

Scottish Empty Homes Partnership

ANNUAL REPORT 2010-11

Summary

The Scottish Empty Home Partnership's Baseline Report prepared in August 2010 revealed that by and large the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership would need to start from square one with councils in terms of building capacity to undertake private sector empty homes work. There were one or two exceptions to this rule and some organisational memory of involvement in the Empty Homes Initiative of 10 years ago, but the most part there seemed to be no lasting legacy from this work in terms of current strategic approaches to private sector empty homes work within councils. The officers who in 2010 were named by Heads of Housing as the lead officer for empty homes work did not have experience in this area and the work was only part of much larger roles such as local housing strategy and the private sector more generally.

Thus the first 10 months of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership have focused on selling the benefits of private sector empty homes work as well as laying the foundations in terms of tools, guides, best practice sharing and networking among councils and their partners.

The barriers identified early on in the project to the development of successful private sector empty homes approaches within councils remain, to varying degrees, the barriers that exist today. These are broadly – data collection; staff resources; and capital funding.

Despite the existence of these barriers, in the first 10 months of the Partnership there has been increased enthusiasm among councils for empty homes work, as evidenced by:

- 9 councils currently drafting an empty homes strategy or action plan;
- an increased expectation among council officers in their capacity to return private sector empty homes back into use;
- a number of applications for empty homes projects to the Innovation and Investment Fund;

- increased awareness of and interest in interventions to bring empty homes back into use;
- 70 members in the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network;
- attendance at the Partnership's training seminars;
- 19 councils signed up to the Report Empty Homes website.

These are all positive developments and point to a growing acceptance of private sector empty homes work within Scotland. In the coming year it will be necessary to move beyond the initial learning and capacity building stages with councils to help them move towards tangible success stories.

The ultimate test of empty homes work is, of course, empty property returned to use. As we will address in greater detail below, this year's survey indicated that only a small handful of empty homes have been brought back into use by 3 councils in the last financial year. These are not a result of the support of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership. Rather, as there is a time lag between the preparatory work with an owner and a property being brought back into use, they were almost certainly the result of interventions already put in place before the Partnership's inception. We did not expect that the Partnership would be able to effect the return of a large number of empty homes into use in the first year of the project. Thus these findings are not surprising and are roughly in line with what we would have expected following the conversations we have had with councils. This low number can be seen as another indication of the conclusions reached in our 2010 Baseline Report, that the level of activity in this area of work in Scotland has been quite low of late.

In the survey carried out this year for the preparation of this report, 11 councils felt confident enough to state a figure of the amount of empty homes they will be able to bring back into use in the next financial year. We believe this increased confidence and emphasise on private sector empty homes work is a result of engagement with the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership. It will be the job of the Partnership to build on this confidence and help councils to achieve the goals they have set for themselves as well as to support others to following suit.

Throughout this document we have set out the priorities of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership for 2011/12 as a result of the findings of our 2011 survey and the experience gained from the first 10 months of our work. These can be grouped into the following categories:

- Improving Data Collection
- Supporting our members
- Focusing on strategies and policies (National & local)
- Development of internal council processes

- Increased funding and resources for empty homes work

The specific priorities that fall within these categories are highlighted throughout the document and drawn together in the section entitled 'Year Two Partnership Priorities'.

Introduction

This is the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's Annual Report for 2010-11. This period coincides with the first 10 months of operation of the Partnership's work as the project began in June 2010 rather than at the start of the financial year. This report follows on from and refers back to the Baseline Report produced by the Partnership in August 2010. The Baseline Report aimed to give a starting snapshot of where councils in Scotland were with regards to private sector empty homes work. It drew on information gathered through initial meetings with councils by the Empty Homes Coordinator, as well as a questionnaire on private sector empty homes work conducted in 2009 as part of the Scottish Government's Private Rented Sector Review.

In the Baseline Report a number of key areas, by which the work of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership would be measured, were identified. The different sections of this document correspond to these key measures.

These are:

- Prioritising empty homes work
- Data Collection/Information
- Capacity Building
- Funding
- Partnership Working

The report will end with several sections which include the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's progress against project outcomes and recommendations for further action.

Background

There are just over 23,000 long term (6 months or more) private sector empty homes in Scotland. Work on empty homes can achieve positive outcomes with regards to:

- Housing Supply
- Community Regeneration/Town Centre Renewal
- Sustaining Rural Communities
- Restoring Confidence in local property markets
- Discouraging Anti-Social Behaviour (due to fire/vandalism/fly-tipping of empty properties)
- Climate Change and Sustainability

Work on empty homes also represents value for money. The Empty Homes Agency in England has estimated that the cost of refurbishing an empty home is between £6,000 - £25,000. The average cost of a new build home in Scotland is £100,000 or more. And of course when you are bringing an empty home back into use the infrastructure and local services will already be in place.

Empty Homes cannot solve housing supply issues alone, but they can be part of a holistic solution to provide local affordable housing and to regenerate communities.

The Scottish Government 2009 review of the Private Rented Sector identified the need for a national post to support councils who wish to pursue empty homes work. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership exists to help councils and their partners pursue work to bring private sector empty homes back into use. The project is funded by the Scottish Government and hosted by Shelter Scotland. The Scottish Government and councils respectively will be pursuing separate strands of work to address social sector voids. While we don't minimise the need to deal with social sector void properties the approaches to deal with these are different to those for dealing with private sector empty homes. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership remit is in regards to private sector empty homes only.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership began work in June 2010. The initial stages of the Partnership involved establishing empty homes contacts in councils and other organisations and establishing the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network.

Key milestones in the first year of work of the Partnership include:

- Establishment of the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network's electronic site – August 2010
- Formal launch of the Partnership – November 2010
- Launch of the Report Empty Homes website in Scotland – November 2010
- First Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network Seminar on Data Collection and First Steps – November 2010
- Council Tax data use amendment to the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 – December 2010
- Second Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network Seminar on Incentives and Enforcement – March 2011
- Publication of a series of tools and guides for councils including:
 - Guide to data collection – October 2010
 - Guide to creating an action plan – January 2011
 - Guide to financing private sector empty homes projects – May 2011
- Involvement at some level by all 32 of Scotland's local authorities

- 19 councils signed up to receive reports through the Report Empty Homes website.

Methodology

The baseline report referred to above, drew heavily on survey data collected for the March 2009 Private Rented Sector Review. For this first Annual Report we have created two new surveys, which repeat some of the questions asked in this previous survey, as well as expanding it to collect more and different information in order to measure the progress of the Partnership.

The first survey was distributed to all members of the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network. It was intended to capture views about the Scottish Empty Homes Network and Partnership as well as views on desired changes in Scottish policy with regards to private sector empty homes.

The second survey, sent to the lead officer for empty homes work in each council, broadly covers the topics addressed in the different sections of this document and is an attempt to capture a snapshot of private sector empty homes practice in Scotland.

Within this document the Private Rented Sector Review 2009 will be referred to as the PRS Review 2009 survey or the 2009 survey. The survey we conducted this year will be referred to as the 2011 survey. Reference will also be made to our 2010 Baseline report.

In addition to the data collected through these surveys this report will also draw on a range of other material including:

- Information collected through meetings with Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network members
- Feedback forms submitted at Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network events
- Information available through the Report Empty Homes website
- Previous research included in our 2010 Baseline Report

Prioritising empty homes work

Both the PRS Review 2009 survey and our baseline report tried to establish the extent to which councils are prioritising private sector empty homes work. One way of measuring this is to track whether councils have highlighted empty homes work in their Local Housing Strategies, Private Sector Housing Strategy or via a distinct empty homes strategy.

Local Housing Strategies

Local Housing Strategies (LHS) form the basis of a council's approach to housing issues, including housing supply, homelessness support and their scheme of assistance. While councils will take their own decisions as to what role empty homes work might play in meeting their goals it would seem sensible that where empty homes work is pursued that the basis for this work should be found in the Local Housing Strategy. Indeed there is a strong case to be made for the role that filling empty homes can play in meeting the outcomes that councils have highlighted in these strategies such as:

'increasing the supply of affordable housing'

'to develop mechanisms to improve choice and access to affordable housing across all tenures'

'to stimulate demand in areas that are less popular or have investment needs'

'Promoting a mix of housing tenures and types to meet the needs of all communities'

Our 2011 survey revealed that 15 councils reported having mentioned private sector empty homes within their LHS, with a further 10 planning to address it in the next version of their LHS with 24 councils in total responding to this question. This compares to 12 councils mentioning empty homes in their LHS in the 2009 survey. What neither of the surveys is able to tell us is the context within which the topic is covered or the extent to which this is integrated into the work of the council.

To supplement this for our Baseline Report, we carried out a desktop review of councils' local housing strategies and found that 16 had some mention of private sector empty homes. A repeat of this exercise, has found 17 now include a reference to private sector empty homes. While this can be seen as a slight improvement, the situation will be clearer this time next year when the majority of councils will have renewed their LHS. Encouragingly, several draft strategies do contain significant mention of private sector empty homes. So we have every reason to believe this situation will be improved in the new round of strategies.

The desktop review conducted for the baseline report indicated that councils were making links between empty homes work and affordable housing as well as increasing local housing supply. The additional council which has now mentioned private sector empty homes in their LHS has done so in the context of improving housing conditions. This council's strategy also now includes a target for reducing private sector empty homes.

In our Quick Reference Guide¹ to including private sector empty homes work within local housing strategies, we indicated the role of bringing private sector empty homes back into use in achieving housing supply outcomes; private sector housing conditions outcomes; and the wider role for housing outcomes including energy efficiency, community safety

¹http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/309873/LHS_Quick_Reference_Guide.pdf

and regeneration. We would hope that the new round of local housing strategies will reflect this breadth of impact that can be achieved through empty homes work.

Other strategies

There may be other places, either in addition to or underpinning Local Housing Strategies, where councils have articulated a commitment to empty homes work. The most likely places where this could be found are within a council's Private Sector Housing Strategy or in a stand-alone Empty Homes Strategy.

Our 2011 survey found that 7 councils had referenced private sector empty homes work within their Private Sector Housing Strategy, with a further 3 planning to address it in the next strategy. This compares to 5 councils reporting the same in 2009.

In addition, 9 councils stated that a Private Sector Empty Homes Strategy or Action Plan was being developed. In 2009, 3 councils reported that they were developing a private sector empty homes strategy. However, perhaps less encouragingly, despite 3 councils saying they were developing a strategy in 2009, no councils in 2011 report having a strategy in place.

In 2011/12 the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will work with identified councils to establish their Empty Homes Strategies/Action Plans.

Data Collection/Information

One of the first steps to developing a process for addressing private sector empty homes is producing a picture of how many empty properties are in a given council and where they are located. It is with this data that a council can take a decision as to what level and what type of work they will undertake to bring these properties back into use.

The Partnership's 2010 baseline report highlighted the 2009 survey results stating that 10 councils collected some sort of data on private sector empty homes. The baseline report also commented that it was not clear from that figure whether data was recorded on both number and location of empty homes or just the number of empty homes. In our 2011 survey, therefore, we delved into the issue of data collection in more detail.

The Partnership put a real focus on data collection in this first year of the project, emphasising to councils that developing an empty homes database was an essential first step to taking policy decisions about empty homes work. We also published a data collection guide for councils and held a seminar centred around creating a database and using it to contact owners. Given this focus, this is an area where we would hope to see improvement. However it should also be noted that the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 amendment that expressly allows councils to share internal data on vacant dwelling

council tax discounts has not yet been commenced and there are reports that this is still hampering the efforts of several councils to move forward with the creation of a database.

The 2011 survey found that 12 councils reported having a database of private sector empty homes, with a further 5 developing one. The most common source of input for this database was reported as local authority council tax data (11 councils), followed by the Report Empty Homes website (5 councils).

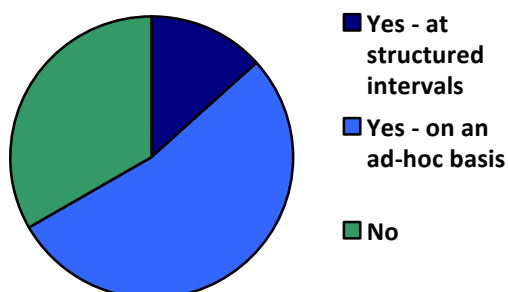
Of the 12 councils who reported having a database, 12 answered the question about what type of data was included in this database. All 12 reported that their database included the number and addresses of empty homes, while 6 reported having data about owner details within their database.

This distinction is important as without accurate address and owner details, more work is required from any officer accessing the database for the purposes of engaging empty home owners.

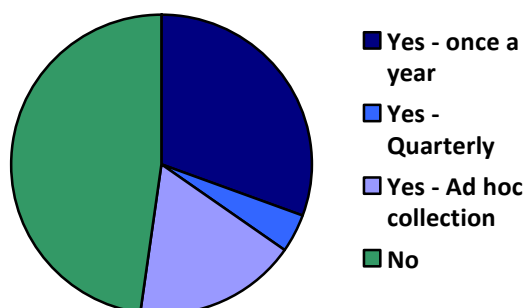
5 councils responded that their council did not have a database. 3 of these reported that this was due to a lack of staff resources to compile and maintain one, and a further 2 responded that their council didn't need/want one.

We asked those councils that do have a database how often they collect information from their database, a question that was also asked in 2009. There was a rise in the number of councils collecting data, but only a small increase in the number of councils accessing this data on a regular basis. This is something the Partnership would like to improve on in the next year of the project, as the extent to which this data is kept up to date can be seen as an indicator of how often it is used for pro-active empty homes work.

**Chart 1 - Data Collection
2009**



**Chart 2 - Data Collection
2011**



In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will work to both increase the number of councils collecting empty homes data and to increase the frequency with which this data is updated.

We also asked councils what they use this data for currently and what they plan to use it for. Our 2011 survey revealed that 7 councils currently use their database to track changes in the total number of empty homes in their area, with a further 4 councils intending to use their database for this purpose. 3 councils also said they use this data to cross check the current status of properties they receive complaints about, with another 3 intending to use the data for this purpose.

9 councils plan to use this data to send out information to empty home owners about working with the council to bring their home back into use. 5 councils replied that they intend to use this data to send out questionnaires to empty home owners. A later question in the survey indicates that 6 councils have already done this.

A further 5 councils reported that they intend to use their database to prioritise empty homes for pro-active intervention from the council.

We cannot compare these intentions or current uses with previous years as this question was not asked in 2009. It is hoped that with further support from the Partnership more councils will begin to use the data to pro-actively contact empty home owners, either on a

blanket basis to offer the advice of the council or on a targeted basis with the help of a prioritisation process.

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will encourage councils to use their data to pro-actively contact empty home owners.

Report Empty Homes Website

This year the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership funded Scottish local authorities to sign up to the Report Empty Homes website. This website, already established in England for several years, allows members of the public to report empty homes in their communities that they are concerned about. The idea is that for councils that are signed up, these reports will go straight to a single lead officer within the council who can then respond themselves or pass the report on to an appropriate colleague. This is useful for both the councils and members of the public because it streamlines the process of reporting empty homes. Previously people may have found themselves passed to a variety of different departments with little clarity about whose responsibility it was to deal with the issue.

For councils the data collected in this way can also be useful in supplementing their empty homes database as not all empty homes will have their council tax status correctly recorded. It also highlights where particular properties are causing additional problems to the community.

To date, 19 Scottish councils have signed up to use the website and over 150 reports have been received via the website since its launch in November 2010. For the 13 councils who have not signed up to the website, the Empty Homes Coordinator receives any reports received and passes them on to the contact in that council.

10 of these 19 councils reported via our 2011 survey, that they have a process in place for responding to reports via the website. The other 9 said they did not have a process in place. Clearly this is a number the Partnership would like to improve on in the coming year.

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will work with councils to establish processes for responding to reports via the Report Empty Homes website.

The 19 councils who signed up to the website were asked how useful the website was. 6 answered either useful or very useful. One council officer offered:

“It is valuable to receive ‘on the ground’ reports of empty properties that may not be known to the council. This not only benefits our data but also ensures that we are aware of particular problems such as vandalism, or a pattern of empty homes in areas.”

The bulk of the other respondents to this question (9 councils), chose the middle rank on the scale between very useful and not useful. This may indicate that it is too early for many councils to tell how useful the website will be for them. One officer stated:

"I think the website will be useful once we have a strategy and processes in place".

Still others were concerned about the vagueness of reports, including the mapping function. As this relies on user input there is little capacity to improve this function of the website. Getting accurate data on exact addresses, where they are not initially given in the report, does rely on some interaction with the reporter from the responding officer. There are implications for staff time in developing such an interaction.

5 councils responded to the question we asked about why their council had not signed up to use the website. Of these responses, 2 said they didn't have the staff time to respond to reports; 2 said they didn't want to falsely raise expectations without having any financial incentives to offer to owners; finally 1 council stated they were waiting to have a process for responding to reports in place before signing up.

Other data

Encouragingly 5 councils indicated within our survey that they use Geographic Information System (GIS) to map the location of empty homes. This method has been used successfully by a number of English councils, notably Stoke-on-Trent, to develop empty homes 'hot spots' for targeting by empty homes officers. The usefulness of GIS data has also been recognised by the Homes and Communities Agency which recently produced an Empty Homes Toolkit for English councils. This included access to a GIS mapping tool that allows councils to map the location of private sector empty homes, alongside other local data such as areas of housing need, and location of amenities and services.

Further research is needed to assess how these 5 councils are using their GIS, how useful this is for them and what is preventing other councils from using this tool.

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will investigate the potential for GIS and other mapping software to be used by Scottish councils in relation to empty homes.

Capacity building

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership

Along with the specific detailed survey to empty homes lead officers, we surveyed the 70 members of the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network to ask them their opinions on the work of the Partnership. 37 of our members replied to this survey.

We asked members of the network what the result of their involvement with the Partnership has been:

Table 1 – Outcomes of involvement with Scottish Empty homes Partnership

Result of involvement with SEHP	# of responses
Opportunities to discuss empty homes work with other officers/organisations	32
Increased knowledge of empty homes	30
Data collection	21
A new approach to empty homes in your organisation	15
Adoption of new tools/methods	12
The organisation taking action which has brought (an) empty home(s) back into use	2

We also asked members of the network to rate the usefulness of the various tools and guides on offer from the Partnership.

In terms of our guides:

- 19 members found our Data Collection guide either useful or very useful;
- 16 members found our Action Plan guide useful or very useful;
- 17 members found our quick reference guides either useful or very useful.

In terms of our tools and events:

- 22 members found the advice from the Empty Homes Coordinator either useful or very useful;
- 18 members found our seminars either useful or very useful;
- 17 members found the Network website either useful or very useful;
- 13 members found the Report Empty Homes website either useful or very useful.

Each of our seminars attracted approximately 25 attendees, not including speakers, and both events achieved a feedback satisfaction rate of over 90%.

In the free form box at the end of our survey to the network there were also a number of comments about the work of the Partnership. Some of these highlighted our concerns around staff resources and funding and others highlighted how the Partnership has helped to raise the profile of the benefits of private sector empty homes work in Scotland:

“I think it is a useful resource but I have not managed to use it or attend seminars as much as I would like purely due to my level of workload being too high to devote time on this.”

“Bringing the issue of empty homes back to the table (it had been put on the shelf) is a positive step – particularly if it leads to a more streamlined approach to compulsory purchase or more importantly a new power of enforced sale where specified conditions are met. Most local

authorities don't want to purchase empty homes but if the property could be sold by compunction to either an RSL or even to an owner occupier it would help remove the blight that empty homes bring to areas."

"Very useful service providing good quality advice and information that we will be using to bring empty homes in our area back into productive use. Excellent communication from the service co-ordinator and very useful meetings/events that have prompted us to collate empty homes information and bring forward proposals for lead tenancies with RSL partners, etc. Hopefully we will be accessing Innovation Fund monies from Scottish Government for an empty homes project and we look forward to receiving advice and support from the Partnership. Well done!"

"I think the Partnership is an excellent way of disseminating information and also promoting positive work which is happening elsewhere."

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will:

- continue to build the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network and ensure that the tools, learning opportunities and relationship building it enables are useful to members.*
- continue to raise the profile of empty homes work to provide network members with the legitimacy to devote more energy to this area of work.*

Empty Homes brought back into use

In our 2011 survey we asked council lead officers how many empty homes had been brought back into use as a result of their intervention. 20 councils responded to this question. 17 said they had brought none back into use. 1 council said they had brought back into use 2 empty homes; another council said 4 empty homes; and one more council said 1 empty home. It is difficult to compare this with the 2009 survey results as the exact number of empty homes was not recorded in this way. All of the 8 empty homes reported as brought back into use in this past year were reported as being brought back into use for below market rent. This compares to 48% being brought back into use for below market rent according to the 2009 survey.

As we discussed above, the low number of empty homes being brought back into use is broadly in line with the anecdotal evidence collected for the 2010 baseline report. We are not surprised to see this low level of activity which is in line with the levels of activity we recorded at the start of the project. We also do not take any credit for the few homes reported as having been brought back into use. We recognise these were the result of processes and interventions put in place before the start of the Partnerships work, although 2 councils have claimed that involvement in the Partnership has resulted in action which has brought an empty home back into use (see Table 1).

Because empty homes work can fall between a number of departments we asked the lead officers how aware they are of actions undertaken in other departments of the council. 17 councils said they were either aware or very aware of actions taken by other departments, which speaks to an encouraging level of joined up working. However, a further 7 said they were either not very aware, unaware or unsure of how aware they were. This points to a need for some work with councils around improving internal communications and processes with regards to private sector empty homes work.

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will work with identified councils to establish internal communications processes in relation to private sector empty homes work.

We also asked officers how many empty homes they anticipate being able to bring back into use in the coming year. 19 councils answered this question.

Table 2 Number of empty homes local authorities anticipate being able to bring back into use next year

	0	1-5	10	15	Other
# of Councils	8	5	4	1	1 (this council indicated they would bring back into use 100 homes)

Based on this data we can conclude that 10 councils now anticipate bringing empty homes back into use in the coming year, with one having stated a target within their recently renewed LHS. Coupled with anecdotal information, we feel it is reasonable to conclude that this increase is due to the higher national profile given to empty homes work over the past year, which has highlighted the benefits of this work to councils; and that these councils feel they now have the tools to bring empty properties back into use. This is encouraging as we noted above that only 3 councils reported having been able to bring empty properties back into use last year.

In addition to the tools, guides and events, the Partnership offers one-to-one advice to councils including involvement with the Practical Project Help Service. This involves advice from the Empty Homes Coordinator in trying to bring one identified empty property back into use as part of an exercise to produce replicable processes. There are currently 5 practical projects underway with different councils. These are at varying stages and at varying levels of activity. The help service is still open to new practical projects and it is anticipated that some results will be seen from these projects in the following year.

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will:
- Work with councils to help them achieve the goals they have set for themselves to bring empty homes back into use.

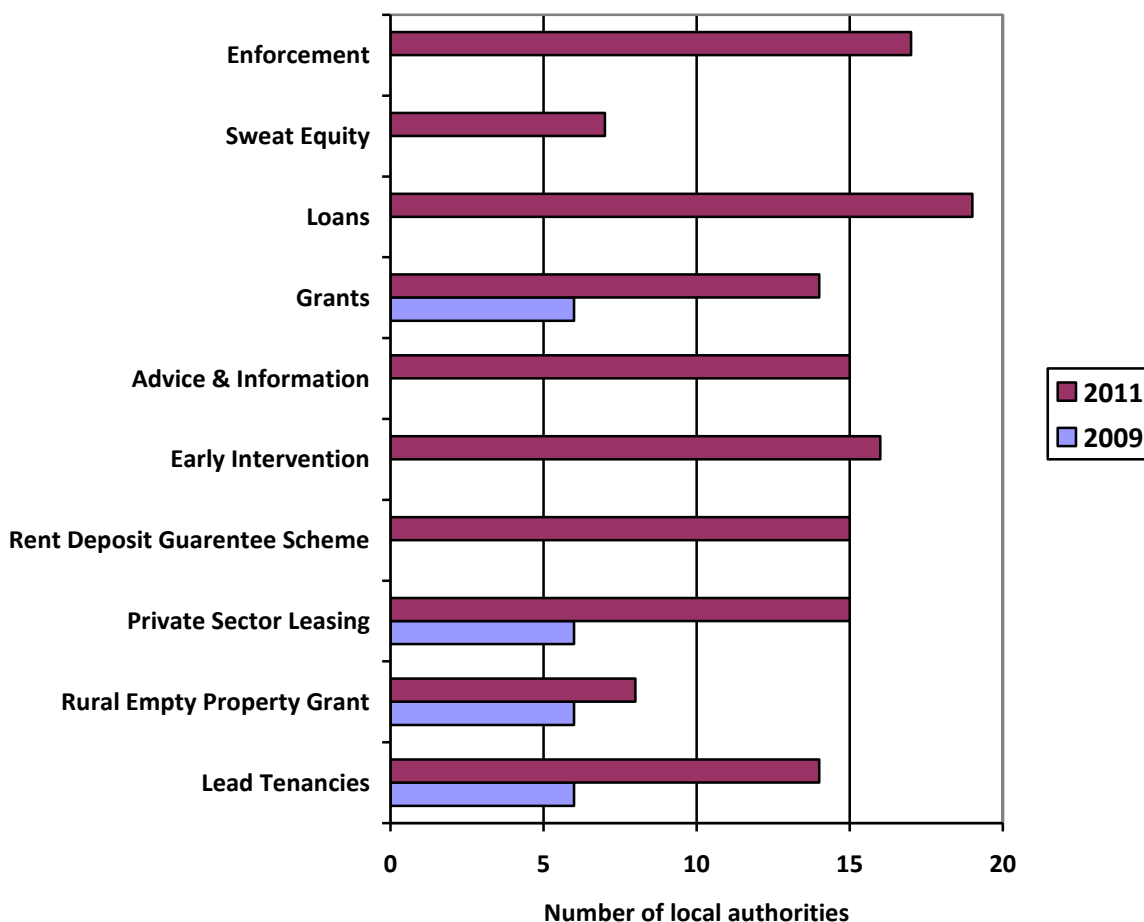
-Work to increase the number of councils who feel they have the tools needed to bring empty homes back into use.

Awareness levels & Use of interventions

As part of work to increase the profile of private sector empty homes work in Scotland, the Partnership has attempted to disseminate good practice examples and inform officers of the various tools and interventions that can be used to bring private sector empty homes back into use.

It is difficult to measure capacity building, however one way we can attempt to do this is to look at both the awareness and use of various interventions over time. The 2009 survey asked a number of questions about awareness and interest in different tools. We repeated these questions in 2011 and added some new options. As some of the available tools have changed since the last survey it was not overly useful to compare actual use of tools however both surveys asked officers to indicate which tools they had not used but would like to try. Below is the comparison for 2009 and 2011.

**Chart 3 - Which interventions would local authorities like to try
2009/2011**



Given that not all of these options were asked about in 2009, it is difficult to draw a useful comparison between the two surveys. However what this second chart does helpfully illustrate is a level of interest in exploring various options for bringing empty homes back into use.

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will continue to raise awareness of potential tools and encourage their use in appropriate circumstances.

Beyond the specific interventions that may be used once contact with an empty home owner has been made, the Partnership has been working with councils to develop processes for contacting empty home owners on a pro-active basis. The following specific actions to contact owners by councils were reported via the 2011 survey:

Table 3 Specific actions carried out by local authorities to contact empty home owners

# of councils	Contact with owners
6	Written to empty home owners to inform them of the councils' interest in empty homes and their options for bringing their home back into use.
10	Provided specific advice or assistance to empty home owners.
6	Conducted a survey of private sector empty home owners to obtain more information about empty homes in your area
8	Contacted individual empty home owners as a result of a report or complaint about an empty home

These numbers roughly chime with the number of councils who have a process in place for responding to empty homes reports via the Report Empty Homes website. It is anticipated that in the coming year we will be able to effect an increase in the number of councils who systematically write out to empty home owners as part of an overall process of engagement.

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will encourage councils to develop processes to pro-actively contact empty home owners.

Funding & Resources

Since the end of the Empty Homes Initiative (EHI) in 2002, there has been no dedicated national funding for private sector empty homes work.

There is little difference in relation to the percentage of staff and resources devoted to empty homes work within councils according to the 2009 and 2011 survey.

The 2009 survey found that there were 7 officers that described private sector empty homes work as 'just one part of their job description'. Indeed that number remains unchanged in the 2011 survey.

Of the 7 councils who indicated that there was an officer with partial responsibility for empty homes work within their council we asked what percentage FTE this amounted to. Answers ranged from 1% to 20% FTE.

Officers asked what level of funding was needed to adequately address empty homes in their area, gave a variety of answers including:

"It would depend on the degree of involvement, if it was only advice and assistance and identification one staff member. To establish an incentives fund would require £100,000 a year to allow a small number of medium standard properties to be brought back into use."

and

“At least a dedicated officer to cover 2-3 LA areas plus admin support from other dept.”

and

“One 0.5 FTe would be great for a one year contract but his is unlikely to attract support in the current climate given that we are losing staff through redundancy. May look at this as a potential spend to save scheme.”

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will promote further devotion of staff resources to private sector empty homes work at local and national level.

Within this section of questions on funding and resources, 1 council indicated that they had a budget set aside for empty homes work. This budget is for grants.

Vacant Dwelling Council Tax Discounts

One way councils can raise money to pursue private sector empty homes work is through varying the council tax discount on long term empty properties. Councils currently have the power to vary this discount between 50% and 10%. We asked councils, as of 1st April 2011 what level of discount on council tax is given to long term vacant properties in your council area? 23 councils responded.

Table 4 Level of council tax discount given to long term vacant properties by area

Percentage discount	# of councils
10%	13
25%	1
50%	9

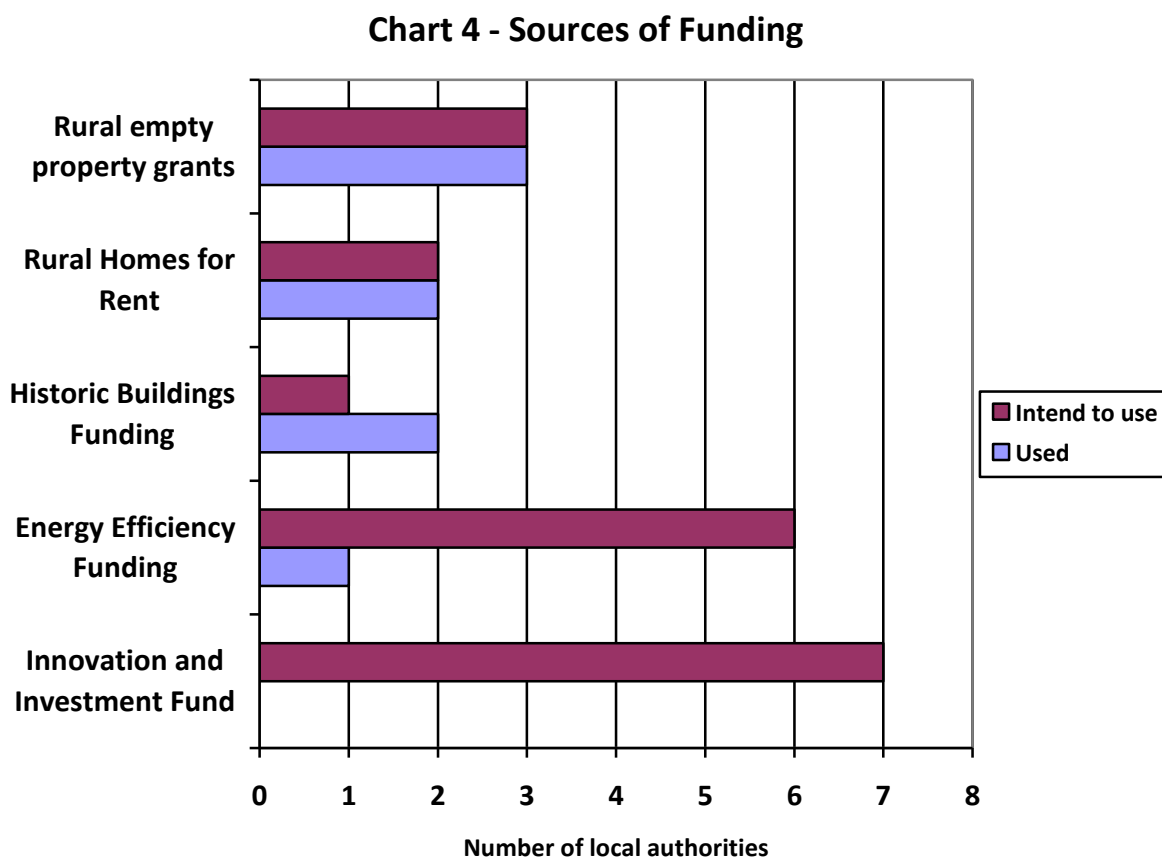
To try to dig deeper into these figures, we asked officers how much revenue was generated above the 50% council tax from long term vacant dwellings as well as how much of that figure was spent on staff resources, financial incentives or enforcement work dedicated to bringing empty homes back into use. Unfortunately this figure was not one the officers tended to have to hand, and from the limited responses to this question, two potential conclusions can be drawn: a) councils are not using these resources in this way; or b) there is a lack of information within councils about what this money is spent on.

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will encourage the use of long term vacant council tax revenue for interventions to bring private sector empty homes back into use.

In addition to trying to assess where councils are now, in terms of funding for empty homes work, which appears to be extremely low, the Partnership also wanted to measure awareness levels of potential funding sources.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership published a guide to financing private sector empty homes work at the end of May while this survey was being conducted. The guide emphasised the need for developing packages that support multiple outcomes, for instance: linking empty homes work with regeneration efforts, or moves to encourage energy efficiency in existing housing stock.

Below is a chart that details those funding sources that officers responding to the 2011 survey had either used (very few) or intend to use (the majority of responses)



Since issuing the survey we now understand that the first two options, rural empty property grants and rural homes for rent have been rolled up into the Innovation and Investment Fund. Thus the numbers represented here should be taken as only an indication of general awareness of different types of funding sources. Additionally, although 7 councils expressed their intention to use Innovation and Investment Fund

money, the Partnership is not aware that 7 applications have been made to the fund this year, thus the answer to this question might indicate an anticipation of a second round of Innovation and Investment Fund bidding.

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will encourage further empty homes bids to any new round of the Innovation and Investment Fund.

Partnership Working

One way that it is envisaged that the Empty Homes Coordinator can add value for councils is by facilitating relationships and making connections between people, organisations and their shared goals.

In our 2010 Baseline report we indicated that we would like to record instances of partnership working as this was not asked about in the 2009 survey. We asked councils ‘What partners have you worked with in your efforts to bring private sector empty homes back into use?’ The answers can be taken as a baseline only and no inference is made that these partnerships were instigated by the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership.

Table 5 Partners local authorities have worked with in efforts to bring private sector empty homes back into use

Partner	# of Councils
Housing Associations	8
Private Developers	4
Other councils	4
Community Planning Partners	4
Community Associations	4
Other: Landowners/Estates	1

Of the councils that responded to this question we asked ‘What form did this partnership working take? What value has been added by this arrangement?’

One council said:

“Very much in its infancy but hoping through the Community Planning arrangements to raise awareness and resource allocation to tackle empty homes”

And another:

“Been able to bring a number of surplus NHS properties into use via sale to RSL for improvement and affordable renting. Have supported RSL buy back of former RTB properties...Has

demonstrated importance of joint working and long term empty issue, and helped deliver on LHS objectives.”

In 2010/11 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will continue to facilitate introductions between potential partner organisations and encourage partnership working via the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network.

Barriers

Part of the remit of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership is to identify barriers to private sector empty homes work and to work towards potential solutions to these.

Data Collection

Early on in the first year of the Partnership, the issue of access to council tax data by housing officers was flagged as an issue by a number of councils. In short, internal approaches to data sharing between housing and finance departments with regards to data on properties receiving the vacant dwelling council tax discount, varied across the country. This resulted in some councils being able to effectively share data in order to develop a private sector empty homes database, while others were unable to access the necessary data.

Upon investigation, it was found that a similar situation had arisen in England several years ago and the solution had been an amendment to the Local Government Finance Act 2003 that expressly allowed council officers to use council tax data to identify vacant dwellings and attempt to bring them back into use. A similarly worded amendment was therefore recommended by the Partnership to the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010. An MSP did come forward to lodge this amendment which was successfully included in the Act. At present time we are awaiting commencement to truly break down this data collection barrier within Scottish councils.

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will seek early commencement of sec. 157 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010.

Staff Resources

Lack of staff time to address private sector empty homes work has clearly emerged from the data of this 2011 survey, as well as from anecdotal evidence through officer meetings and other interactions on the part of the Empty Homes Coordinator.

The Partnership hopes to help kick start further allocation of staff time to empty homes work by helping to develop manageable processes, as well as providing guides, research and opportunities for training. However this does not get around the fact that best practice from elsewhere in the UK indicates that what is needed is a full time staff member to dedicate to empty homes work in order to really bear fruit. In the current financial climate

it is unlikely that Scottish councils, who are currently in the midst of redundancy discussions, will find the resources to fund full time Empty Homes Officers.

One alternative would be further exploration of a shared service model, perhaps mirroring the geographies of the Housing Options Hubs. There is certainly a wealth of experience south of the border that speaks to the effectiveness of moving forward on this basis.

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will advocate for national funding for and local adoption of shared services approaches to private sector empty homes work.

Funding

Closely related to staff resources, funding for empty homes work has been raised time and time again by council officers and members of our network from other types of organisations.

This year the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership proposed a number of options to the Scottish Government with regards to approaching the funding of private sector empty homes work. Of the options presented, including a small dedicated stream of empty homes funding to kick start activity and inclusion of empty homes projects within the criteria of the Innovation and Investment Fund, it was the latter that was taken up by the government. Reference to private sector empty homes projects featured within the qualifying criteria for the £10m Innovation stream within the Scottish Government's Innovation and Investment Fund.

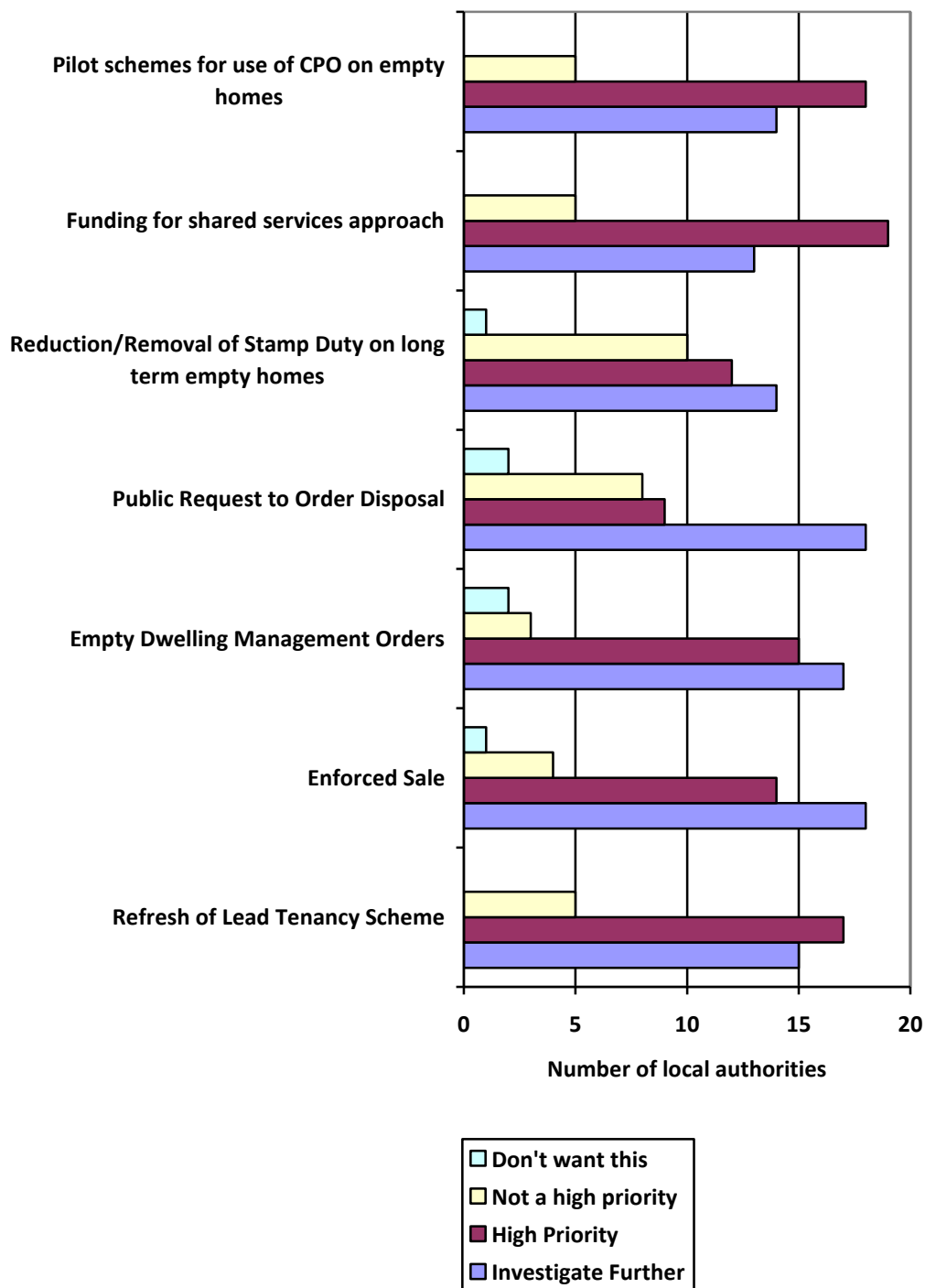
In this final quarter therefore, the Empty Homes Coordinator has focused on encouraging councils to apply to the Innovation Fund for private sector empty homes projects. We are aware that several councils have made bids to the fund in this vein, but it is of course too early to know whether any of them will be successful.

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will encourage further empty homes bids to any new round of the Innovation and Investment Fund.

Recommendations

As part of our survey to the whole of the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network, we asked what potential changes in the empty homes landscape members would like to see pursued by the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership. 37 members responded to these questions. Below are their answers:

Chart 5 - Potential changes to be pursued by the Partnership



From the sample of those surveyed there appears to be a high level of interest in at least further investigation of a number of the potential legislative or policy changes highlighted.

Topping the list are: funding for shared services approaches and pilot schemes for use of compulsory purchase orders on empty homes.

This chimes with the thinking of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership. Below is the Partnership's top line recommendations for areas that require further investigation as a result of the first year of our work. A further document will be produced delving into these recommendations in more detail.

- Funding for shared services approaches to Private Sector Empty Homes Work.
- Investigation of additional enforcement powers for Scotland in conjunction with pilot schemes for the use of CPO on private sector empty homes.
- Consideration of use of new stamp duty powers (in 2015) to incentives purchase and development of long term empty homes.
- Refresh of the lead tenancy scheme.
- Development of a Scottish Empty Homes Mapping tool for Scottish Councils.
- Additional dedicated funding within the next round of the Innovation and Investment fund for private sector empty homes projects.
- Implementation of vacant dwellings council tax proposal contained in the Scottish Governments Housing for the 21st Century strategy document.
- Investigate how the Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill could benefit Empty Homes work

In 2011/12 The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will produce a paper detailing recommendations for legislative/policy change to encourage private sector empty homes in Scotland to be brought back into use.

Progress on Project Outcomes

The project brief at the commencement of the Scottish Empty Home Partnership set out a number of project outcomes. Below is an attempt to track progress against these outcomes.

Outcome	Progress
A measurable increase in the number of empty home brought back into use as a result of direct intervention over the period of the project.	Not yet achieved. Too early in the project to make progress. Councils have indicated increased expectation of being able to bring empty homes back into use in the next financial year. See p. 13
A number of significant improvements made in flagship projects or high profile	5 practical projects currently underway. See p. 13

properties.	
Where appropriate, meaningful inclusion of empty homes work within local housing strategies and other key local authority documents along with specific plans and targets to achieve strategic aims.	<p>Some increase in inclusion of empty homes work in local housing strategies. Need to further monitor next round of LHS.</p> <p>Increase in the number of councils developing an empty homes strategy. See p. 5-7</p>
An improved and consistent information base across local authorities and clear recommendations on systems to sustain this.	<p>Increase in the number of councils with an empty homes database.</p> <p>Inclusion of vacant dwellings council tax amendment in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010. See p. 7-10</p>
A self-supporting network of practitioners within local authorities whose experience and expertise on empty homes will continue to be available beyond the span of the project.	<p>Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network established.</p> <p>Further capacity building work needed to make this network self-supporting. See p. 11-12</p>
A databank of good practice, shared resources and practicable guidance.	<p>Databank of good practice and shared resources has been established and is available through the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network website.</p> <p>Practicable guidance appears on the website including the Partnerships' 3 primary practitioner guides and various quick reference sheets. See p. 11-12</p>
Increased engagement with members of the public in empty homes work.	<p>Over 150 reports received by members of the public on the Report Empty Homes website since its launch in November 2010.</p> <p>Further reports and approaches from landlords and empty home owners received by the Partnership as a result of publicity of the Partnership's work.</p>

	See p. 9
Active and ongoing commitment by organisations representing landlords, property owners and letting agents to promote the value of homes being brought into use.	<p>The Scottish Rural Property and Business Association is an active member of the Partnership's advisory group and disseminates information to its members.</p> <p>Links have also been made with the Scottish Association of Landlords.</p> <p>This outcome requires further exploration in the coming year.</p>
A set of recommendations on future developments in policy and practice and a steer as to how they might be pursued.	<p>Paper on policy recommendations to be published July/August 2011.</p> <p>Steer on practice can be found within the Partnerships main guides as supplied to the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network.</p>

Year Two Partnership Priorities

Based on the findings of this report we have identified a number of distinct priorities moving forward into year two of the project. These can be viewed as a subset of the Partnership's ongoing goals and project outcomes. These have been highlighted throughout the document but can be grouped into a number of themes:

- Improving Data Collection
 - work to both increase the number of councils collecting empty homes data and to increase the frequency with which this data is updated
 - investigate the potential for GIS and other mapping software to be used by Scottish councils in relation to empty homes
 - continue to seek commencement of sec. 157 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010
- Supporting our members
 - continue to build the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network and ensure that the tools, learning opportunities and relationship building it enables are useful to members
 - continue to raise the profile of empty homes work to provide network members with the legitimacy to devote more energy to this area of work
 - Work with councils to help them achieve the goals they have set for themselves to bring empty homes back into use

- Work to increase the number of councils who feel they have the tools needed to bring empty homes back into use
- continue to raise awareness of potential tools and encourage their use in appropriate circumstances
- continue to facilitate introductions between potential partner organisations and encourage partnership working via the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network
- Focusing on strategies and policies (National & local)
 - work with identified councils to establish their Empty Homes Strategies/Action Plans
 - promote further devotion of staff resources to private sector empty homes work
 - produce a paper detailing recommendations for legislative/policy change to encourage private sector empty homes in Scotland to be brought back into use
- Development of internal council processes
 - encourage councils to use their data to pro-actively contact empty home owners
 - work with councils to establish processes for responding to reports via the Report Empty Homes website
 - work with identified councils to establish internal communications processes in relation to private sector empty homes work
- Increased funding and resources for empty homes work
 - encourage the use of long term vacant council tax revenue for interventions to bring private sector empty homes back into use
 - encourage further empty homes bids to any new round of the Innovation and Investment Fund
 - advocate for national funding for and local adoption of shared services approaches to private sector empty homes work

A potential Year 3

The Scottish National Party Manifesto in the 2011 Scottish Elections indicated the government's intention to extend the work of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership beyond its initial 2 year time frame.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership feels that a 3rd year of the project would be valuable. The first year of the project has largely been about establishing networks and disseminating good practice. The second year of the project will focus on translating these foundations of relationships and guidance into practical results. A third year would allow these practical steps longer to bear fruit and demonstrate the potential of private

sector empty homes work in Scotland. It is from such a position where we can move to making the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network a self-sustaining one with the potential to carry on beyond the life of the Partnership.

Given where we have started from, as evidenced by the Scottish Government's Private Rented Sector Review 2009, even 3 years to establish a self-sustaining network of empty homes experts in Scotland is a tall order. However stopping the project after 2 years, we feel, will put the momentum that has been generated to date, at risk of petering off without a central organisation to harness it.

In a third year of the Partnership we would:

- highlight Scottish success stories and lessons learned
- assist councils to implement empty homes strategies and action plans
- push for Scottish Government guidance to councils on empty homes work – based on the accumulated learning of the project.