

Scottish Empty Homes Partnership

Annual Report 2014-15

June 2015

Summary

At the start of last year the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership set out a number of priorities for 2014-15. These priorities have been developed over this past year and are reviewed in this report.

The specific priorities and milestones for 2014-15 are set out in Appendix A. In line with activities and priorities in previous years 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, the number of empty homes reported as brought back into use has doubled– from 278 in 2013-14 to 558 in 2014-15. This is a reflection primarily of increases in, and skilling up of, dedicated Empty Homes Officers and reflects a further maturing in the empty homes sector where best practice continues to be widely shared, honed and put into action.

There is still some distance to travel to achieve full national coverage of responsive and effective empty homes services. The extension and expansion of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership which came into effect in April 2015 will aim to continue to push for take up of existing best practice, further resources for empty homes work and legislative changes to address existing barriers to bringing private sector empty homes back into use.

We 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. The report concludes with a section on continuing barriers and recommendations and a look to the year ahead.

Highlights from the year

 **558**

Council reported number of empty homes brought back into use through direct intervention with the owner

 **17**

The number of councils with at least 1 empty homes officer (some have more than 1) has increased from 16 to 17, with a number of new appointments in the pipeline for additional councils in 2015/16.

 **14**

In February 2015 the Scottish Government reported that 14 councils were applying the vacant dwelling council tax dwelling powers with 9 applying the full 100% increase.

 **22**

Councils have set themselves targets for bringing private sector empty homes back into use.

 **Forth Valley Empty Homes Project**

Successfully transitioned from seed funding to full partner council funding and management.

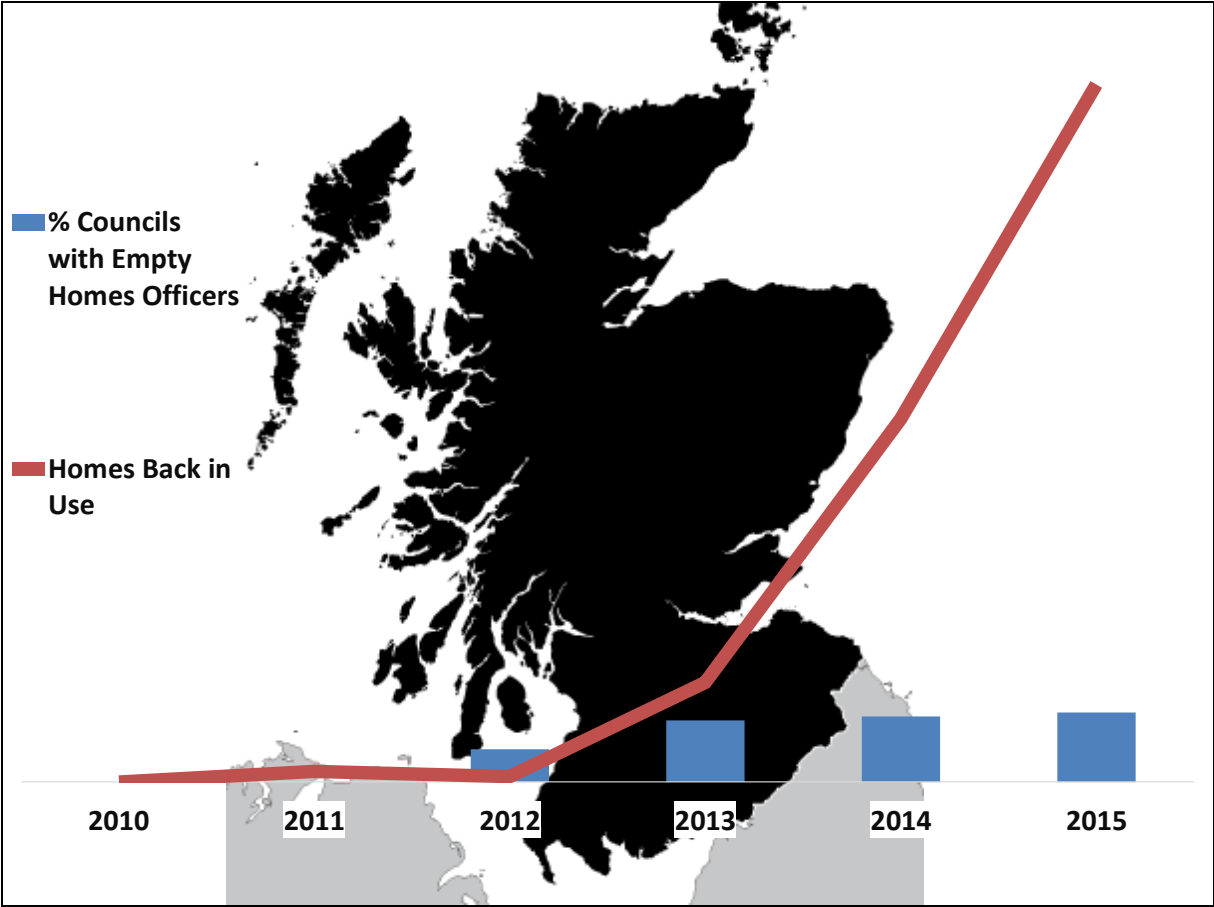
 **March 2018**

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's work was extended and expanded to cover 1.5 new members of staff running until March 2018.

 **Funding secured**

To start two new Empty Homes Shared Service Incubator Projects each year for the next 3 years.

Graph 1: Visual summary showing progression of highlighted figures since the start of the Scottish Empty Homes Project



Recommendations at a glance

Staff Resources

Mainstream funding for local Empty Homes Officer in all of Scotland’s Local Authorities, preferably on permanent contracts.

Funding

- A diversification of financial incentive schemes offered by Scottish Government and Local Authorities to include more types of empty homes for more types of end uses. Specifically empty homes in areas of low demand, empty properties requiring extensive renovations or conversions, and empty homes whose end use is expected to be market sale or owner-occupation.
- A specific fund to support community groups and Social Enterprises to take forward empty homes projects, learning from the success of the UK Government’s Empty Homes Community Grants Programme.

- Local Taxation Reform to retain a financial incentive for empty home owners to bring their properties back into use.

Enforcement

The introduction in legislation of an empty homes appropriate enforcement tool by the Scottish Government, using one of two potential options (in order of preference).

1. Introduction of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's proposed Housing Re-use Power.
2. Inclusion of the Land Reform Review Group's proposal for a Compulsory Sale Order power to be included in the Land Reform Bill, with a definition of the scope of the power to cover not just vacant and derelict land but also long term empty homes and buildings.

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Introduction

This is the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's Annual Report for 2014-15. 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 Annual Reports from 2010-11 through to 2013-14. 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 next four years' 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 2014-15 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 projected outcomes and milestones for 2015-18 under the new extended framework for the Partnership's work.

Background

There are over 27,000 long term (6 months or more) private sector empty homes in Scotland¹ 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's 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 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 three times and is currently funded until March 2018.

¹ Source: Scottish Government, Housing Statistics for Scotland, Quarterly Update - March 2015, <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0047/00472359.pdf>

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 pro-active engagement 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.

For the first two years of the Partnership's work councils were largely focused on steps 1-3, but over the last three years with the employment of more empty homes officers in more councils, there is now a greater proportion of councils actively engaging in steps 4 and 5 and a small number of councils beginning to look at the use of step 6.

2012-13 saw the biggest leap in the amount of staff resources allocated to empty homes across Scotland. This year staff resources have continued to increase. We are pleased to report that there are now 17 councils with 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. Indeed a small number of these 17 councils have more than 1 member of staff dedicated to empty homes work. In previous reports we have identified this issue as crucial to finding solutions to entrenched issues with long term empty homes and this remains the case. It is still 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 attempts to capture a snapshot of private sector empty homes practice in Scotland. In recent years we have also sent a survey to members of the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations asking for information on current involvement in and views of private sector empty homes work.

These surveys have been repeated in April/May each year since. This year, out of the 32 Scottish Local Authorities we received responses from 27 (though not all respondents answered every question).

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
- 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 and funding for incentives and enforcement measures

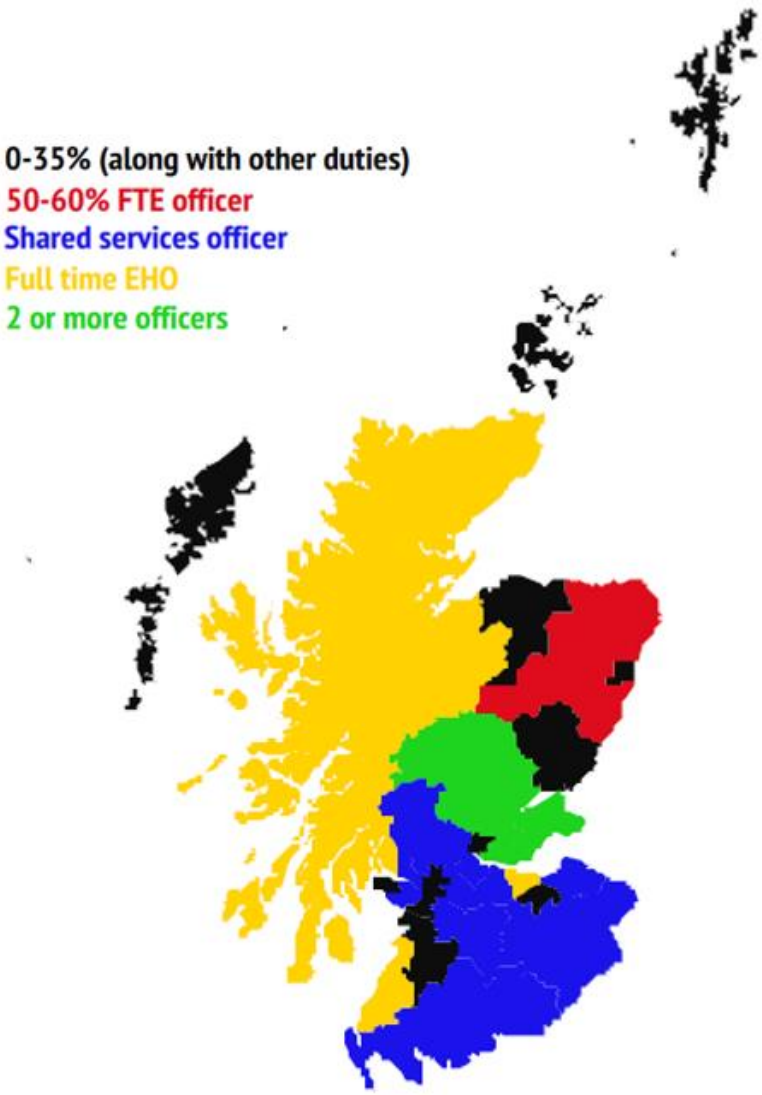
Dedicated Staff Resources

Last year we reported another small increase in the amount of staff resource dedicated to empty homes work in Scottish Councils, and the upward trend has continued. In 2013-14, 16 councils had an Empty Homes Officer (either full time or as part of a Shared Services Project). In 2014-15, 17 councils have an Empty Homes Officer either full time or as part of a Shared Service Project. We deliberately 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 the officer is 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.

Table 1: % FTE Empty Homes Staff 2015

% FTE	# of Councils
0%	5
5%	1
10%	2
25%	2
30%	3
50%	6
100%	6
150%	2
200%+	1

Graph 2: Dedicated Empty Homes Staff in Scotland 2014/15



Shared Services Pilots

Since 2012 the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership has instigated and run a number of Empty Homes Shared Services Pilot Projects across Scotland. The model to date has been as follows:

- 2 or more councils agree an empty homes service is needed.
- The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership helps partner councils to submit a proposal to Scottish Government to attract seed fund money from Scottish Government.
- Scottish Government and partner councils agree funding levels.
- Where required (most projects) the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership at Shelter Scotland recruits and line manages an Empty Homes Officer whose time is split across partner councils.

- Pilots have historically had initial one year agreements and all of the projects have subsequently been extended to a second year with reduced Scottish Government seed fund money.
- At the end of the second year it is up to partner councils to fully fund the project should they wish it to continue.

The overall aim of the projects is to provide local evidence of the need for and benefits of an empty homes service. The hoped for outcome is therefore that councils would either continue with shared service arrangements, or better still, hire their own full time Empty Homes staff.

To date this has resulted in a 3 year life span for the first Shared Services Pilot – the Homes Again Project (2 officers split between Fife Council, West Lothian Council, East Lothian Council, Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway) & Homes Again West Dunbartonshire/Renfrewshire (managed by West Dunbartonshire Council).

The Homes Again Project has had a phased end for the various partners and will end officially in August 2015. Fife Council have secured funding for 200% FTE Empty Homes Officers and Dumfries and Galloway have secured funding for a 100% FTE Empty Homes Officer. The remaining councils are yet to take final decisions on empty homes provision going forward but it is hoped they will retain current service levels where possible.

The Homes Again West Dunbartonshire/Renfrewshire Project has no set end date and looks set to continue.

The Forth Valley Empty Homes Project, initially Falkirk, Stirling and Clackmannanshire, was extended to a second and now a third year by Falkirk and Stirling Councils (with Clackmannanshire choosing not to continue). This third year has seen council partners take over management of the Empty Homes Officer. The new shared services incubator model described below follows this pattern.

The Lanarkshire's Empty Homes Project, the newest shared services project, has recently agreed in principle to move into a second year with North Lanarkshire currently recruiting for a full time officer (therefore increasing their empty homes service provision) but staying involved with the shared services project in a mentoring role to South Lanarkshire Council who will retain a 50% FTE Empty Homes Officer.

As part of the expansion and extension of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership to March 2018 the way Shared Services Pilots are designed and operated will change going forward.

The new Empty Homes Shared Services Incubator Model takes effect from 2015 onward and will apply to all new projects. The new model involves the following elements:

- The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership at Shelter Scotland holds a dedicated pot of grant funding for shared services projects from Scottish Government with the aim of initiating 2 new shared services projects per year.
- A maximum of 2 partner councils/organisations agreeing that an empty homes service is necessary and that they will share an Empty Homes Officer.
- A 2 year proposal being submitted to the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership by potential partners (this can as before include Shelter Scotland recruitment and line management if necessary but the preference is for council managed projects).
- Final agreement of grant funding approved at Scottish Government level.
- Seed fund money is granted from Shelter Scotland to the shared services partners decreasing from Year 1 to Year 2.
- Following the completion of Year 2, partner organisations must fully fund the project should they wish it to continue.

To date Dundee/Angus have been approved for the first of these Shared Services Incubator Projects. Dundee City Council will recruit and manage the post.

Funding for Incentives and Enforcement measures

Funding for empty homes incentives and enforcement measures remains an area which is under resourced. However in the past couple of years the sector has seen significant increases in this area, primarily through the new Vacant Dwelling Council Tax Powers and the Scottish Government's Empty Homes Loan Fund.

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%. This power was added to as a result of the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.) (Scotland) Act 2012.

The Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.) (Scotland) Act 2012 was commenced in April 2013. 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 100% extra council tax on long term vacant properties that are not subject to any of the stated exemption categories².

For properties not subject to set exemptions councils choosing to use these new powers have discretion under the legislation to exempt owners/properties from the charge. New guidance was issued by the Scottish Government in March 2015 giving further clarity to this discretion and highlighting a number of areas where councils might considering using this flexibility including:

Any other circumstances where the owner has agreed with an Empty Homes Officer to take positive steps to re-occupy their property and it is in the view of the Empty Homes Officer that a time-limited council tax increase "holiday" would encourage the property to be brought back into use sooner.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership believes this is a positive piece of guidance and has encouraged councils to involve their Empty Homes Officers in these discretionary decisions. We know that several councils have implemented such council tax 'holidays' to good effect, enabling them to engage with owners and bring more empty homes back into use quicker.

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 the Scottish Government's March 2015 response to the Finance Committee's review of these powers³ it was reported that 14 councils were applying the vacant dwelling council tax dwelling powers with 9 applying the full 100% increase. Scottish Government estimates predict revenue of £8.5m across Scotland from use of these powers in 2014-15.

Data below on funding for empty homes work by council gives some indication of funding sources where provided but we do not have full data on how much if any of the revenue generated through the Vacant Dwelling Council Tax Powers have been recycled into empty homes work.

Empty Homes Loan Fund

In 2013, 17 projects across Scotland were allocated £4.5m under the Scottish Government's Empty Homes Loan Fund. Projects vary but the majority are run by local authorities or housing associations and all are aimed at bringing long term empty homes back into use for a minimum of 5 years affordable housing. Management arrangements vary across the projects but the vast majority involve a loan to the empty home owner to bring the property up to a lettable standard in exchange for the property being let out at an affordable rate (below LHA rates) for at least 5 years. Many projects have struggled to attract interested owners and in 2014-15 the Scottish Government extended terms to many projects to include the option of a loan to sell at affordable levels alongside the existing model.

We are aware of 10 councils who have used loans to successfully bring empty homes back into use. This number included Argyll & Bute Council who run their own empty homes loan scheme outside of the Scottish Government fund but with the same tie to the provision of affordable housing.

The Scottish Government's latest figures are that around 50 units have been brought back into use via the Empty Homes Loan Fund since 2013. A further 2 projects have recently been established with unspent loan fund money from other projects. Some early learning from delivery of the Empty Homes Loan Fund and Town Centre Housing Fund was used in the

³ Post-legislative scrutiny of the Financial Memorandum accompanying the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.) (Scotland) Bill

http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_FinanceCommittee/General%20Documents/Cabinet_Secretary_to_the_Finance_Committee.pdf

development of the Town Centre Empty Homes Fund which is due to be launched in June 2015.

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.

This year the number of councils keeping a private sector empty homes database has increased from 24 to 25, according to survey responses and discussions with councils. .

As well as the number of councils collecting data we also ask survey respondents about 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.

Once again this year council tax is listed as the main source of data for empty homes databases in Scotland, followed by direct engagement with owners, local surveys to owners and information from other council departments. The option of specifying that collection of data was 'more often than quarterly' was added to the survey in 2014 in the expectation that this was becoming more common practice, however at that time it was not borne out in the survey results. However this year the number of officers indicating they collect data more often than quarterly seems to have replaced the majority of those who previously collected data only on a quarterly basis.

Of those who said they do not hold an empty homes database the reasons why were given as not having staff resources (2) and IT issues (1).

Chart 1 - Data Collection 2009

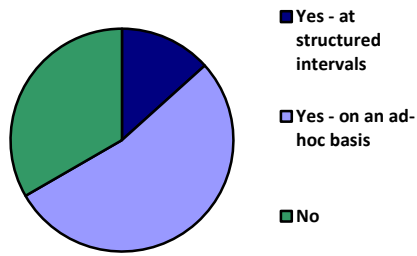


Chart 2 - Data Collection 2011

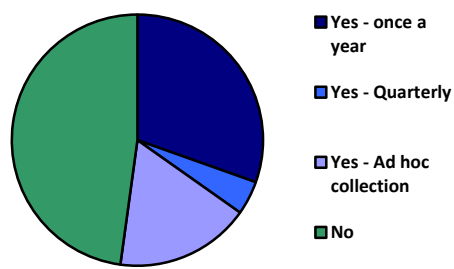


Chart 3 - Data Collection 2012

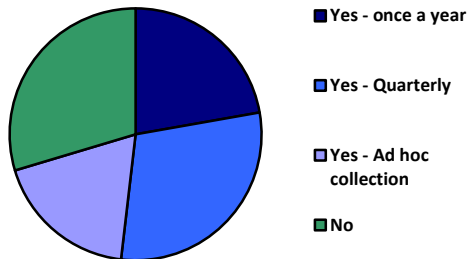


Chart 4 - Data Collection 2013

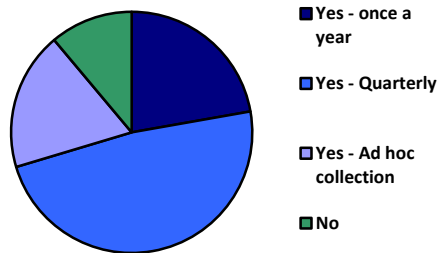


Chart 5 - Data Collection 2014

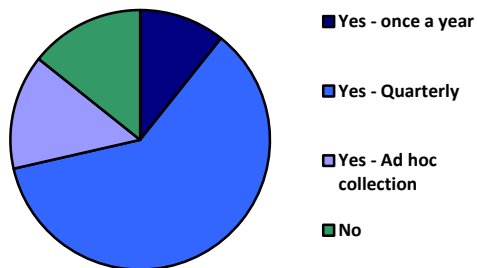
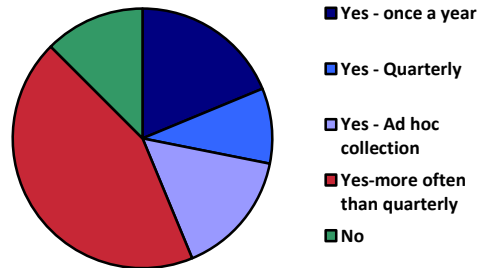


Chart 6 - Data Collection 2015



We also asked councils what they use this data for. Some notable results include:

- 19 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 use it to cross-check the current status of properties they receive complaints about
- Only 9 councils replied that they use it to prioritise empty homes for pro-active intervention from the council, down from 14 councils last year.

These figures are important as they are indicators of the continuation of a more in-depth engagement with empty home owners that we reported last year. It is this in-depth engagement that brings empty homes back into use. It is not clear from the survey results why there has been a drop in councils using their database for prioritisation purposes or if they are using other means to prioritise which empty homes to focus on.

Reporting Problem Empty Homes

Up until last year the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership funded the Report Empty Homes website for use by Scottish local authorities. This website, established in England for several years before adoption in Scotland, allowed members of the public to report empty homes in their communities they were concerned about. The idea was that for councils that were signed up, reports would go straight to a single lead officer within the council who could then respond themselves or pass the report on to an appropriate colleague. This was useful for both the councils and members of the public because it streamlined 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.

Data collected in this way could also be useful to supplement council empty homes databases as not all empty homes will have their council tax status correctly recorded. It also highlighted where particular properties are causing additional problems to the community.

At its peak, 29 Scottish councils had signed up to use the website. Over 600 reports had been received in Scotland from the public via the website. These reports are largely organically generated with some peaks in reporting following national television coverage on the subject of empty homes. We were however aware that local councils did not publicise the website to their communities and we had begun to question the value of funding the site in the future. Independently the Empty Homes Agency in England began to have issues with the website providers and chose to terminate their contract with them.

At the time of writing the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership is due to launch the phone and web based Empty Homes Advice Service providing not only advice to owners and neighbours about bringing empty homes back into use but also replacing the reporting function of the reportemptyhome.com website for Scotland. Anyone across Scotland can now phone the advice service and be directed to a named person within their local authority to follow up on their empty homes complaint. The advice service will not only make these referrals but also

provide advice to councils about how to respond, as well as following up to see how reports and complaints have been dealt with.

However councils become aware of complaints we think it is important that they have a set process for responding and this is something we ask councils in each survey. The number of councils who say they have a set process and that they respond as soon as reports are received has continued to increase year on year.

Table 3: Council response to reports and complaints from any source

Statement	# of councils			
	2012	2013	2014	2015
My council has a set process for responding to reports.	16	22	27	29
Of which:				
I respond to reports as soon as I receive them	12	16	19	24
I respond to reports within a set period of time	4	6	8	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'

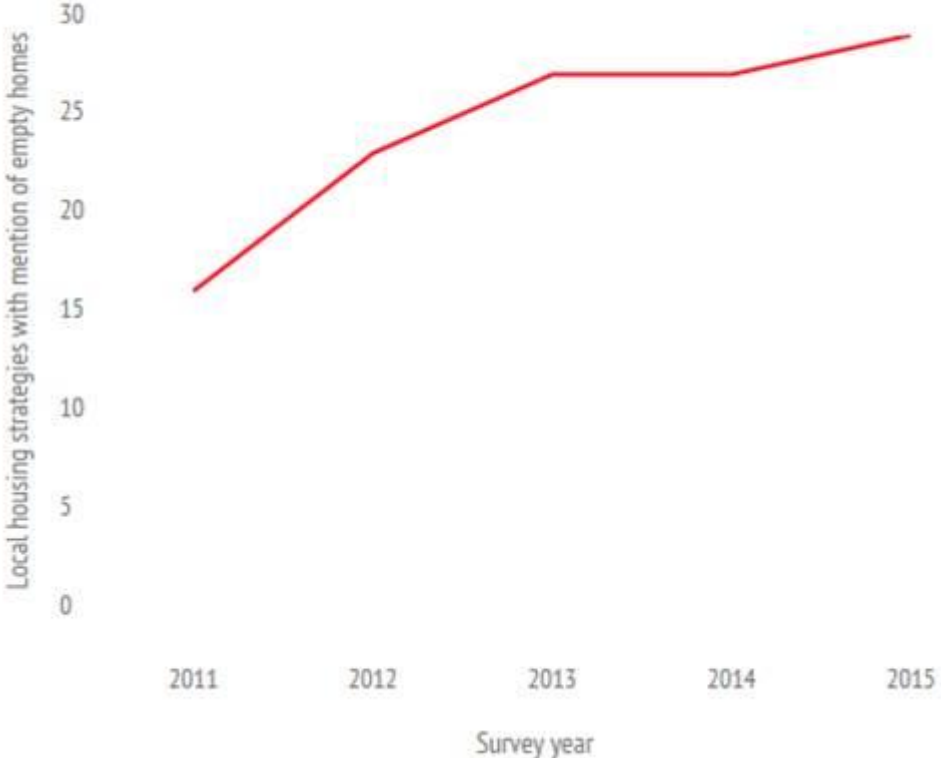
'to stimulate demand in areas that are less popular or have investment needs'

'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. Our baseline report found that 16 had some mention of private sector empty homes, rising to 17 in 2011. In 2012 there was a significant improvement, following the refresh of a number of Local Housing Strategies and a repeated desktop review found that 24 councils had some mention of private sector empty homes.

This number has continued to grow so now all but Dundee and East Dunbartonshire include some mention of private sector empty homes work in their local housing strategies. Over time, these mentions have in many cases become more in depth, including more specific action points and target setting – 10 councils include a specific numeric target for empty homes brought back into use, and a further 4 mention "reduce" or "decrease" the number of empty homes. Some local housing strategies that have been recently updated have also increased their targets.

Graph 3: Empty Homes in Local Housing Strategies



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, 10 councils indicated they had a specific Empty Homes Strategy or Action Plan in place (up from 4 last year). A further 4 said empty homes was addressed in their private sector housing strategy.

Empty Homes brought back into use 2014-15

One difficulty for the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership as a capacity building project with no statutory powers to compel reporting is our ability to accurately reflect the number of empty homes being brought back into use through the engagement of councils with empty home owners. However our involvement with the empty homes shared services projects and links

with other officers through the Scottish Empty Homes Best Practice Group has provided us with significant amounts of data from the majority of the most active councils undertaking empty homes work. We are aware our data is likely to still be incomplete but believe it is getting more accurate year on year.

Our best estimate of the number of private sector empty homes brought back into use in the last financial year through direct intervention is 558, double the figure of 278 for last year. 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 558 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 130 and the lowest (above 0) was 4.

In addition to these Scotland wide numbers we have additional data from the Empty Homes Shared Services Projects directly managed by the Partnership on behalf of councils. In these projects as well as those properties brought back into use through direct engagement we know of a further 510 active cases that were progressing strongly at the turn of the financial year and we would expect a number of these to be brought back into use over the coming months. We also recorded approximately £129,540 recovered by partner councils as a result of the work of the Empty Homes Officers through 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) and debt recovery work across the three projects.

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. As is discussed elsewhere in the report a new case closing data analysis tool, produced by the Partnership, should help councils to collect more outcomes of their empty homes work, including debt recovery at a local level and this may be information that they would be willing to share with us for future reports.

This year, the Partnership asked councils to provide information on how empty properties they had worked with had been brought back into use, with basic groupings of '1 to 10' and 'more than 10' on a range of different outcomes. Of the 18 councils who reported that some empty homes had been brought back into use with their intervention, 14 councils were able to provide some basic breakdown of data around the outcome of empty properties that had

been brought back into use with their intervention. In the future, we would like to know the number of empty homes brought back in the following way:

- Sold at auction
- Purchased through council buy back scheme
- Purchased by Housing Association partners
- Privately let
- Let through a letting agent
- Let through a Private Sector Leasing Scheme
- Let through a Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme
- Housing Association management arrangement
- Owner Occupation
- Sweat Equity agreements

The Partnership has recently completed its own analysis on outcomes of empty homes, as well as on referral sources, common issues leading to empty properties and the interventions taken by the empty homes officers. Some data from this analysis is presented in this report. However, most councils do not have a system in place to give more specific feedback on this. In recognising the importance of being able to report on empty homes work at a local level the Partnership have developed a case closing analysis tool. This tool would provide councils with the ability to store, track and report on this data themselves, and aid the provision of this information to the Partnership in future. We hope that the new Partnership's case closing analysis tool will be taken up by councils to help build further evidence about the benefits of empty homes work throughout Scotland as well as providing valuable local data that can support empty homes work.

Empty Homes Targets

Last year we reported 21 councils with a specific target for bringing empty homes back into use. This year that number has increased slightly to 22. 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. With several new empty homes shared services projects due to start in the next financial year we anticipate this number will increase in 2015/16.

We also once again asked councils how many empty homes they anticipate they will bring back into use in the coming year. 28 councils answered this question. Collectively they anticipated bringing back into use 597 empty homes with figures given by individual councils ranging from 0 to 150. Several councils who we know are due to begin empty homes shared

services projects have either stated 0 or underestimated numbers their project is likely to bring back into use so we view this estimate as a conservative one.

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.

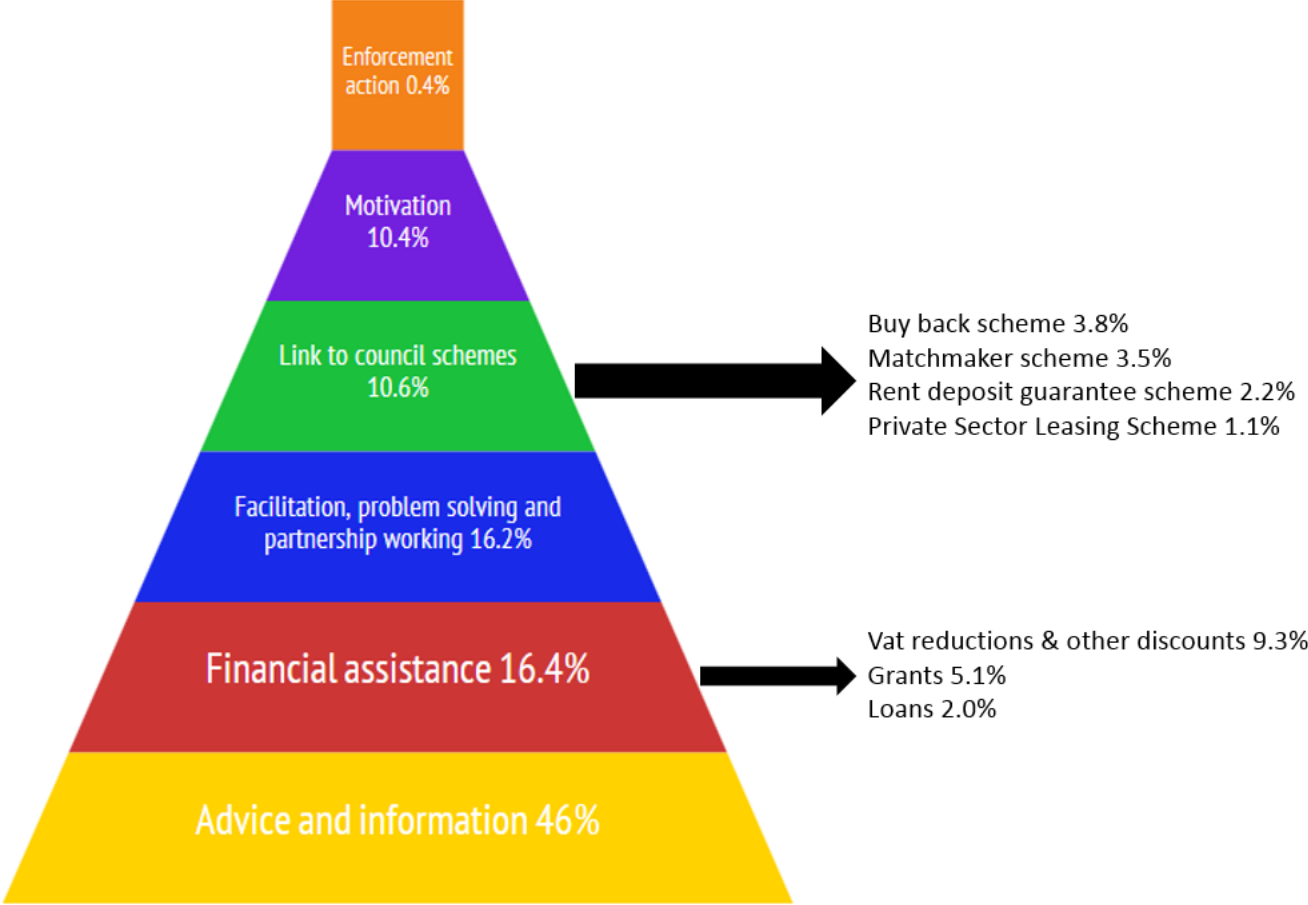
Table 4: Interventions used successfully by councils

Intervention	# of councils who have ‘used successfully’			
	2012	2013	2014	2015
Writing to owners	5	17	20	21
Providing advice and assistance	10	20	21	20
Conducting a survey	6	14	15	13
Contacting empty home owners as a result of a complaint	10	14	18	20
Private sector leasing	2	4	2	5
Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme	5	7	8	9
Grants	5	4	4	5
Loans	0	2	5	10

Along with the data above the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership holds a database of interventions used to bring empty homes back into use compiled from case studies submitted to the Partnership. This database reflects what we knew anecdotally previously – that most empty homes are brought back into use through advice, information, negotiation and motivation methods rather than through enforcement. This mirrors similar breakdowns

for empty homes work in England and Wales (although the 'threat of enforcement' is used more widely outside of Scotland).

Graph 4: Ways empty homes have been brought back into use in Scotland⁴



Enforcement

In this year’s survey we asked councils if they had used enforcement as a method to bring empty homes back into use. 5 councils said they had used enforcement successfully. When asked what form this enforcement had taken, responses ranged from ‘increased council tax’ to ‘amenity notice’ and ‘CPO’.

⁴ Percentages are taken from data held for empty homes brought back into use reported to the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership by councils from June 2010 – March 2015.

This year for those who had not used CPO but who indicated an empty homes enforcement power was needed we asked 'What has stopped you using a CPO?' Answers included:

'Lack of resources, too time consuming'

'Local authorities don't have the budget to CPO'

'Legal services don't seem to consider this a clear cut option'

'Lack of will in the local authority to use this'

'We are looking at using CPO this year for an empty home'

'Cost and time constraints'

'Lack of funding and legal expertise'

'Lack of knowledge on how to implement this and internal reluctance to pursue this'

'Legal departments being unhappy to carry out a CPO for simply empty homes reasons. They seem only willing to carry these out for demolition reasons. They seem to think this would result in poor press for the council – maybe highlighting misunderstand in the purpose of empty homes work.'

90.9% of this year's survey responders indicated that a specific Scottish empty homes enforcement tool would be 'very useful' (63.6%) or 'useful' (27.3%). We also asked councils what type of enforcement tool they would find useful, and received the following ideas:

'Glasgow believe that the power of Enforced sale would be invaluable'

'Enforced sale would be useful'

'Like the idea of the Specific Scottish Empty Homes Enforcement Tool'

'A compulsory sale order – may be useful for cases of 'empty home hoarders'

'Something that could be used as a stepping stone to CPO process, Anything that would assist the legal process when owner deceased and no identified beneficiary or someone dealing with estate.'

'Compulsory Sale Order'

'It is still too early for me to pinpoint this – however, I have already come across 4+ properties with large council tax arrears where owners are unresponsive.'

'Compulsory sale orders'

'Compulsory sale orders'

'Simplified EDMO'

'Maybe the Scottish Government making it clear that they fully endorse the use of CPOs to aid tackling the empty homes problems and maybe doing something to reduce the timescales for a CPO and therefore making it a more cost effect and user friendly tool'

'Compulsory sale order'

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership still believes, based on the experiences of Empty Homes Officers in local councils, that a specific empty homes enforcement tool is required. While we consider the previously proposed Housing Re-Use Power would be the best solution for this as it gives the options of both lease and sale of empty property, we are

interested in ongoing discussions about the Land Reform Review Group’s proposal for Compulsory Sale Orders⁵. If the definition of vacant and derelict land referenced in this recommendation included vacant and derelict property as well it would provide an enforcement tool for long term empty homes that councils would be more inclined to use when they get to that last resort stage.

A number of councils have highlighted to the Partnership outside the survey process that they have lists of ‘no hope’ empty homes where the property is causing issues in the community, the owners are non-engaging or non-contactable and the council is not prepared to pursue Compulsory Purchase due to the perceived risks around cost, timescales and the potential of ending up as owners of a property with no set end use.



Empty Property in East Ayrshire. Empty since 2008. Owner uncooperative.



Empty Property in Perth & Kinross. Unknown length of time empty. Owner can’t be found.

⁵ The Land of Scotland and the Common Good. Report of the Land Reform Review Group.
<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0045/00451597.pdf>

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.

Table 5: Partnership Working

Partners	# of councils who have worked with partners in relation to empty homes
Housing Associations	13
Private Developers	13
Other Councils	9
Community Planning Partners	10
Other private companies	8
Community Associations	6

Links to Housing Associations is one area where much greater partnership working has been observed over the past year. A number of the Empty Homes Loan Fund Projects involve partnership working between Housing Associations and councils. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership is also aware of a greater number of discussions and formal referral agreements being made between Housing Associations and councils with regard to empty homes repair and management schemes.

As in previous years we sent a short survey to members of the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations asking to what extent they consider or pursue empty homes work as part of their development work. The number of housing associations reporting that they directly engage in bringing empty homes back into use remains low. However, there was a big jump in the number of responses we received to this survey this year, and a number of notable responses were received:

- 33 out of 41 responding housing associations said they knew who to contact in the council to report any issues they are having related to private sector empty home.
- 26 had submitted a report of an empty property to their local council.
- 28 housing associations reported that they had worked with councils in their area to bring private sector empty homes back into use.
- 11 housing associations said associations have a ‘large role to play’ in bringing private sector empty homes back into use; 14 said they had a ‘limited role to play’.

We also asked what barriers respondents perceived in housing associations becoming involved in bringing private sector empty homes back in to use. Some notable responses include:

'Does not seem to be a priority for the Council in this area'

'Opportunities are limited. Unless large numbers of properties, unlikely to be economic for the housing association.'

'We need to be careful that the costs associated with this type of initiative are fully funded as otherwise it is tenants rental monies that is subsidising the activity.'

'One of the main barriers is the majority of Housing Associations have a criteria that new properties must meet if they are to be added to the stock. Unfortunately the majority of private empty homes will not meet this criteria (even when refurbished). If the Housing Associations are to manage the properties then the lack of engagement with owners is a barrier.'

'Links with Local Authority staff'

'Funding capital works and identifying what rationale there is for being involved . For example is it part of a Council Housing or Regeneration Strategy, is there revenue support available and how will it help secure affordable good quality housing locally. Finally a barrier is what risks may be involved for the association.'

To council Empty Homes Officers we asked for more details of how Empty Homes Officers had worked with partners and were given the following examples:

'With regard to private developers, it has involved highlighting specific properties where the owner has expressed an interest in selling. I have also been working with regeneration partners regarding applying for Town Centre Empty Homes Funding.'

'The Empty Homes Loan Fund scheme we are currently promoting uses a Housing Association to cost and undertake the works required to bring properties up to a lettable standard. A tenant is nominated from the council waiting list, and the housing association will manage the property. This ensures that the property will be maintained to a high standard and gives the tenant security and peace of mind whilst addressing housing need in the area.'

'partnership working can attract additional funding and help find alternative solutions'

'Referrals for PSL, Matchmaker Scheme, spotting empty homes and reporting them to EHO. Has resulted in increased options for owners/ also allowed more properties be reported and tackled.'

'Working with private developers to identify buildings and secure total project funding. Partners acknowledged the crucial roles of all parties to make projects a success. Community Planning partners have assisted with negotiations with private developers, and signposted developers to the EH officer. Opening crucial communication lines and increasing knowledge of the issue.'

1) Working with community trust to identify a potential occupier of a rural farmhouse. 2) Private developers who can require assistance and support to access funding streams for projects, particularly in town centre properties.'

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 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 Partnership. Not all respondents answered every question.

Table 6: Perceived usefulness of Scottish Empty Homes Partnership support

Tool/Support	# stating:		
	'very useful' (5 of 5 point rating)	'useful' (3 or 4 of 5 point rating)	'not useful' (1 or 2 of 5 point rating)
Guides	21	11	0
One to one advice from Empty Homes Coordinator	22	10	1
Scottish Empty Homes Conference & seminars	11	18	1
Monthly Network Updates	10	20	1
Staff Training	14	13	2
Knowledge Hub	13	18	1
Best Practice Group	15	7	2

The Scottish Empty Homes Conference 2014

In November 2014, the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership held its fourth Scottish Empty Homes Conference in Glasgow. The theme of the event was 'helping more people, filling more homes' which highlighted the increased number of empty homes officers around the country and subsequent rise in homes being brought back into use. The event was well attended with 77 delegates ranging from councils, to private landlords and housing associations.

Speakers included third sector organisations and council staff, as well as keynotes Malcolm Fraser focusing on the link with town centre regeneration and Ineke Hulshof highlighting some innovative refurbishment projects in the Netherlands.

All respondents to our feedback form reported that the conference would affect their practice in some way, with comments on how it will affect them including:

To tackle many properties within my council ward

New ideas of development

More ideas on how to get empty home owners to engage

It has made me aware of new ideas/practices and contacts

Looking at more inventive ways to bring properties back into use

Consideration of people issues more in situations

It has encouraged me to think more 'outside the box'

A better understanding overall of empty homes

Increased awareness of projects and funding streams/methods of working

Staff Training

Following increases in the levels of dedicated empty homes staff employed by councils, the Empty Homes Coordinator has over the last three years been offering a 1 day induction training course free of charge to all councils, particularly where new staff have been employed. This one day training is frequently supplemented with an arranged shadowing day with an experienced Empty Homes Officer from another council.

The one day induction training currently 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 in the background section of this report, and to aiding them in achieving their individual empty homes goals.

This year, training has been provided for staff working in the following councils and organisations:

- Aberdeenshire Council
- Moray Council
- Edinburgh City Council
- Perth & Kinross Council
- Fife Council
- North & South Lanarkshire (Shared Services Officer)
- West Lothian & Fife Council (Shared Services Officer)
- Clackmannanshire Council
- Scottish Empty Homes Partnership new core staff (x2)

The offer of training will remain open to all councils (or council partners) who are embarking on empty homes work. The new Empty Homes Local Projects Manager has been tasked with refreshing the training material using his background as an Empty Homes Officer and to come up with some more flexible options for delivery of training which could include shorter sessions over more days, e-learning or continuation of the existing model depending on the needs and geographical distance of new empty homes staff.

Best Practice Group

The Scottish Empty Homes Best Practice Group has been in existence for nearly three years, holding its first meeting in August 2012. 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.

There are approximately 16 regular attendees with other members attending as they are able. Positive feedback has been received on the usefulness of the group (see figures above in Table 6). 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. Members regularly contribute agenda items and have collaborated in sharing Matchmaker scheme buyer sign ups as well as sending local promotional material to national events attended by other members.

To date, attendance from officers in the North of Scotland has been minimal. Some efforts have been made to alter the location of meetings on occasion to attempt to combat this. More recently the newly appointed Empty Homes Local Projects Manager is pursuing the

formation of a Northern Best Practice Group with a probably meeting point in Aberdeen. Several officers not previously engaged with the group have expressed an interest in this.

Barriers & Recommendations

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership has consistently focused on three key areas where we believe continuing improvement would remove barriers to more private sector empty homes being brought back into use. These are staff resources, funding, and enforcement powers.

Staff Resources

In 2014-15 there were 17 councils with one or more Empty Homes Officers (or Vacant Property Officers) dedicated to bringing private sector empty property back into residential use. While there are a number of other councils with ongoing empty homes work or funding, we believe it is only where a dedicated Empty Homes Officer is in place that significant strides have been made to bring problem empty homes back into use.

In future we would like to see all councils providing a holistic empty homes service that includes advice and information, financial support, and enforcement as a last resort.

One issue which has been highlighted in individual empty homes shared service project reports is that of the short term nature of many empty homes staff contracts. This is true not only of shared services posts that run on year to year contracts but also of a number of other empty homes officer posts across the country that are also employed on fixed term contracts. The short term nature of these posts is problematic when it comes to both recruitment of quality candidates and retention of quality staff. The ensuing disruption to empty homes service provision in councils with high staff turnover has a knock on effect on outcomes and numbers of homes brought back into use. In order to both attract and retain skilled empty homes officers these posts need to be offered on a more secure basis in future. It is for this reason that the shared services model has been changed to provide for initial two year agreements.

Recommendations:

Mainstream funding for local Empty Homes Officer in all of Scotland's Local Authorities, preferably on permanent contracts.

Funding

Access to funding for private sector empty homes work and particularly incentives for owners continues to be an issue for councils. The Scottish Empty Homes Loan Fund and the expected Town Centre Empty Homes Fund have improved the funding landscape for empty homes projects but more is needed for different types of empty homes, owners and end uses to really scale up the numbers of empty homes being brought back into use in Scotland.

Work on the development of Empty Homes Loan Fund projects has 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 market 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 by more empty home owners.

The most successful loan fund in the UK – the Kent 'No Use Empty' Scheme provides loans to incentivise private developers to get involved in bringing empty homes back into use for market rent and sale.

We believe there is a need for further funding to incentivise empty home owners to bring their properties back into use for a variety of end uses and to encourage more and varied players into empty homes work including private sector developers and community groups.

The UK Government's Empty Homes Community Grants Programme (2011-15) allocated £50m across community based organisations in England and Wales and attracted a number of non-housing based organisations into empty homes work. 110 projects leased or bought to improve private sector empty homes. Provisional estimates are that the Grants Programme brought back into use 1,759 properties over the 4 year period⁶. The focus was not only on

⁶ The Impact of the Empty Homes Community Grants Programme (EHCGP)
<http://www.hact.org.uk/impact-empty-homes-community-grants-programme>

bringing empty homes back into use but on complementary outcomes including employment, training, and safer neighbourhoods⁷.

Along with established Scottish Government run funds 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. We hope that moves to reform local taxation will reflect the need to retain this financial incentive for empty home owners to work to bring their homes back into use.

Recommendations:

- A diversification of financial incentive schemes offered by Scottish Government and Local Authorities to include more types of empty homes for more types of end uses. Specifically empty homes in areas of low demand, empty properties requiring extensive renovations or conversions, and empty homes whose end use is expected to be market sale or owner-occupation.
- A specific fund to support community groups and Social Enterprises to take forward empty homes projects, learning from the success of the UK Government's Empty Homes Community Grants Programme.
- Local Taxation Reform to retain a financial incentive for empty home owners to bring their properties back into use.

Enforcement Powers

A consistent theme in the feedback the Scottish Empty Homes 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. 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, timescales and risks of pursuing a Compulsory Purchase Order.

⁷ Evaluation of the Empty Homes Community Grants Programme (EHCGP) – Midlands Region.
<http://www.bshf.org/published-information/publication.cfm?lang=00&thePubID=6112D94C-D4AE-52C7-7049841769AB2EFC>

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership have recommended the introduction of a 'Housing Re-use Power' for councils which would allow them to either lease or force the sale of long term empty homes as a last resort and under strict conditions. We would expect the use of such a power to be used at the discretion of councils only after all other options in terms of advice, information and incentives have been offered. Not all councils would choose to use an enforcement power, but 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 are not as accessible or as effective as they would like.

The proposal for a Housing Re-Use power was endorsed by the Land Reform Review Group. The group made a recommendation for the creation of Compulsory Sale Order which would enable councils to force vacant and derelict land on to the open market if it remains unused for 3 years⁸. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership is in favour of the adoption of a Compulsory Sale Order Power provided that any definition of vacant and derelict land also included vacant and derelict buildings. We believe such a power would achieve much of what we have been seeking through our proposal for a Housing Re-Use Power, namely a change of ownership where properties have got 'stuck' and owners are missing or not engaging. Change of ownership has time and time again proven the key to unlocking many an empty homes case and a power that councils can realistically use at low cost would be invaluable in tackling some of the worst problem empties.

Commentary earlier in the report from members of the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network through their survey responses supports the introduction of a Compulsory Sale Order Power as a useful tool to advance local empty homes work.

Recommendations:

The introduction in legislation of an empty homes appropriate enforcement tool by the Scottish Government, using one of two potential options (in order of preference).

1. Introduction of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's proposed Housing Re-use Power.

⁸ The Land of Scotland and the Common Good. Report of the Land Reform Review Group.

<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0045/00451597.pdf>

2. Inclusion of the Land Reform Review Group's proposal for a Compulsory Sale Order power to be included in the Land Reform Bill, with a definition of the scope of the power to cover not just vacant and derelict land but also long term empty homes and buildings.

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. We have sought to track the progress against these milestones.

Milestones	Progress
<p>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 month</p>	<p>Last year 213 case studies of empty homes brought back into use were uploaded to the Knowledge Hub website.</p>
<p>Secure commitments from Falkirk and Stirling Councils to continue with shared service empty homes officer model when Scottish Government funding ceases in 2015</p>	<p>The Forth Valley Empty Homes Project (Falkirk/Stirling) is continuing into its third year fully funded by the partner councils and with the full time Empty Homes Officer line-managed by Falkirk Council.</p>
<p>Ensuring additional local authorities have the following specific tools in place by March 2015:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) An empty homes database b) An advice package for empty home owners 	<p>We know from survey and other data sources that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) The number of councils with an empty homes database has increased from 24 to 25 b) The number of councils who have an advice package for empty home owners has reduced from 21 to 20 in terms of survey results, but anecdotally we are aware that at least 2 additional councils developed an advice package in the last year (Edinburgh and Midlothian).
<p>Ensuring additional local authorities feature empty homes commitments as a key part of their housing strategies and/or set target to return additional empty homes to use by March 2015</p>	<p>The number of local authorities featuring empty homes in their local housing strategy has increased from 28 to 30.</p> <p>The number of councils with an empty homes target (not necessarily explicitly in LHS) has risen from 21 to 22.</p>

Number of Scottish Empty Homes Partnership training sessions for all new empty homes staff (councils & housing associations) undertaken in the year

9 induction training sessions were held for 15 staff beginning empty homes work (either dedicated staff or staff assigned new empty homes tasks).

Year 5 Priorities & Milestones

The 2014-15 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 five 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 four officers directly employed by Shelter plus the officer employed by Renfrewshire and West Dunbartonshire Councils.
- In addition to the projects above, support the proposed new shared services project in South and North Lanarkshire should it be agreed.
- 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 or convert empty commercial premise into residential 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 2014-15 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 month

- Secure commitments from Falkirk and Stirling Councils to continue with shared service empty homes officer model when Scottish Government funding ceases in 2015
- Ensuring additional local authorities have the following specific tools in place by March 2015:
 - 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 target to return additional empty homes to use by March 2015
- Number of Scottish Empty Homes Partnership training sessions for all new empty homes staff (councils & housing associations) undertaken in the year

Appendix A

Scottish Empty Homes Partnership Expansion

The Scottish Government has recently agreed a proposal to extend and expand the work of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership from 1st April 2015 – 2018. The ways in which the partnership will be changing over this period are detailed below.

The expansion proposal for 2015-18 included an intention to increase both the capacity of the core Scottish Empty Homes Partnership team but also to increase the opportunity for councils to engage in the successful shared services model. Below is a breakdown of funding agreed with Scottish Government for both parts of the expansion. The money earmarked for shared services projects is dependent on acceptable proposals being put forward by viable partnerships between councils who have not yet had Scottish Government seed funding for a shared empty homes officer. This money will not flow to the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership directly but rather to shared services partner councils.

Scottish Empty Homes Partnership

Core Scottish Empty Homes Partnership funding for:

- 1 FT Scottish Empty Homes Partnership National Manager
- 1 FT Empty Homes Local Projects Manager
- 0.3 FTE Policy Assistant
- 0.5 FTE Empty Homes Advisor

Deliverables:

- Coverage of current project objectives in line with existing grant agreement
- Development of several one-off multi-unit empty homes projects including sourcing funding.
- Increased national promotion of empty homes work
- Research & Promotion of financial products & affordable housing models
- Increased capacity for in depth consulting work and support to councils
- Increased joint working with town centre living and rural housing agendas
- Dedicated phone & web based advisor to provide empty homes advice and referrals to owners, neighbours and others.* see below
- Phone/web advisor addition to the team will add capacity to allow other members of the core team to pursue funding bids for add on projects in areas such as employability, working with housing associations, etc., as opportunities emerge.

Shared Services

In line with the experience of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership running Shared Services Projects over the past 3 years it is proposed that the model for shared services projects be amended to an **'incubator'** model.

This means new projects who choose to use Shelter Scotland employment and line management of their Empty Homes Officer post would be clear that this is a time limited arrangement of no more than two years.

Wherever possible projects would be encouraged to take up the council hosted model with Scottish Empty Homes Partnership mentoring support instead of direct employment, however, we recognise that for some councils it is the option of Shelter Scotland recruitment and management that makes the project feasible as a pilot project.

Funding has been secured to establish two new shared services projects each year for the next three years with seed fund money (grant) paid directly from the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership at Shelter Scotland to successful projects.

Empty Homes Advisor

A national Empty Homes Advisor will add significant value to the partnership through:

- Providing a single number and web address to be promoted nationally.
- Empty home owner referrals and community complaints can be driven to locally based officers where they exist and provide first level advice and information where they do not.
- Free up Empty Homes Officer time by dealing with simple enquiries including advice and information for early intervention/prevention cases (not yet 6 months empty) leaving locally based EHOs with more capacity to devote to difficult and complex cases.
- Remove some of the postcode lottery of empty homes service provision by providing first level empty homes advice over the phone and through web content.
- Increasing the overall capacity of the team by taking on some administrative functions currently undertaken by the Policy Assistant and Empty Homes Coordinator.

National Promotion

Increased national promotion under the extended and expanded partnership will include:

- Increased capacity to highlight the issue of empty homes through Shelter Scotland's ongoing media and promotional work
- Increased capacity to work on better integration and promotion of Empty Homes Partnership on key digital channels, including the Shelter Scotland website (60k visits per month)
- Structured and better coordinated promotion of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership on key Shelter Scotland social media channels (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)
- Increased capacity to showcase local projects through Shelter Scotland media work, targeted both in national and sector publications as well as through targeted engagement with relevant local media outlets across Scotland
- Increased capacity to attend, speak at and promote the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership at partner agency conferences and sector networking events
- Active promotion of national helpline and web advice

Scottish Empty Homes Partnership Priorities & Milestones 2015-18

The Core Partnership Tasks have been rolled forward from 2014-15 largely unaltered and will remain essential to the Partnership's workplan.

- Continue to support the practice community through information-sharing, providing accurate guidance and template tools.
- Support the 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.
- Offer support and training to new empty homes staff across Scotland.
- Continue meetings and other relevant 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.
- Promote the use of a holistic approach to empty homes work to councils who chose to use the 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).

New Development Tasks to be added to Core Partnership Tasks:

- Development of several one off multi-unit empty homes projects including sourcing funding.
- Increased national promotion of empty homes work (including promotion of national helpline).
- Research & promotion of financial products and affordable housing models.
- Increased capacity for in depth consulting work and support to councils.
- Increased joint working with town centre living and rural housing agendas.

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

- Provide a minimum of one innovative good practice example of an empty home brought back into use or of initiatives taken by councils and others to tackle empty homes in Scotland per quarter. Each example should highlight innovative best practice, problems encountered/solved and intelligence gathered. A key use of these is to inspire others to search out new ways of doing things.
- Evidence of additional councils developing an Empty Homes Service including:
 - a commitment to employing an Empty Homes Officer (shared or otherwise)
 - putting tools in place including an Empty Homes Database and advice package for empty home owners
 - including Empty Homes commitments as a key part of their housing strategies
- Number of Scottish Empty Homes Partnership training sessions for all new empty homes staff (councils & housing associations) undertaken in the year.
- A significant increase in the number of empty homes brought back into use by councils and others year on year. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership will continue to play a role in enabling and facilitating councils and their partners to work towards the Scottish Government's stated aim of circa 1,200 empty homes brought back into use in 2017-18.
- Project Plan by end October 2015 detailing how the new Development Tasks will be rolled out – once this has been agreed, further milestones will be added based on the plan.