin for her amazing work with Fife Council which has included her work to bring 395 properties back in to use since taking up her post in 2014.

Even during the Covid pandemic, Joanne has worked to review the council’s empty homes strategy and submitted a proposal to change the terms of the council’s empty homes loan fund to make the scheme more attractive to owners in Fife. Judges were particularly impressed with Joanne’s ability to work on the strategic direction of the service as well as bringing so many homes back in to use, alongside her ability to build relationships with owners and investors.

Other shortlisted entrants:

Katrina Morrison, Perth & Kinross Council
Dawn Cadwell, East Ayrshire Council

Best Empty Homes Partnership

Aberdeen City Council Empty Homes Working Group

The Empty Homes Working Group at Aberdeen City Council is a group of professionals from across the council identified by the Empty Homes Service. They include; Empty Homes Officer; Housing Strategy; Council Tax; Housing Access Service; Private Sector Housing; Energy Officer; Solicitors; Environmental Health; Planners; and Building Standards.

The judges felt that the group embodied partnership working in the city to target empty homes. Key outcomes that impressed the judges were bringing in excess of 130 empty properties back to use; using discretionary powers to support engaging owners who need financial support; access to council tax and recovery staff to cut waiting times, and; the success of a Matchmaker scheme to match owners of properties with tenants and/or buyers.

Please see page 29 of this report for more about the Aberdeen Matchmaker Scheme.

Other shortlisted entrants:

Angus Council Housing Enablement Team
Glasgow City Council Empty Homes Service



Best Long-term empty homes restoration project

Moniaive Initiative & South of Scotland Community Housing for Sawmill Green, Moniaive Nominated by: Mike Staples, South of Scotland Community Housing.

Judges awarded the “Best Long-term Restoration project” to South of Scotland Community Housing and Moniaive Initiative for brining Sawmill Green back in to use, transforming it into a fully accessible amenity home, meeting local housing need in a rural area after it had been lying empty for 13 years.

A feasibility award was attained from the Scottish Government’s Rural Housing Fund to appraise the condition of the property and works required to entirely reconfigure the house. This led to a successful application for capital grant from the Rural Housing Fund and the award of a grant from SSE’s regional Sustainable Development Fund to acquire, strip out and reconfigure the house as a fully accessible amenity home.

Other shortlisted entrants:

Buckstone, Edinburgh – Nominated by: John Addison, City of Edinburgh Council
Victoria Street, Rothesay – Nominated by: Kelly Ferns, Argyll & Bute Council



Best Merchant, contractor or service

Howden’s Joinery, Inverness

Howden’s Joinery in Inverness impressed the judges by their willingness to go the extra mile to help bring empty homes back in to use, particularly in harder to reach areas.

The branch was described as “instrumental” in helping to provide kitchens and other materials to empty home owners. The judges noted that, with a high-quality product and competitive prices, empty home owners have been able to afford the kitchen they really want which can make all the difference when seeking to rent out or sell a property.

Other shortlisted entrants:

Fraser & Fraser – Genealogists & International Probate Researcher
Auction House Scotland – Residential property



Mainstreaming empty homes work

Our ambition to mainstream empty homes work

Empty homes can be an opportunity for local authorities to meet their housing supply challenges. Bringing a portion of these homes back into use 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 25 local authorities that completed our annual survey in full, 14 reported that they had a dedicated empty homes strategy. 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. These are important as they can help to unlock some of the homes that are stuck due to economic decline.

Furthermore, 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 is more likely to be retained.

Case study – established mainstream service

Glasgow City Council – complex legal issues when empty homes work is mainstreamed in the council.

The owner of this property died in July 2013, but it transpired that the flat was omitted from the estate. A local Housing Association reported it as empty in 2018 to the Glasgow empty homes service. Investigations carried out by the EHO, uncovered confirmation of the estate and contact details for the executor.

This turned out to be a complex case with legal issues around ownership, that required involvement of solicitors that had previously dealt with the estate, as well as ongoing engagement with the executor and housing association. Following considerable collaborative working by all involved parties, which was led and co-ordinated by the EHO, the property was sold to the Housing Association. It will require major repairs to make it habitable again but once complete will help to address housing demand in the area.

Glasgow has clear outcomes in their empty housing strategy as detailed below, and bringing this property back into use meets much of its objective:

- Increase the availability of housing stock to meet demand, providing good-quality accommodation for those who need it;
- Offer home owners information and advice to help bring properties back into use;
- Identify opportunities for suitable housing for particular groups, such as larger families, homeless people, and those with a variety of support needs;
- Tackle environmental and neighbourhood blight; and
- Safeguard the interest of tenement flat owners to facilitate common repairs work.



Aberdeen City Council Matchmaker Schemes

Anu Kasim, Empty Homes Officer for Aberdeen City Council, tells us about the Council's Matchmaker Schemes. The scheme was one of the initiatives that saw The Empty Homes Working Group in Aberdeen win this year's Best Empty Homes Partnership award at our 2021 annual conference.

In the last 5 years, Aberdeen's housing market has suffered from market failure due to the downturn in oil and gas plus most recently effects from Covid impacting income and lifestyle, an oversupply of homes alongside a high demand of specific types of homes available in the private sector but more needed in the social or affordable sector.

The Aberdeen City's Local Housing Strategy 2018 – 2023 has a strategic outcome to ensure there is an adequate supply of housing. Empty homes work is part of a holistic solution to contribute to solving housing supply issues.

The City's Empty Homes Service has kickstarted its contribution to increased supply in housing via our Matchmaker Schemes. The Matchmaker Schemes aim to introduce owners of empty homes who are looking to sell or rent their property to potential buyers or tenants.

Aberdeen City Council's Matchmaker schemes draw on three elements as its critical success factors:

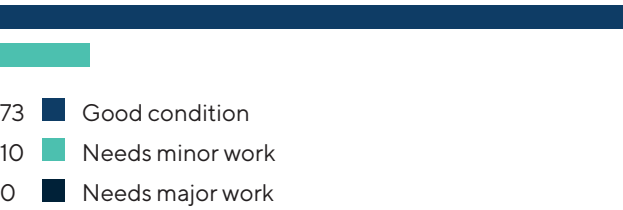
1. Expanding and improving best practise.

The Matchmaker scheme which involves the selling and purchase of an empty property is not a new concept amongst Empty Homes Officers in Scotland. However, Aberdeen City decided to expand on it and extend it from the original Matchmaker to Sell scheme to create a 2nd branch which is the Matchmaker to Rent scheme where owners are matched with potential renters on our housing waiting lists.

We did this for two reasons:

- I. large numbers of people on our waiting list needing 1 bed property.
- II. a current over supply of available properties for rent in the private sector which have been empty for 6 months or more as evidenced in our forms to landlords currently registered on the scheme which shows that most of the properties on the scheme are in a good condition and available for immediate occupation.

Condition of property

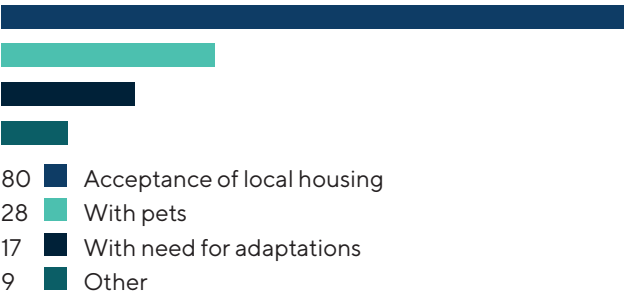


2. Collaboration and embracing cross dependencies that exist within the council.

The Empty Homes Service Working Group, that consists of members from 11 different key housing-related teams in the council and beyond has built a close working relationship to ensure a joined up approach to target empty homes in the city.

Its success would not be possible without the continuous collaboration between all parties. One of the key actions from the group via the Matchmaker to Rent Scheme is to promote the use of the Private Rented Sector, where appropriate, to reduce demand on social housing. As evidenced below, this approach has shown that owners/ landlords in the private rented sector are willing to rent to households in acceptance of the Local Housing Allowance whom are currently working with our Housing Advice and Homelessness Teams.

Types of tenants you are happy to have



The Matchmake to Rent (MM2Rent) scheme now forms a key part of the advice given by Housing Officers with the website page also referenced when speaking to customers about housing options.

3. Embracing digital solutions.

Use of different technological platforms have helped break barriers in communication between the Service and our customers. Our use of digital forms helps foster engagement with all age groups; cuts out middle-man bureaucracies and fosters proactive self-service.

Our key attributes in achieving this has been to create a platform that:

- a) Is easy to access on phone or computer;
- b) Is simple to use with an average time to complete of about 15-20 minutes; fosters self-service and
- c) Holds key information and signposting to other appropriate services where required.

To conclude, in less than 12 months, the service has had 103 owner registrations on the Matchmaker scheme with 17 of those registered now back into use as well as 29 buyer/investor registrations.

Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service

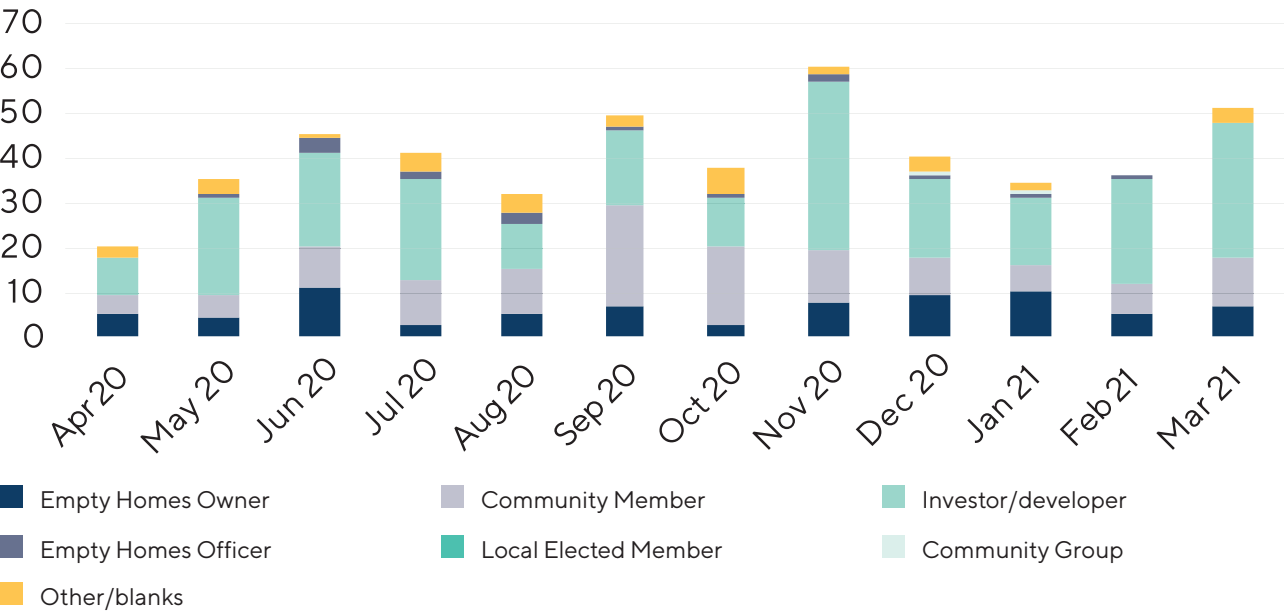
The Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service (SEHAS) uses specialist knowledge to provide advice and information to anyone concerned about empty properties. The service works collaboratively with empty homes practitioners, local authority private sector teams and other organisations to drive forward empty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

Following a holistic review of the service in 2018/19 and work undertaken to maximise visibility and reach of the SEHAS in 2019/20, the service has received 480 contacts, an increase of 73% from the previous year. This increase comes at a time when people were asked to work from home and remain in their local areas for large parts of the year. It is thought that this may have accounted for some of the increase of reports of empty homes from members of the public. However, there has been a significant

increase in contact from investors particularly those expressing interest to join the matchmaker scheme. A factor in this may be the presence of an online form on the SEHP website. Changes were made to the matchmaker process in June 2020 to limit the number of speculative referrals made to EHOs by the service. SEHAS advisers contact all those completing the online form to gain further information to aid referral.

Who contacts SEHAS?

Contact by type



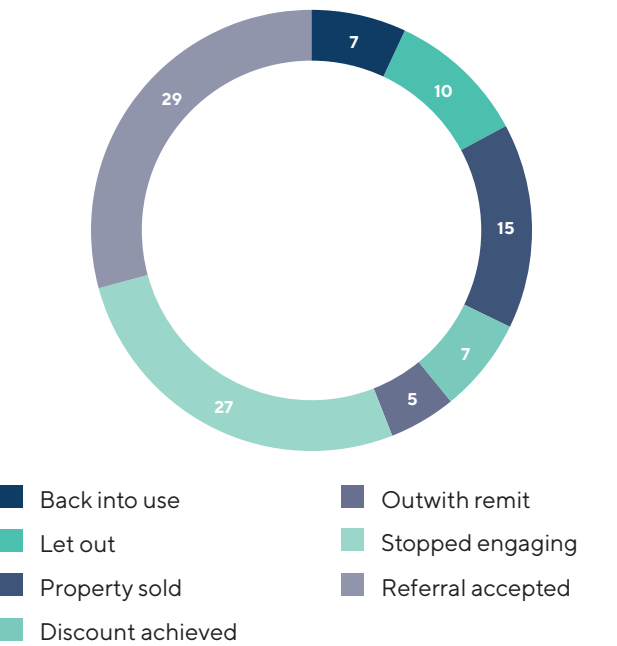
Throughout 2020 the Senior Empty Homes Adviser carried out a user journey analysis by contact group, looking at how users contact the service, why, and where the service can have the most impact.

Empty Homes Owners Users Journey:

	Aware	Join	Use	Develop	Leave
Channel(s) Means of communication	Word of mouth Facebook ads Council/other	Call Email Complete form	Response within 1 business day	Came back for follow up advice	Case follow up diary date set or closed
Context What's going on?	Home is empty costing/losing money	Get advice to help solve the problem	Options discussed	Referral to EHO where available	Can come back for follow up advice
Satisfaction How do they feel?	Stressed Overwhelmed Angry	Supported Informed Calmer	Options are helpful/unhelpful	Relief or informed but stuck	Relief

Through this, it was found working with owners is where the service can be most effective. The options range from accessing discounts, council tax discretion and exemptions, joint casework with EHOs or providing initial advice and referring on. Where there is no EHO, the adviser works with the owner to find a solution to their empty property. The graph below outlines the outcomes reached for owners who have contacted the service. Where an outcome is known, 68% of these have been positive, with the owner either being referred on, receiving a discount, selling or letting the property, or bring it back into use in another way.

Owners outcome (%)




The SEHAS recognises the collaborative work with EHOs in achieving discounts and bringing properties back into use.

In January 2021 the Senior Empty Homes Adviser contacted all owners who had been in touch with the service within an 18-month period to ask them to complete an online survey on their experience of the empty homes service and to establish what was the catalyst in them seeking advice. We sent out 120 surveys and received 30 responses back (25% response rate). We then contacted those who were happy for us to, to carry out more in-depth qualitative information to inform service development and improvement. 3 qualitative interviews were carried out with owners. Understanding the owner's journey will help to refocus the service to ensure that the SEHAS can target its resources more effectively.

As part of the wider work to engage with owners a Cost of an Empty Homes Calculator has been developed. This calculator sits on the SEHP website and is in two parts. The first part is an average cost calculator that allows the user to simply pick the costs applicable and this works out the average costs of having an empty home. There is then the option to contact the advice service, end the session there or continue to the next section which goes into more detail and allows the user to enter their own costs. The aim of the calculator is to generate contacts from owners and also to help to demonstrate that leaving the home empty is not really an option. The calculator has had a soft launch on our social media channels in February and has had 4 users complete with 2 coming through for further advice. Going into this year and with further promotion it is anticipated that more engagement will be generated.

The SEHP social media channels launched in September 2020 over Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. The strategy has focused on testing different messaging with the aim of encouraging more empty homes owners to use the SEHAS and to build the SEHP brand. Facebook growth has been greater than on the other channels receiving new followers and collecting over one hundred engagements every month. Twitter has seen a similar growth pattern (although at a lesser extent) as Facebook while LinkedIn growth has been relatively mixed.



Scottish Empty Homes Partnership

Published by Rebecca Malcolm · 3 March ·

Do you own an empty property and don't know what to do with it?

Many empty home owners don't realise how many options are available to them. We can provide you with all the essential information to ensure that bringing your empty home back into use is an easy process.

Get in touch with us today: <https://bit.ly/3h238Ha>



Building on the first phase of the social media strategy a new campaign will be launched in the coming months that will focus on Empty Homes \ Officers. This campaign will run over all three channels and showcase the positive impact that Empty Homes Officers have on empty homes owners and local communities. Case studies will be used to outline successful projects and include images or videos. The purpose of this is to encourage owners to engage with the SEHP and their local empty homes service, while also urging local authorities to employ Empty Homes Officers.

Service Aims 2021/22

- Maintain annual contact to the SEHAS at between 450-480 contacts annually.
- Contact from owners to make up 25% of all enquiries.
- Inform policy and practice through identifying key themes and trends in advice.
- Maintain and develop a digital platform for the SEHAS.

Calculator: Cost of an Empty Home

Which local authority is the empty property in?

Select Your Local Authority

What Council Tax band is the property in?

Average monthly cost from Council Tax band: Average monthly water charge from Council Water

Select Your Band

When did the property become empty?

Why did the property become empty?

☐ Inherited

☐ Abandonment

☐ Major Damage

☐ Difficulty selling

☐ Difficulty Letting

☐ Owner in care

☐ Owner passed away

☐ Relationship breakdown

☐ Bought with the intention to sell/let

☐ Owner moving without selling

☐ Other

Monthly Standing Charges (tick all that apply)

Average Energy costs from Council, Average Insurance costs from MoneySuperMarket, Average Factoring costs from Council Housing

☐ Gas

☐ Electric

☐ Insurance

☐ Factoring

Other Monthly Costs (tick all that apply)

Average security and maintenance costs from the Scottish Empty Property Initiative

☐ Security

☐ Maintenance

How much is your mortgage per month?

What is the potential monthly rental income of the property?

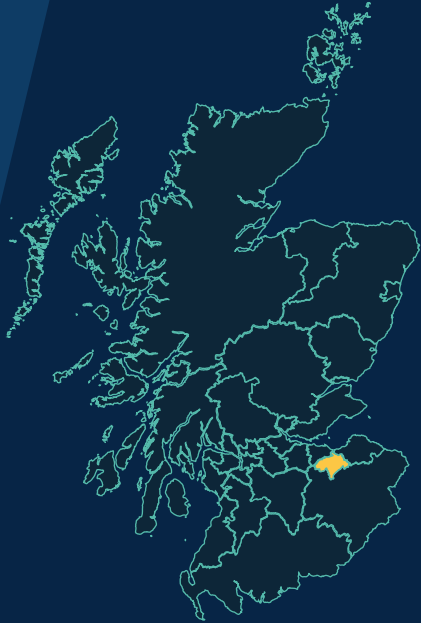
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Your Empty Home Is Costing You Per Month : £ 0.0

Would you like more information or assistance?

Submit more information

Next



Bill Harrison / Council Houses / CC BY-SA 2.0

Case study – supported by the Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service

Empty over 14 years – brought back into use with support from the advice service

The advice service took a call from an owner, whose property had been empty for 14 years after the previous tenant left. The property required work including a new kitchen, bathroom, boiler and general décor. The owner had been paying the increased council tax levy for a few years and this together with the ongoing mortgage repayments made it difficult to fund any renovations. Contact was made with the advice service to inquire about any available funding that could be accessed.

The property is in an area where there is no Empty Homes Loan Fund available. The SEHAS adviser was able to advise on eligible VAT discounts, how to access these, potential grants and loans from the Energy Savings Trust and advice on letting or selling the property. The option of placing the property on the market in its current condition was discussed, weighing up any reduction in current value against the ongoing costs and costs of renovation. The adviser also suggested that a request for discretion from the council tax levy could be made.

The owner stayed in touch, and after carrying out work to clear the property and to tidy the garden area, the owner chose to place the property on the market. The adviser assisted the owner to request discretion from the increased levy for the period from April 2020 due to COVID restrictions, by providing a draft letter, outlining relevant section of the guidance.

The owner received an offer on the property and following a request for discretion, the council refunded £472.52 from their council tax bill.

Council tax and empty homes

Regulation 3 of the Council Tax (Variation for Unoccupied Dwellings) (Scotland) Regulations 2013 establishes a statutory council tax discount of 50% for unoccupied dwellings and second homes.

However, to encourage property owners to bring their properties back into use and discourage properties being left empty for long periods, the regulations allow councils to both remove the discount and increase the level of council tax payable on these properties in specified circumstances. This gives local authorities the power to apply a surcharge of up to 100% when properties have been empty for 12 months or over (or for two years where they are being actively marketed for sale or rent).

The regulations specify that this power 'may be exercised to make different modifications for different cases or different classes of case, including for different areas.' This is often referred to as discretionary application of the surcharge.

All but two local authorities apply the long-term empty property surcharge. Of the 24 local authorities that completed the survey, 18 noted that they have a policy to use discretion when applying it. However, the extent of discretionary powers varied widely, with some indicating little or no variation from the statutory discounts required under legislation.

Examples of cases where local authorities were applying discretion included;

'If owners can demonstrate that they are taking steps to bring property back into use i.e renovations etc

If owners can clearly demonstrate their property is being actively marketed for a fair and reasonable asking price yet no sale is achieved

If owners can show good reason why they are NOT taking steps to meet policy intention i.e. illness, bereavement, legal issue, which prevents them actively marketing the property etc.

Each case will be assessed individually on its own merits.'

'(i) Where an existing owner commences or resumes activity to bring a long-term empty dwelling back into use.

- (ii) Where the nature of the dwelling is such that it could not reasonably be brought up to a habitable standard within the timescales allowed under existing legislation governing the award of discounts or exemptions.
- (iii) Where conditions, outwith the control of the owner, create a limited market and thereby a negative impact on the time that a dwelling may take to sell.
- (iv) Any other exceptional circumstances outwith the direct control of the owner'

Of the local authorities that did not apply discretion there were mixed views of the impact that this had on their empty homes work.

While one respondent noted 'It can have a negative impact for those who are paying the charge as this reduces the money available to renovate,' another noted that, 'It has not impacted my work in a negative way, rather it has been a useful tool for motivating owners to take action to do something with their property. In a majority of cases owners have had properties empty for a substantial amount of time and would be less likely to take action without the levy.'

While we recognise that there are many cases where it is only the application of the levy that incentivises owners to take action, we still consider that a blanket approach to the levy can be counter-productive, making it harder for people to finance repairs and renovations and in some instances penalising people for owning properties in areas where economic conditions mean that there is little or no demand for property.

However, we also note that there appear to be a significant number of cases where imposition of the surcharge does not lead to an owner engaging with an empty homes officer or making any attempt to return the property to use. In these circumstances, there is an argument to be made for stronger enforcement options in addition to the surcharge, particularly in areas where there is clear unmet demand for housing.

The year ahead

If we are to tackle the numbers of homes becoming, and remaining, long-term empty, the need for councils to have an empty homes strategy, with a clear plan for empty homes in their local areas is paramount.

In practice, this would be an audit of empty homes, particularly those that have been empty for over 12 months, identifying what local neighbourhoods these homes are situated in, and what efforts have been made so far to bring these back into use. This is not possible with a single member of staff carrying out empty homes work, and while EHOs have made, and continue to make an immense contribution to bringing homes back into use, this must be supported by an action plan that sets out the methods that can be used for homes to be brought back into use.

We will continue to raise the profile of empty homes work both at a local and national level and will provide support to any local authority looking for further information in their local area. We will encourage all councils to have an empty homes service and strategy.

We know that further legislative powers are needed, and we will continue to call for Compulsory Sale and Compulsory Rental Order powers so that there are more options available for homes that are causing a blight on the community and cannot be brought back into use with a light touch approach.

We will continue to support the EHO network and will use service design principles to ensure service users are involved in the development of our training and events.

Finally, we want to continue our engagement with empty home owners across Scotland, to understand from their perspective what a package of support could look like.

