

SCOTTISH EMPTY HOMES PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT 2012-13

Summary

At the start of last year the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership set out a number of priorities for 2012/13. These priorities have been developed over this past year and will be reviewed in this report.

The specific priorities and milestones for 2012/13 are set out in Appendix A. There are three themes running through these priorities and milestones which will be used to structure this report.

- Increased funding and resources for empty homes work
- Bringing empty homes back into use
- Sharing Best Practice

This year has seen a real shift in empty homes work in Scotland. Councils with an empty homes staff resource are no longer in the minority. There are examples of maturing empty homes offerings from a number of councils and evidence that more and more councils are making use of the best practice being disseminated via the work of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership.

Highlights from the year include:

- Councils have reported 76 empty homes brought back into use through direct intervention with owners.
- The number of councils with an Empty Homes Officer has increased from 8 to 15.
- There are now 21 councils offering some form of financial incentives to empty home owners, including 14 councils providing loans as a result of the Scottish Government Empty Homes Loan Fund.
- Councils were given powers to remove vacant dwelling council tax discounts and increase council tax by up to 100% on dwellings that have been vacant for over a year.
- 19 councils have set themselves targets for bringing private sector empty homes back into use.

- Extension of existing Shared Services Projects to a second year and establishment of the Forth Valley Empty Homes Shared Service Project.

We have repeated our survey of Scottish Empty Homes Network Officers and Empty Homes Lead Officers this year and this report draws heavily on that survey as well as the wider work of the Partnership over the last year. Unfortunately this year the response to our survey to Housing Associations was quite low, so we've not been able to reflect their views in this report. The report concludes with a section on continuing barriers and recommendations and a look to the year ahead.

Graph 1: Visual summary showing progression of highlighted figures between 2012 and 2013.

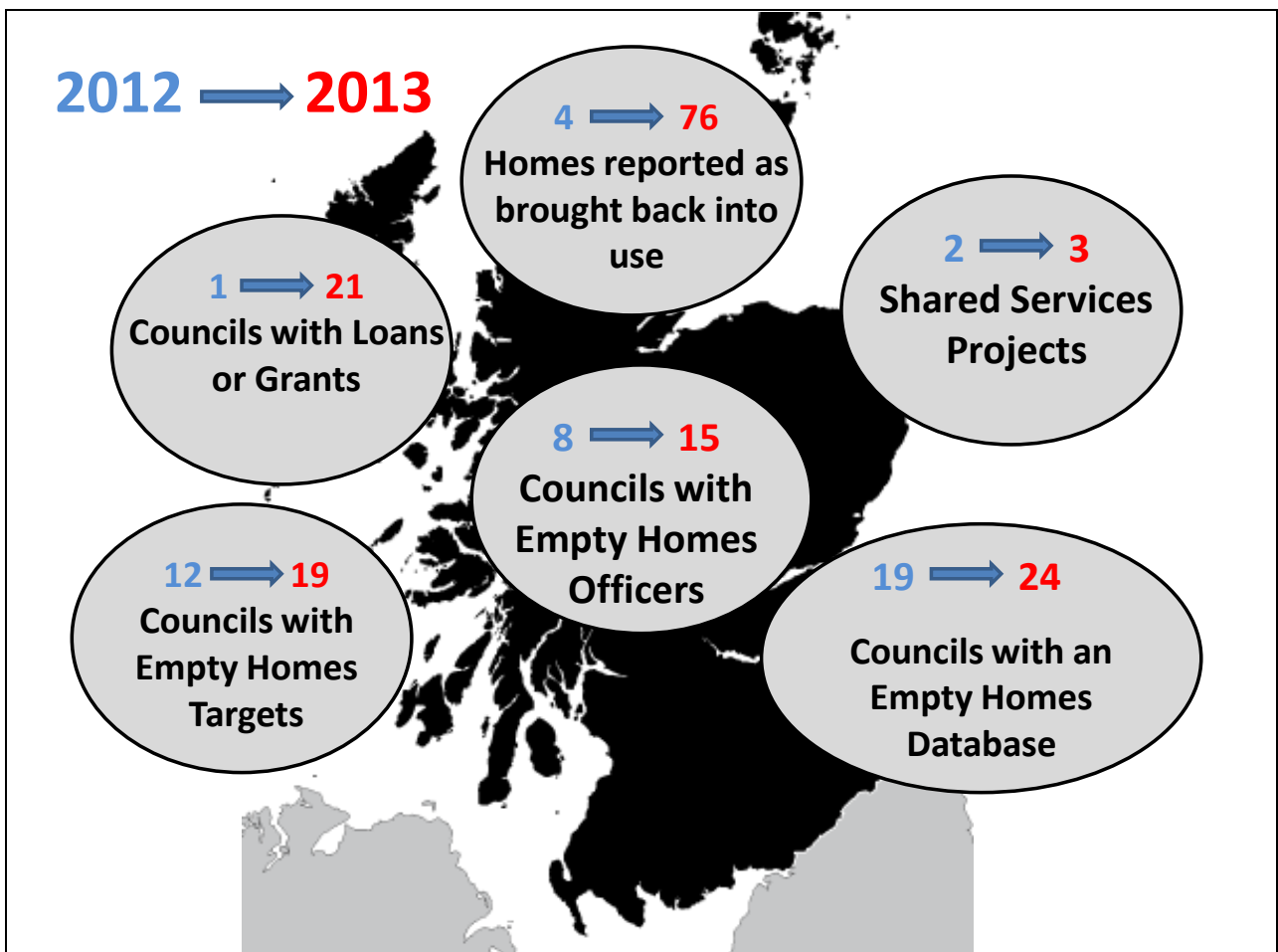


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Introduction

This is the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's Annual Report for 2012-13. This report follows on from and refers back to the Baseline Report produced by the Partnership in August 2010 as well as the Partnership's 2010-11 & 2011-12 Annual Reports. The Baseline Report gave 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. The 2010-11 & 2011-12 Annual Reports drew on wider surveys of the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network which repeated some of the 2009 questions. The same survey was repeated this year.

The different sections of this document are grouped under three themes which encompass the priorities set out for 2012-13 in last year's Annual Report.

These are:

- Increased funding and resources for empty homes work
- Bringing empty homes back into use
- Sharing Best Practice.

The report will end with several sections which include the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's progress against current project milestones, commentary on ongoing barriers and recommendations for empty homes work in Scotland and the project's Year 4 outcomes and milestones.

Background

There are just over 23,000 long term (6 months or more) private sector empty homes in Scotland according to council tax records.

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 and £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's 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 was established 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 Empty Homes Partnership began work in June 2010 with a two year lifespan. The project has been extended twice and is currently funded until March 2014.

Since June 2010 much work has been done across the country to promote the value of private sector empty homes work, share best practice from across the UK and help councils to develop policies and processes to bring private sector empty homes back into use.

The process promoted by the partnership has several interlinked steps:

- 1) data collection – finding out where the empty homes are and who owns them
- 2) prioritising – which empty homes to spend time/resources on to meet council goals
- 3) advice and information – providing signposting advice to empty home owners as standard, how to rent, how to sell, how to refurbish
- 4) negotiation – more involved engagement, niggling, nagging, and negotiating with owners to encourage them to bring their property back into use
- 5) incentives – using council schemes such as Private Sector Leasing (PSL), rent deposit guarantee, empty homes loans, or grants to encourage owners to bring their property back into use
- 6) enforcement – where all else fails and the property is still presenting an issue for the community using enforcement to encourage or force an empty home owner to bring their property back into use.

Last year we reported that steps 1-3 had been almost universally adopted in councils where empty homes work has been initiated. However financial and staff resources had hindered their ability to continue on to steps 4 through 6. This year the sections below will show that there is now a greater proportion of councils actively engaging in steps 4 & 5 and a small number of councils beginning to look at the use of step 6.

A strong theme of last year's report and this year's work has been the need to increase staff resources for empty homes work in Scotland. We are pleased to report that there have been clear improvements in this situation in the past year with 15 councils now having some form of dedicated empty homes staff, either full time or as part of a shared services project with further moves in other councils to allocate more staff time to empty homes work. These developments will be discussed in full later in the report. We identified this issue as crucial to finding solutions to entrenched issues with long term empty homes and would therefore count this shift towards a greater provision of staff resources in councils as the single most important achievement of the past year. It is the key to unlocking more empty homes.

Methodology

The baseline report referred to above, drew heavily on survey data collected for the March 2009 Private Rented Sector Review. For the 2010-11 Annual Report, we 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 covered 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.

These surveys were repeated in April/May 2012 with some minor tweaks and again in April/May 2013. This year, out of the 32 Scottish Local Authorities we received responses from 27 (though not all respondents answered every question).

Within this document the Private Rented Sector Review 2009 will be referred to as the PRS Review 2009 survey or the 2009 survey. Reference will also be made to our 2010 Baseline report, our 2011 and 2012 surveys and the survey carried out this year will be referred to as the 2013 survey¹.

¹ Scottish Empty Homes Partnership Baseline Report and Annual Reports for previous years can be found on the Shelter Scotland website in the Empty Homes pages under 'Annual Reports'. Go to: http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/housing_issues/empty_homes

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
- Research included in our previous reports

Increased funding and resources for empty homes work

Measures of progress in this strand of work can be broken down into two sections:

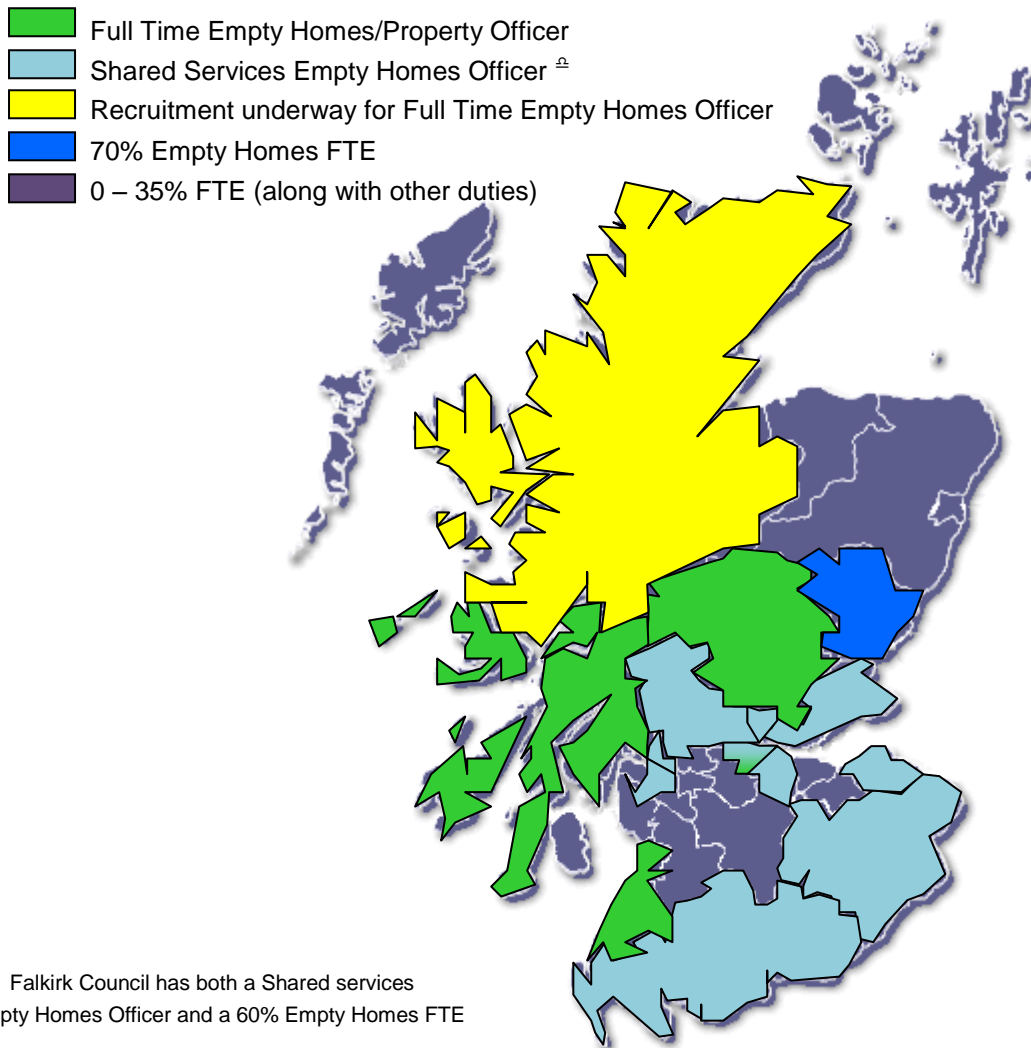
- Dedicated Staff Resources
- Funding for incentives and enforcement measures

Dedicated Staff Resources

This year we have seen a marked increase in the amount of staff resource dedicated to empty homes work in Scottish Councils. Last year 8 councils had an Empty Homes Officer (either full time or as part of a Shared Services Project). This year 15 councils have an Empty Homes Officer either full time or as part of a Shared Service Project. We specifically asked the question 'Does your council have an Empty Homes Officer?' separately to the question about what percentage Full Time Equivalent (FTE) staff the council has in order to reflect the important role of a dedicated Empty Homes Officer. Whether they are full time for one council or full time across a number of councils as part of a shared service project the important distinction is that they are focused full time on empty homes work. This full time focus anecdotally appears to be a key indicator of how effective and engaged a council is in bringing empty homes back into use.

That being said there are a number of councils who are seeing impressive results with staff resources organised in a different way. Angus Council for instance has a 70% FTE member of staff dedicated to empty homes who does not hold the title 'Empty Homes Officer' and East Ayrshire Council are engaging empty home owners using similar techniques to Empty Homes Officers however with responsibilities for different types of cases split across team members. Excluding these two examples and those councils with a dedicated Empty Homes Officer, answers about what percentage of staff time is dedicated to empty homes work in councils ranged from 0% to 35% FTE.

Graph 2: Dedicated Empty Homes Staff in Scotland 2013



We expect to see more Empty Homes Officers appointed over the coming year. We are already aware of two shared services councils considering a move to a full time Empty Homes Officer and one council in receipt of Empty Homes Loan Fund money who is currently recruiting an Empty Homes Officer (this officer has not been included in the 15 councils referenced above).

Shared Services Pilots

This year the original Homes Again Shared Services Project (Fife, West Lothian, East Lothian, Scottish Borders, Dumfries & Galloway) and Homes Again – West Dunbartonshire/Renfrewshire were extended to a second year. Funding was also secured for the establishment of a third Shared Services Pilot – the Forth Valley Empty Homes Project. The Forth Valley Empty Homes Project involves one full time Empty Homes Officer shared between Falkirk, Stirling and Clackmannanshire Councils with line

management from the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership and funding from the 3 member councils and Scottish Government.

Funding for Incentives and Enforcement measures

This year has seen several developments with regards to funding available to councils for the purposes of providing financial incentives to empty home owners and to pursue enforcement measures. One is the introduction of new powers for councils with regards to council tax charges on long term vacant dwellings and the other is the award of Scottish Empty Homes Loan Fund monies from the Scottish Government to a number of projects across the country.

Vacant Dwelling Council Tax Powers

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. Previously councils had the power to vary this discount between 50% and 10%.

Based on the Scottish Government's Council Tax Assumptions Returns, in 2012-13, there are now 3 councils applying the 50% discount and the remainder applying a 10% discount.

The Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.) (Scotland) Act 2012 was commenced in April this year. The Act and the associated regulations give councils the power to remove this discount altogether after a property has been empty for 1 year and in addition, to charge up to a 100% extra council tax on long term vacant properties that are not subject to any of the stated exemption categories².

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership has consistently argued that councils taking advantage of these new powers should recycle at least a proportion of the revenues collected to develop their empty homes offering to owners, in order to provide the needed balance of carrot and stick that will bring more empty homes back into use. It is of course for individual councils to have internal discussions about where any revenue raised is allocated but these new powers do at least provide an opportunity for new money to be raised that could be allocated towards empty homes work.

² Exempt properties include those being actively marketed for sale or let for up to 2 years. See [The Council Tax \(Variation for Unoccupied Dwellings\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2013](#).

In this year's survey when asked if they would be removing the vacant dwelling council tax discount for dwellings empty over a year, 13 councils said they would be removing the discount, 9 said they didn't know and 1 said they wouldn't be removing it.

We also asked councils if they intend to use these new powers to increase council tax levels beyond 100%. 7 councils said they did intend to charge an increase on long term vacant dwelling and 2 said they did not intend to. 14 councils answered that they didn't know. This may reflect a desire from councils to take more time to assess their options before exercising any new powers. An alternate reading might give cause for concern if this is interpreted to mean that the empty homes professionals who replied to this survey 'don't know' because they are not part of internal discussions about the use of these powers and the associated revenue. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership continues to encourage our Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network members to raise the issue with colleagues to make sure their work is on the radar and that they are considered an integral part of discussions about the use of these new powers.

A number of councils who said they would implement the increase have indicated that this will not happen before 2014 and the details are still under review by their council tax colleagues. We know that Western Isles Council have already removed the vacant dwelling discount for properties empty over a year and commenced charging a 100% increase as of April 2013. They report that this has resulted in a number of owners changing the classification of their properties to second homes and that they have also seen another group of owners who have been spurred by the increase charge to bring their properties back into use. The City of Edinburgh Council have also taken the decision to remove the discount and begin charging an increase as of mid 2013/14. Fife Council have said their increase charge will come into force as of 2013/14.

Empty Homes Loan Fund

In 2012-13 a big focus for the Partnership was supporting councils and others to prepare applications for the Empty Homes Loan Fund. This work included quite intensive support to a wide range of applicants in developing their project ideas and assisting them to present them clearly for the purposes of the application process. In the end the Scottish Government awarded funding to 17 projects across the country totalling £4.5m. The majority of projects involve individual councils providing loans to empty home owners to renovate their properties to an appropriate standard in exchange for letting the property out at an affordable rent for 5 years. There are variations on this theme within the projects, but for the majority of the projects there is an element of recycling the money as it comes back through rents to provide further loans.

Since the announcement of the successful applicants in December 2012, the focus for the Partnership has shifted to supporting members to get their Loan Fund Projects up and

running. This has included facilitating the sharing of information between councils as well as holding a dedicated seminar in March 2013 to discuss various aspects of empty homes loan fund projects.

This year in our survey we asked councils that are in receipt of loan fund money what further support they would like to see from the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership. Here are some of the replies:

'Just continuing to share the information from other councils so we are aware of any issues we may face.'

'The current level of assistance from the SEHP is excellent.'

'There is no obvious support missing from the SEHP, but the continuing support in relation to EHLF is appreciated.'

'I already feel that the level of support from the Partnership has been excellent. Further information on trouble shooting with loan applications when the scheme is up and running may be beneficial. Information and advice on publicising the scheme after our initial PR drive.'

Funding Levels

As with previous years surveys we did not get a high level of responses to our questions about funding available to councils for empty homes work. There were more replies this year than last, mostly citing the money received from Scottish Government through the Empty Homes Loan Fund. However we are aware of a number of councils committing funding to empty homes work over and above the loan fund money and indeed a number of councils who did not apply for the loan fund who are funding empty homes incentives by other means.

Below is a table of the funding we are aware of – including Empty Homes Loan Fund money - that has been allocated by different councils to empty homes work for this year. It is by no means complete and should be taken as a rough sketch of funding across the country rather than the definitive picture.

Table 1: Funding Levels for Empty Homes Work by Council

Council	Empty Homes Funding	Source
Aberdeen City	Staff time to carry out a survey of empty home owners & offer advice and information.	No new funding, re-allocation of staff time.
Aberdeenshire	£200,000 for empty homes	Section 75 agreement

	loans to owners	
Angus	£120,000 for Empty Homes Loans plus staff time.	Empty Homes Loan Fund
Argyll & Bute	£3, 000,000 for empty homes loans, grants and a full time empty homes officer	Grants - £1.5m from Strategic Housing Reserves Loans - £1.5m from Council Reserves
Clackmannanshire	£75,000 for empty homes loans plus funding for Shared Services Empty Homes Officer	Empty Homes Loan Fund Private Sector Housing Budget and Scottish Government
Dumfries & Galloway	£100,000 for empty homes grants in the Housing Regeneration Area plus funding for Shared Services Empty Homes Officer	Section 75 agreement Private Sector Grant Funding & Scottish Government
Dundee	Unknown	
East Ayrshire	£250,000 for empty homes loans plus staff time from the Landlord Registration Team	Empty Homes Loan Fund
East Dunbartonshire	Unknown	
East Lothian	£150,000 for empty homes loans plus funding for Shared Services Empty Homes Officer	Empty Homes Loan Fund Private Sector Housing Budget and Scottish Government
East Renfrewshire	No specific budget	
Edinburgh	£750,000 for empty homes loans provided by Link Housing Association	Empty Homes Loan Fund
Falkirk	£100,000 for empty homes loans plus funding for Shared Services Empty Homes Officer and an additional 60%FTE member of staff	Empty Homes Loan Fund Private Sector General Fund and Scottish Government
Fife	£150,000 for empty homes loans plus funding for Shared Services Empty	Empty Homes Loan Fund

	Homes Officer	General Housing Fund
Glasgow	£700,000 for empty homes loans in partnership with a number of housing associations including GHA.	Empty Homes Loan Fund
Highland	£800,000 for empty homes loans plus funding for an Empty Homes Officer	£400,000 Empty Homes Loan Fund £400,000 Private Sector Housing Grant
Inverclyde	£370,000 for empty homes loans plus previous budget of £80,000 for empty homes grants.	Empty Homes Loan Fund Private Sector Housing Budget
Midlothian	£125,000 for empty homes loans	Empty Homes Loan Fund
Moray	Unknown	
North Ayrshire	£200,000 for empty homes loans	Empty Homes Loan Fund
North Lanarkshire	£500,000 for Empty Homes Purchase Scheme	Affordable Housing Policy Committed Sums & Housing Revenue Account
Orkney	Unknown	
Perth and Kinross	£145,000 for Empty Homes Grants and Feasibility Grants plus funding for the Vacant Property Development Officer	Empty Homes Grants - £100,000 Private Sector Housing Grant Feasibility funding and Vacant Property Development Officer £80,000 Investment Improvement Fund
Renfrewshire	£150,000 for empty homes loans plus funding for Shared Services Empty Homes Officer	Empty Homes Loan Fund Private Sector Housing Grant and Scottish Government
Scottish Borders	£150,000 for empty homes loans plus funding for Shared Services Empty Homes Officer	Empty Homes Loan Fund Housing Strategy Budget and Scottish Government

Shetland Islands	Unknown	
South Ayrshire	£414, 000 for empty homes loans and Empty Homes Officer for 3 years	Scottish Government Innovation and Investment Fund
South Lanarkshire	No budget	
Stirling	Funding for Shared Services Empty Homes Officer (Rural Stirling Housing Association has a separate empty homes loan fund of £90,000)	Strategic Housing Account and Scottish Government
West Dunbartonshire	£150,000 for empty homes loans plus funding for Shared Services Empty Homes Officer	Empty Homes Loan Fund Housing Strategy Budget and Scottish Government
West Lothian	£150,000 for empty homes loans plus funding for Shared Services Empty Homes Officer	Empty Homes Loan Fund Homelessness Strategy Budget and Scottish Government
Western Isles	£155,000 for empty homes loans	Empty Homes Loan Fund

Bringing empty homes back into use

Data Collection

One of the first steps to bringing private sector empty homes back into use is producing a picture of how many empty properties are in a given council and where they are located. It is this data that is the basis of active engagement with empty home owners.

The 2011 survey found that 12 councils reported having a database of private sector empty homes, with a further 5 developing one. Last year that number was 19 councils and this year we know from survey data and other sources that this number has increased again to 24 councils keeping a private sector empty homes database with 1 further council reporting that they are developing one.

Of the 3 councils who told us they don't hold a database the reason why was stated as a lack of staff resources to compile and maintain such a database as well as IT issues.

As well as an increase in the number of councils collecting data this year's survey also reveals an increase in the frequency with which this data is updated. This can often be a reflection of the level of engagement a council has with empty home owners as a greater engagement requires more accurate and up to date data.

Chart 1 - Data Collection 2009

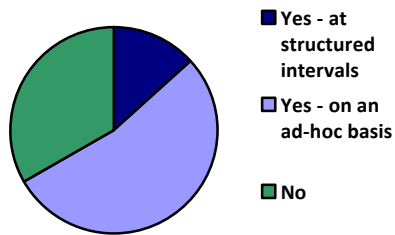


Chart 2 - Data Collection 2011

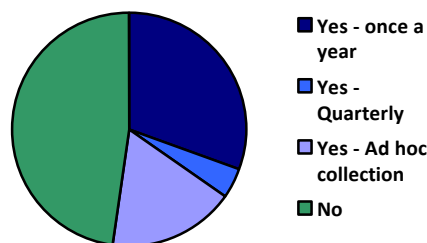


Chart 3 - Data Collection 2012

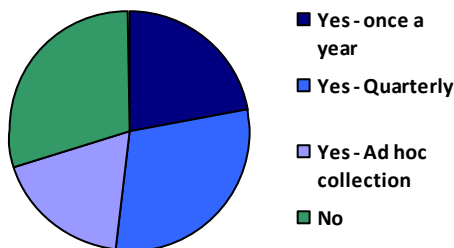
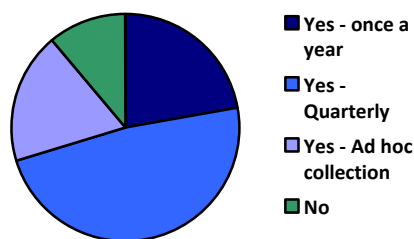


Chart 4 - Data Collection 2013



Once again this year council tax is listed as the main source of data for empty homes databases in Scotland. Other popular sources of information according to the 2013 survey include direct engagement with owners, information from other council departments and data collected through a local survey/questionnaire to empty home owners.

We also asked councils what they use this data for currently and what they plan to use it for. Some notable results include:

- 18 councils replied that they use this data to send out information to owners about working with the local authority to bring their empty home back into use.
- 16 councils say they use the database as their case management system.
- 16 use it to send out questionnaires to empty home owners.
- 12 use it to prioritise empty homes for pro-active intervention from the council.

These figures are important as they are indicators of a much higher and more in depth engagement with empty home owners than we have seen in previous years' surveys. And it is this in-depth engagement that brings empty homes back into use.

Despite the improvement in data collection and use of data in the past year some issues were still raised in this year's survey relating to data. These ranged in nature but the strongest theme was a mixture of either communication or IT issues resulting in Empty Homes Officers not getting accurate data reports from their council tax colleagues. While it's a common theme, the specific issues at play appear to be particular to the individual councils involved.

Report Empty Homes Website

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership fund Scottish local authorities to use the Report Empty Homes website. This website, established in England for several years before adoption in Scotland, 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, 27 Scottish councils have signed up to use the website. This is unchanged from last year. Just over 600 reports have been received in Scotland from the public via the website. These reports are largely organically generated with some peaks in reporting following national television programmes on the subject of empty homes. To date we are not aware of many councils pro-actively marketing the use of the website for reporting.

In this year's survey, we asked councils if they had a process for responding to reports and how quickly they respond. Table 2 below shows that 80% of those who responded are actively using the information collected from the site and responding in a timely fashion. Although not all 27 councils signed up to the site responded to this question we believe these numbers are likely to be an accurate reflection of use of the site overall. All of these numbers are up from last year, most notably there was an increase from 16 to 22

in the number of councils who have a set process for responding to reports from the website.

Unlike in England, where all councils were signed up to the website by the Empty Homes Agency whether or not they had pro-actively decided to join, in Scotland we have taken the approach of seeking active sign up from councils. We believe the fact that over 80% of those signed up are responding to reports justifies our decision to seek buy in from councils before signing them up to the site. For the 5 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.

Table 2: Council response to reports from www.reportemptyhomes.com

Statement	# of Councils 2012	# of Councils 2013
My council has a set process for responding to reports.	16	22
Of which:		
I respond to reports as soon as I receive them	12	16
I respond to reports within a set period of time	4	6

Strategies

In previous reports we have 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 distinct empty homes strategies.

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, 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'

Starting with the research to compile our baseline report in 2010 we have carried out a desktop review of councils' local housing strategies each year, we have therefore carried out this exercise 4 times so far. Our baseline report found that 16 had some mention of private sector empty homes. A repeat of this exercise, in 2011, found 17 included a reference to private sector empty homes. Last year the numbers significantly improved. A repeated desktop review following the refresh of a number of Local Housing Strategies found that 24 councils had some mention of private sector empty homes. This is a very encouraging improvement and we aim to help councils translate the commitments they have set out in these strategies into practical action on the ground. This year we repeated this exercise again and found that 28 councils have mentioned private sector empty homes work and that these mentions have in many cases become more in depth, including more specific action points and target setting.

11 councils have included targets to bring empty homes back into use within their Local Housing Strategy, up from 8 last year.

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.

Of those that responded to this year's survey, 3 councils reported inclusion of empty homes work within their private sector housing strategy with a further 2 intending to address it in the next Private Sector Housing Strategy.

In addition, 4 councils stated they had a standalone empty homes strategy, up from 3 last year and a further 9 councils reporting that they are developing an Empty Homes Strategy.

Empty Homes brought back into use 2012/13

One of the difficulties we reported last year was being able to accurately reflect the number of empty homes being brought back into use through the engagement of councils with empty home owners. This year we are glad to say that through our involvement with the 3 shared services projects and links with other officers through the Scottish Empty Homes Best Practice Group we have a clearer picture of this – although we are aware our data is likely to still be incomplete.

Our best estimate of the number of private sector empty homes brought back into use in the last financial year is 76. This is based on survey data as well as case studies submitted to the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network Knowledge Hub. The councils involved have case notes and other evidence to show that these 76 properties were brought back into use as a result of engagement by council staff with empty property owners. The highest reported number of homes brought back into use by any one council was 14.

In addition to these Scotland wide numbers we have additional data for the Homes Again Project where two Regional Empty Homes Officers are directly managed by the Partnership on behalf of 5 member councils. In this project as well as those properties brought back into use through direct engagement we know of a further 65 active cases that were progressing strongly at the turn of the financial year and should be brought back into use over the coming months. We also recorded 27 properties brought back into use following repeated mail outs from the Empty Homes Officers and a further 165 cases of data cleansing (where details have been updated by the Empty Homes Officer to reflect the fact that a property currently in receipt of vacant dwelling council tax discounts is not in fact empty and should have this discount removed).

We are unable to capture these additional figures Scotland wide however we are pleased to see that the increased level of staff resources dedicated to empty homes work across the country is translating itself into numbers of empty homes back into use. We do note that many of these staff are relatively new in post and we expect to see numbers of empty homes brought back into use increase year on year as these staff become more experienced and the empty homes offering from councils further matures and develops.

Empty Homes Targets

Last year we reported 11 councils with a specific target for bringing empty homes back into use. This year that number is 19, a marked increase. This number is different to that stated above in the section on strategies as not all of these targets are included explicitly in Local Housing Strategies.

We also once again asked councils how many empty homes they anticipate they will bring back into use in the coming year. 24 councils answered this question. Collectively they anticipated bringing back into use 435 empty homes with figures given by individual councils ranging from 10 to 66.

Use of interventions

In previous surveys we have asked councils about what types of interventions they have used. The table below shows the progression from last year's answers about what types of interventions have been used successfully by councils.

Table 3: Interventions used successfully by councils

Intervention	# of councils who have 'used successfully' 2012	# of councils who have 'used successfully' 2013
Writing to owners	5	17
Providing advice and assistance	10	20
Conducting a survey	6	14
Contacting empty home owners as a result of a complaint	10	14
Private sector leasing	2	4
Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme	5	7
Grants	5	4
Loans	0	2

We also gave respondents to the survey the chance to tell us about what they perceived to be the types of interventions that had been successful for them in a free form box. Here are some of the responses:

'Liaising with owners, giving advice on marketing of property, advice on VAT discounts, visiting properties with owners to discuss issues, matchmaker scheme.'

'Engagement with owners on a personal level, financial assistance through private sector housing grant, provision of advice support, threats of statutory action to owners who refuse to engage, working with registered social landlords to bring properties back into use, working with owners in communal blocks to address disrepair, etc.'

'Empty Homes Initiative Feasibility Grant Funding.'

Enforcement

In this year's survey we asked councils if they had used enforcement as a method to bring empty homes back into use. 2 councils said they had used enforcement successfully and 1 said it was in the process of pursuing a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) on a long

term empty property. Of the remaining respondents, 8 said they would like to try using enforcement as a tool and a further 7 said they would not be likely to try this.

Previous years' reports have highlighted the reluctance of councils to use Compulsory Purchase Powers to bring empty homes back into use. There have been efforts made through best practice sharing to dispel some of the concerns about CPO but as the answers above reflect this has yet to translate into more councils using these powers. This year in order to try to break down the issues with the use of CPO for councils we asked respondents 'What aspects of using CPO do you need more support with?' Most of the responses focused on the costs of pursuing CPOs. Here are some of the responses:

'The CPO process is too slow, expensive and cumbersome to deal responsively with empty homes – the powers which authorities have in England and Wales provide a more responsive basis for action.'

'Further clarification on 'public interest' when it comes to individual properties would be useful. There is a reluctance to take the CPO route for properties where the end use is not clear, i.e. the home in question is not fit for purpose, and the refurbishment/redevelopment costs do not make it a viable development opportunity in the current housing market. The availability of funding to the public sector to CPO homes and bring these properties back into use would be beneficial.'

'To make it more accessible to councils so legal aren't put off using it so much.'

'Would need a dedicated budget line to take forward CPOs. The Council has successfully completed a number of CPOs for regeneration purposes (not to address empty homes).'

Following previous years' surveys and requests from councils for a specific empty homes enforcement power, the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership submitted a proposal to the Scottish Government for adoption of what we are calling a Housing Re-use Power. We see this power as taking the best elements of existing empty homes powers in England and placing them in a Scottish context. In short it would involve a council using a set of criteria to determine if enforcement action is needed to bring an empty home back into use and then following one of two potential streams to achieve this depending on local market conditions. One option would be to place the property for sale on the open market to find a new owner who will bring the property back into use and the other would involve repairing and leasing out the property.

The Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill Consultation took place this year and general questions were asked within it about the need for a specific Scottish empty homes enforcement tool. Analysis of the responses revealed:

'Most respondents agreed that local authorities should be given more power to sell or lease long-term empty homes where it is in the public interest to do so. [...]

There was widespread support from community representatives for the additional powers proposed, with the blighting effect of empty and badly maintained houses and the shortage of affordable homes cited as reasons. [...]

While a number of local authorities and other organisations supported additional powers, several respondents also made clear that these should be used as a last resort and only if voluntary sale or lease cannot be agreed. [...]

Respondents were asked in what circumstances a local authority should be able to enforce a sale of an empty home and what minimum criteria would need to be met. [...]

Circumstances proposed by several respondents included:

- *evidence of neglect of the property (and evidence that this is causing a problem such as anti-social behaviour);*
- *length of time vacant (suggestions varying between 18 months and 20 years - but mostly around two to three years);*
- *refusal of the owner to address the problems identified or to respond to repairs notices; and*
- *the need for housing in the area.'*

We expect a further consultation on contents of the Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill in summer 2013 and we hope that it includes the introduction of the Housing Re-use Power.

Partnership Working

One of the ways the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership seeks to add value for councils is by facilitating relationships and making connections between people, organisations and their shared goals. In this year's survey we asked councils what partners they had worked with in relation to bringing empty homes back into use. Here is what they said:

Table 4: Partnership Working

Partners	# of councils who have worked with them in relation to empty homes
Housing Associations	14
Private Developers	8
Other Councils	10
Community Planning Partners	3
Other private companies	5
Community Associations	3

Links to housing associations is one area where much greater partnership working has been observed over the past year. Anecdotally we are aware that a number of the Empty Homes Loan Fund Projects involve partnership working between Housing Associations

and Councils. The Partnership is also aware of greater number of discussions and formal referral agreements being made between Housing Associations and Councils.

Sharing Best Practice

The Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network

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

We asked members to rate the usefulness of different types of tools and support provided by the empty homes partnership. Here is what they said:

Table 5: Perceived usefulness of Scottish Empty Homes Partnership support

Tool/Support	# stating 'very useful'	# stating 'useful'	# stating 'not useful'
Guides	15	10	0
Report Empty Homes Website	8	8	2
One to one advice from Empty Homes Coordinator	20	4	0
Scottish Empty Homes Conference	15	9	0
Monthly Network Updates	14	13	0
Knowledge Hub	13	11	0
Staff Training	13	5	0
Best Practice Group	11	7	0

The Scottish Empty Homes Conference 2012

This year the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership held its second Scottish Empty Homes Conference in November 2012 as well as a Seminar focusing on the Empty Homes Loan Fund in March 2013.

There were 82 delegates at the Scottish Empty Homes Conference which was held in Glasgow. The focus of the day was on Showcasing Scottish Practice and speakers were

drawn largely from Scottish councils including a plenary presentation on the Homes Again Project and specialist workshops on the Inverclyde Empty Homes Pilot and the Perth and Kinross town centre approach to empty properties.

In our feedback form for the conference we asked delegates if the conference would affect how they deal with the topics raised on the day. 96% of those responding said it would. When asked in what way, we received a number of comments including:

'The conference gave valuable insight into the way other councils and the Homes Again approach their empty homes strategy, and gave fresh ideas and information for our own vacant property project. Sharing information on case study examples and how to contact missing owners etc was useful.'

'I have come away with some fresh ideas and more contacts who have already been in touch to swap best practice.'

*'1. Further influence the way in which funding is provided within my council for empty homes work
2. Amend the Scheme of Assistance to reflect empty homes approach
3. consider a formal Empty Homes Approach'*

'The conference has given me an excellent opportunity to hear about the different initiatives that are working so well in Scotland. We can take away a lot of good ideas which actually work in bringing empty homes back into use and have this as evidence for our Minister, local councils etc.'

Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network Seminar 2013

The Seminar, held in March in Glasgow focused on all aspects of developing an Empty Homes Loan Fund Project – from setting up the legal documents through to attracting owners and using the media. 35 members of the network attended the seminar. When asked the same question as that asked at the conference, about whether the seminar would affect how they deal with the topics raised, 100% of respondents said that it would.

When asked in what way the following comments were left:

'Will help to think more about using media and promoting Empty Home work.'

'As project solicitor it has given me a wider perspective hearing from colleagues (legal & otherwise) involved in Empty Homes projects which are at a more advanced stage.'

'By understanding issues affecting partnering local authorities'

Staff Training

Following recent increases in the levels of dedicated empty homes staff employed by councils, the Empty Homes Coordinator has reacted by developing a 1 day induction

training course which is being offered free of charge to all councils especially where new staff have been employed. The training day includes modules on:

- Introduction to the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership
- Data, priorities & contacting owners
- Working with owners & recording impact
- Developing an Empty Homes Strategy
- Sharing the learning

The course is adapted to suit the needs of individual councils but in all cases seeks to give staff the theory and practical tools to take forward the empty homes process outlined above in the 'Background' section of this report and to allow them to achieve the empty homes goals they set for themselves. Recently the training has been amended to include a focus on implementing Empty Homes Loans Projects as part of this wider process.

To date training days have been held with staff in the following councils:

Argyll & Bute

Clackmannanshire

Dumfries & Galloway

East Ayrshire

East Lothian

Falkirk

Fife

North Ayrshire

North Lanarkshire

Renfrewshire

Scottish Borders

South Ayrshire

Stirling

West Dunbartonshire

West Lothian

The offer of training will remain open to all councils (or council partners) who are embarking on empty homes work.

Best Practice Group

Another response to the increase of dedicated empty homes staff in councils has been the creation of the Scottish Empty Homes Best Practice Group. This group is open to all full and near full-time Empty Homes staff. The group meets bi-monthly and is dedicated to the discussion of topical empty homes issues impacting on the day to day work of

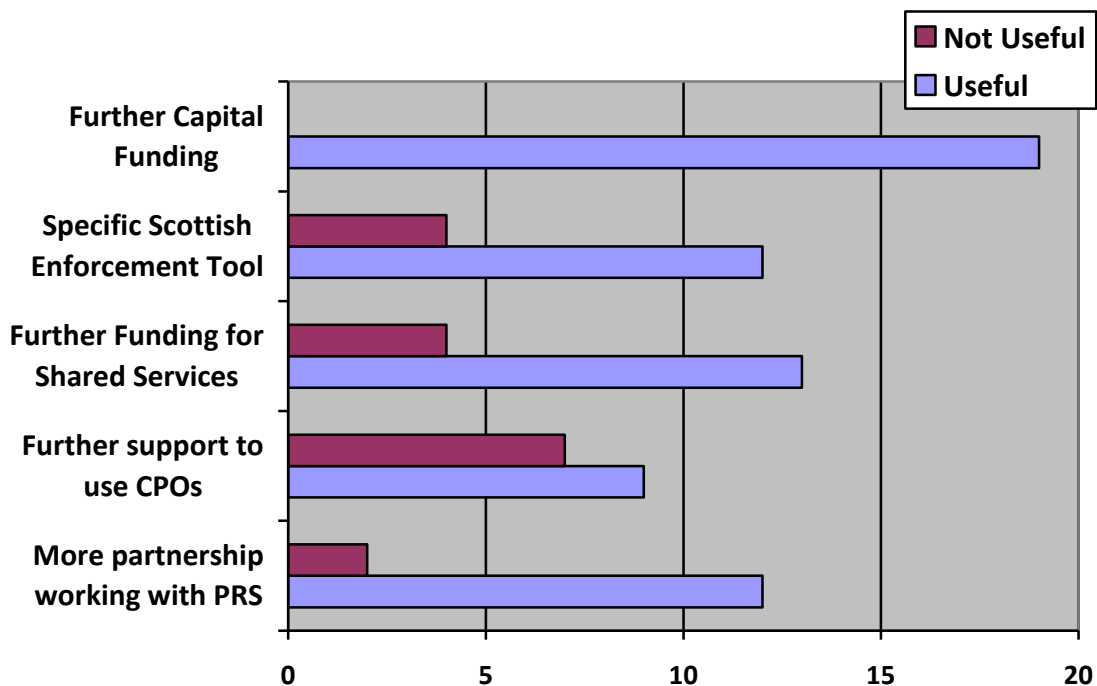
members as well as the exchange of best practice lessons. Recent meetings have covered topics such as the Empty Homes Loan Fund, Communal Repairs issues affecting empty properties; Energy Efficiency funding, and work-shopping individual empty homes cases.

The first meeting of the group took place in August 2012 and membership has steadily grown. There are approximately 12 regular attendees with other members attending as they are able. To date positive feedback has been received on the usefulness of the group (see figures above in Table 5). The group is perceived to provide a much needed forum for exchanging knowledge and practical tips as well as contributing to the cohesiveness of the empty homes professional sector in Scotland.

Barriers & Recommendations

In an effort to identify remaining barriers to private sector empty homes work in Scotland we asked our survey respondents to tell us what they would find useful in increasing their efforts to bring private sector empty homes back into use. These findings along with the evidence from this year's work with councils across the country to develop their empty homes offering has resulted in a list of three areas where we believe more could be done to enable successful private sector empty homes work. These areas are: staff resources, funding, and enforcement powers. These three areas are the same ones that we focused on in this section of last year's report, however the specific issues and recommendations have evolved alongside the maturing of empty homes work that has taken place over the past year.

Chart 5: Do you think any of the following would be useful in bringing private sector empty homes back into use?



Staff Resources

The background section of this report described the steps involved in private sector empty homes work that are promoted by the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership. Last year we described how the lack of staff resources was stopping some councils from exploring all of these steps to their full potential. We are pleased to say that this year has seen a significant increase in staff resources for empty homes work. We also believe that those councils who have dedicated empty homes staff are beginning to be able to evidence the results of that investment through numbers of empty homes brought back into use. We

would like to see this trend continue and we would like to see more empty homes staff employed on permanent rather than temporary contracts.

We do however have some real concerns about those councils who have embarked on empty homes loans projects in the absence of dedicated staff resource. Evidence from across the UK shows that value for money is achieved in terms of the levels of empty homes that can be brought back into use where financial incentives for owners are paired with dedicated officers engaging empty home owners with advice and support of a non-financial nature as well. We continue to promote the message to councils that a holistic empty homes service is needed to bring homes back into use as well as to ensure that empty homes loan fund spending targets are met.

The same message has been promoted to those councils who are implementing or considering implementation of the new Vacant Dwelling Council Tax amendments. In our evidence to the Scottish Parliament on the proposed powers we recommended that councils use these powers as part of a wider package of empty homes measures. We recommend that councils removing the vacant dwelling council tax discount and charging an increase on these properties should have a dedicated Empty Homes Officer who can provide advice, problem solving and financial incentives to empty home owners in the first instance, prior to them reaching the point where additional council tax charges become due. We believe this would provide the most balanced and effective approach, by combining the carrot of support with the stick of increased council tax charges.

Recommendations:

- Scottish Government and Shared Service Member Councils commit to forward funding of the existing Regional Empty Homes Officers and consideration be given to additional shared service projects.
- Councils taking forward Empty Homes Loan Fund projects and/or implementing the new Vacant Dwelling Council Tax Powers should employ dedicated empty homes staff as part of a holistic empty homes service.

Funding

Access to funding for private sector empty homes work and particularly incentives for owners continues to be an issue for councils. This year the £4.5m National Empty Homes Loan Fund has significantly improved this situation. However, short term bid funds, even where they focus on recyclable loans, cannot address all aspects of the need for funding for private sector empty homes work.

Work on the development of Empty Homes Loan Fund projects has also highlighted the types of empty homes issues that it cannot address, such as empty homes in areas of low demand; empty properties requiring extensive renovations; and empty homes whose end

use is expected to be sale or owner-occupation. The first two categories of empty homes are often the ones that community members and elected officials are concerned about and providing some assistance to the final category would likely lead to greater engagement on the part of more empty home owners.

Along with the Empty Homes Loan Fund there exists an opportunity for councils using the new council tax powers, to recycle some of this additional revenue for empty homes work, including help, advice, negotiation, incentives and enforcement.

Recommendations:

- The Scottish Government strongly encourage councils to recycle vacant dwelling council tax increase revenue for use in other aspects of empty homes work as part of their guidance on the associated legislation and regulations.
- Scottish Government and councils consider the development of incentive schemes for wider categories of empty homes beyond the quick wins that are currently covered by the Empty Homes Loan Fund.

Enforcement Powers

A consistent theme in the feedback the Partnership has received from councils via our surveys and other means has been the desire for more empty homes enforcement tools in Scotland. This year we have sought to support councils who are looking to use existing powers, namely Compulsory Purchase. One council, West Lothian, is soon to take a decision on whether to pursue this on a particularly long-term empty home causing problems in a local community. We hope to learn lessons from their experience that can make it easier for other councils to use CPO on individual empty homes. However, the message we are receiving from councils continues to be that they don't think the existing tools are fit for purpose. They raise with us concerns about both the cost and complexity of pursuing a Compulsory Purchase Order and often cite the desirability of the empty homes enforcement tools in place in England and Wales.

This year's survey indicates that some respondents (4) are not keen on new enforcement powers. Anecdotally we believe this is because those councils are not keen to use enforcement of any type. We would therefore want to make clear that when we recommend the introduction of a new enforcement power for Scotland we would expect it to be up to the discretion of councils whether or not they choose to use it. What we do know is that for those councils who see enforcement as a necessary part of their empty homes approach, the powers that exist do not appear to be either as accessible or as effective as they would like.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's proposed 'Housing Re-use Power' was outlined earlier in this report. We welcomed the questions about empty homes enforcement tools

in the consultation on the Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill and we hope to see a specific Scottish empty homes enforcement power introduced as part of this bill.

Without an enforcement power that councils can plausibly and effectively use, many negotiations with empty home owners will not bear fruit as there will be no recourse for the council should the owner not wish to engage.

Recommendation:

- Scottish Government introduce an Empty Homes Housing Re-Use Power in Scotland

Progress on Project Milestones

Last year's report set out the milestones agreed between the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership and Scottish Government by which the project would be measured. Below we have sought to track the progress against these milestones.

Milestones	Progress
Provide a minimum of one good practice example of an empty home(s) brought back into use or of initiatives taken by local authorities to tackle empty homes in Scotland per quarter	Last year 35 case studies of empty homes brought back into use were uploaded to the Knowledge Hub website as well as information about 10 empty homes initiatives taken by Scottish local authorities to bring empty homes back into use.
Ensuring at least five more local authorities feature empty homes commitments as a key part of their housing strategy and/or set target to return additional empty homes to use by March 2013	Councils featuring empty homes in their LHS increased from 24 to 28 this year and the number of councils including a target for empty homes returned to use within their LHS rose from 8 to 11.
Ensuring at least five more local authorities have the following specific tools in place by March 2013: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) An empty homes database b) An advice package for empty home owners 	We know from survey data that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The number of councils with an empty homes database has risen from 19 to 24 this year b) The number of councils who have successfully used advice and information to bring empty homes back into use has risen from 10 to 20.
Promote the use of empty homes loans schemes or other financial incentive schemes to local authorities by highlighting current good practice examples, with the aim to have more local authorities taking part in or considering using such schemes by March 2013.	The Empty Homes Coordinator took forward promoting applications to the Empty Homes Loan Fund as a key priority for 2012-13. As a result the Loan Fund was oversubscribed with over 20 applications received by Scottish Government. The majority of the successful applicants were assisted through direct advice and consultancy from the Empty Homes Coordinator.

The year ahead

The priorities and milestones for the fourth year of activity of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership have been agreed with Scottish Government and are set out in Appendix B. In summary the focus for the coming year will be:

- Continuing support and training for councils
- Promoting holistic empty homes approaches
- Providing evidence of empty homes brought back into use
- Sharing best practice
- Maintaining and increasing dedicated empty homes staffing levels in Scotland.

Year 3 priorities

The Partnership's work was originally due to finish in June 2012. In order to allow momentum in developing private sector empty homes work in Scotland to continue, the Scottish Government agreed to further fund the Partnership up to March 2013. Below are the agreed continuing priorities and milestones for this third year of the project. As stated throughout this document we believe that part of achieving a number of these priorities and milestones is dependent on the Partnership placing a strong emphasis on increase staff capacity within councils to undertake dedicated private sector empty homes work. This will be a strong theme of Year 3 of the Partnership's work.

Continuing Priorities for 2012-13

- Continue to support the practice community through information-sharing, providing accurate guidance and template tools
- Support the three locally-based shared service empty homes officers to achieve their targets of aiming to bring on average fifty empty homes back into use per officer per year
- Continue meetings and other regular contact with local authorities, housing associations and other relevant private sector and community bodies to encourage them to carry out work to bring empty homes back into use
- Provide support to local authorities and other bodies who have been awarded or are applying for funding for empty homes projects in developing and implementing their projects, including in particular the implementation of schemes to offer loans to empty home owners to enable them to refurbish and bring their homes back into use.
- Support councils who wish to prepare to use council tax powers in advance of the new legislation (the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.)(Scotland) Bill and subsequent regulations) coming into force
- Continue to undertake research into new enforcement tools as required in order to assist the Scottish Government in preparing legislative proposals
- Maintain the empty homes network contact database and expand the portfolio of practical projects to bring empty homes back into use
- Maintain Scottish Empty Homes Partnership web presence on the knowledge hub and manage successful migration from the Communities of Practice website
- Host a minimum of two empty homes seminars per year

Milestones for success measurement

Whilst having regard to the achievement of the priorities above, the success of the project will be measured based on the progress during 2012-13 in achieving the targets set out below:

- Provide a minimum of one good practice example of an empty home(s) brought back into use or of initiatives taken by local authorities to tackle empty homes in Scotland per quarter
- Ensuring at least five more local authorities feature empty homes commitments as a key part of their housing strategy and/or set target to return additional empty homes to use by March 2013
- Ensuring at least five more local authorities have the following specific tools in place by March 2013:
 - a) An empty homes database
 - b) An advice package for empty home owners
- Promote the use of empty homes loans schemes or other financial incentive schemes to local authorities by highlighting current good practice examples, with the aim to have more local authorities taking part in or considering using such schemes by March 2013.

Year 4 Priorities

The 2013-2014 priorities for the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership are:

- Continue to support the practice community through information-sharing, providing accurate guidance and template tools
- Support the four locally-based shared service empty homes officers to achieve their targets of aiming to bring on average fifty empty homes back into use per officer per year. This includes the three officers directly employed by Shelter plus the officer employed by Renfrewshire and West Dunbartonshire Councils
- Offer support and training to new empty homes staff across Scotland
- Continue meetings and other regular contact with local authorities, housing associations and other relevant private sector and community bodies to encourage them to carry out work to bring empty homes back into use
- Provide support to local authorities and other bodies who have been awarded or are applying for funding for empty homes projects in developing and implementing their projects, including in particular the implementation of schemes to offer loans to empty home owners to enable them to refurbish and bring their homes back into use.
- Promote the use of a holistic approach to empty homes work to councils implementing an Empty Homes Loan Fund project to encourage wider take up of loans and other assistance to bring private sector empty homes back into use
- Promote the use of a holistic approach to empty homes work to councils who chose to use the new vacant dwelling council tax powers
- Maintain the empty homes network contact database
- Maintain Scottish Empty Homes Partnership web presence on the knowledge hub
- Host a minimum of two empty homes events per year (conference/seminar)

Milestones for success measurement:

Whilst having regard to the achievement of the priorities above, the success of the project will be measured based on the progress during 2013-14 in achieving the targets set out below:

- Provide a minimum of one good practice example of an empty home(s) brought back into use or of initiatives taken by local authorities to tackle empty homes in Scotland per quarter

- Secure commitments from Fife, Borders, Dumfries & Galloway, West Lothian, East Lothian, Renfrewshire and West Dunbartonshire to continue with shared service empty homes officer model when Scottish Government funding ceases in 2014
- Ensuring additional local authorities have the following specific tools in place by March 2014:
 - a) An empty homes database
 - b) An advice package for empty home owners
- Ensuring additional local authorities feature empty homes commitments as a key part of their housing strategies and/or set a target to return additional empty homes to use by March 2014
- Number of Scottish Empty Homes Partnership training sessions for all new empty homes staff (councils & housing associations) undertaken in the year