

Scottish Empty Homes Partnership

Annual Report 2016-17

June 2017

Summary

In 2016/17 the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) has managed to build and maintain successful relationships with many local authorities, housing associations and other partners and continues to encourage the mainstreaming of empty homes as a focus on local housing strategies. Increasingly, councils across Scotland are seeing the benefits of bringing empty homes back into use.

The number of empty homes brought back into use this year has increased again, however with more than half of councils now employing dedicated Empty Homes Officers, cleaner data reflects a higher than expected baseline. Currently, it is estimated that there are 34,000 long term empty properties in private ownership across Scotland.

Extensive media coverage of empty homes has been noted, the blight these bring on communities and the positive impact an Empty Homes Officer has made at a local level. This continues to remind the public to report the issue to the Empty Homes Advice Service, now in its second year of operation, and encourages local stakeholders such as councils, housing associations and local community groups to bring empty homes back into use.

There are some local authorities demonstrating excellent best practice, with dedicated empty homes officers applying creative thinking for traditionally harder to bring back into use properties. However, there is still a challenge to influence the remaining councils to understand the importance of empty homes work and recognise the difference a dedicated officer can bring. This is difficult given the reduced budgets and pressures local authorities are currently faced with.

There continue to be challenges in pursuing effective empty homes work, primarily the restricted nature of existing financial incentives. Feedback from the Network suggests that the Empty Homes Loan Fund could be more accessible if extended for the right to borrow to occupy the property, or the right to sell on. Extending the scope of applicants to the Rural Housing & Island Fund may increase uptake.

Highlights from the year



859

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



19

Number of councils with an empty homes officer - 4 of these have recently recruited.



23

23 councils are currently applying the vacant dwelling council tax dwelling powers with 22 applying the full 100% increase.



397

Enquiries processed by the Empty Homes Advice Service.



UK recognition

Argyll and Bute scooped up two awards at the Empty Homes Conference in Birmingham 2017 for Innovation and Best Before & After pictures.



Shared Services

Inverclyde Council and River Clyde Homes - innovative partnership between Housing Association and Local Authority. Orkney Islands with Highland and Island Enterprise.

Recommendations at a glance

Below are the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's key recommendations to ensure the success to date in bringing empty homes back into use across Scotland are developed further. Some of these have been carried forward from last year and are still considered relevant.

Staff Resources

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

Strategic Priority

Ensuring that as many local authorities as possible have a commitment to tackling empty homes in their local housing plans

Enforcement

The introduction in legislation of a Compulsory Sale Order power for vacant and derelict land and buildings.

Town Centre Empty Homes Fund

A new Town Centre Fund along similar lines to the RHIF, to address the issues with empty properties in town centres

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Introduction

This is the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's Annual Report for 2016 -17. Since the commencement of the Partnership in 2011, there has been a significant increase in the year on year numbers of properties that councils report as being brought back into use. There have been 859 properties reported back into use in 2016 -17.



We have based our findings in this report from a survey distributed to the Scottish Empty Homes Network. This year we have received a response from 25 Local Authorities. 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
- One to one conversations with empty homes practitioners throughout Scotland

This report is structured around the priorities for the SEHP, which are:

- Funding and resources for empty homes work
- Bringing empty homes back into use
- Sharing best practice.

It also includes a summary report on the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's progress against targets, commentary on the ongoing barriers as well as recommendations for empty homes work in Scotland.

Background

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) was established by the Scottish Government in 2010 to help build capacity within local authorities to bring private sector empty homes back into use. The project is funded by the Scottish Government until March 2018 and is hosted by Shelter Scotland.

The review of the private rented sector identified the need for a focus on bringing Scotland's empty homes back into use, particularly, but not exclusively, for affordable homes. The SEHP supports the Government's commitment to this and we recognise that while on its own, empty homes work will not solve housing supply issues, it is an important part of a holistic solution to provide local affordable housing.

Most empty housing is in the private sector and recent estimates suggest there are 34,000 (25,000 in 2009) long-term empty properties in Scotland, with more than half of these empty for over 12 months. The rise in the number of long term empties is linked to the reclassification of second homes which then saw a comparative decrease in numbers. Even bringing a proportion of these back into active use would represent an important and cost effective contribution to housing supply¹.

Since June 2010 much work has been done across Scotland to promote the value of private sector empty homes work, share best practice and help local authorities develop policies and processes to bring private sector empty homes back into use. The process promoted by the SEHP has several interlinked steps:

¹ <https://beta.gov.scot/policies/more-homes/empty-homes/>

- 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.

Funding and resources for empty homes work

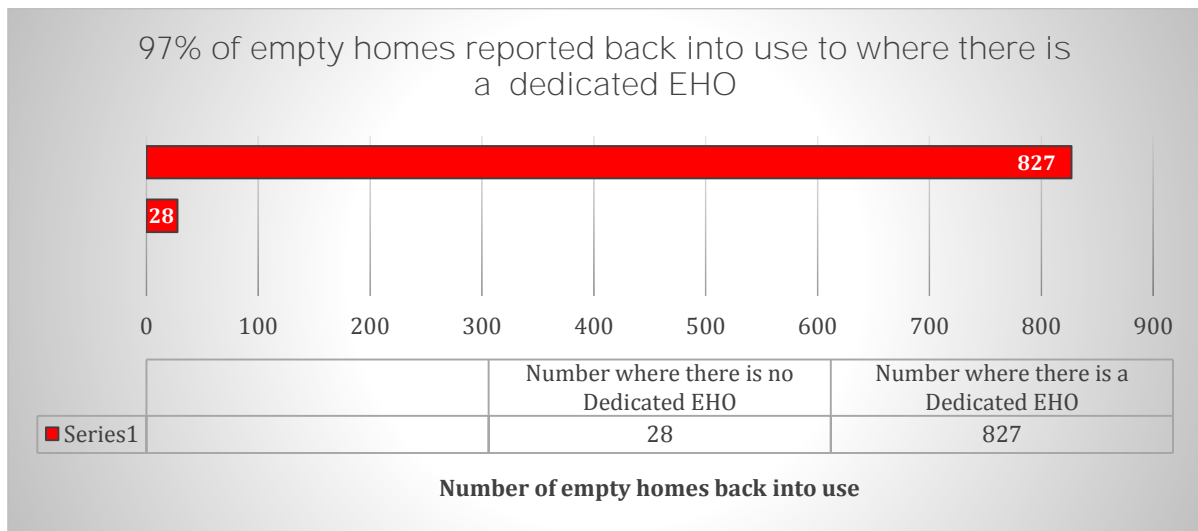
Measures of progress in this strand of work can be broken down into two sections: dedicated staff resources; and funding for incentives and enforcement measures

Dedicated Staff Resources

One of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnerships recurring recommendations to local authorities is to employ permanent full time empty homes staff.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership believes that full time Empty Homes Officers in councils will become cost neutral after 1-2 years in post and often will generate revenue for the council. This link is seen most clearly in the council tax data cleansing work that empty homes officers undertake as well as council tax debt recovery from bringing long term problem empty homes back into use. There are a range of other monetary and outcome based benefits to pro-active empty homes work.

There is a direct correlation to the increase in the number of empty homes being brought back into use to the employment of a dedicated empty homes officer in a local authority.

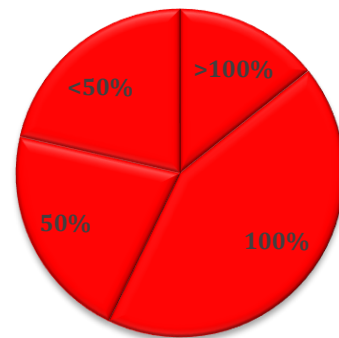


The dedicated officer is able to spend the time and effort required to develop local relationships and expertise to most effectively bring empty properties back into use.

Year	Number of councils with an empty homes officer (spending more than 10% of their time on this work)
2016-17	19 Councils with an Empty Homes Officer (4 of which have just been recruited)
2015-16	17 councils with an Empty Homes Officer (a further 2 councils have an officer spending 10% or less of their time on Empty Homes work)
2014-15	17 councils had an Empty Homes Officer (either full time or as part of a Shared Services Project)

We want to identify what staffing resource is dedicated to empty homes work across Scotland and so we asked the question in our surveys "does your council have an empty homes officer?" and "what % of FTE is dedicated to empty homes work?" We know that there are 19 councils with Empty Homes Officers. We can see from the chart below, that from the responses we received, more than half of the empty homes officers have 100% of their time (where 100% is FTE) dedicated to empty homes work.

% of time dedicated to empty homes work



■ >100% ■ 100% ■ 50% ■ <50

We believe that the best way to bring the empty homes back into use is by employing a dedicated empty homes officer with at least 50% FTE dedicated to empty homes work.

Shared Services Pilots

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

- 2 or more organisations, normally a council or Registered Social Landlord (RSL) 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.
- The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership at Shelter Scotland or the lead council recruits and line manages an Empty Homes Officer whose time is split across partner councils/orgs.
- 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. The new Shared Services Incubator Model involves an initial two year agreement with Scottish Government seed fund money administered by the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership.
- 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 aim of the projects is to provide local evidence of the need for, and demonstrate the effectiveness and value of, an empty homes service. The local authority should benefit from an increase in supply of housing stock, an increase in council tax revenue and possible reduced complaints of vandalism and fly tipping. This could in turn have an impact on the community with improved wellbeing in regenerated areas. The intended outcome is that councils will recognise these advantages and continue with shared service arrangements, or see the business case to employ their own full time Empty Homes staff.

West Dunbartonshire and Renfrewshire

The Homes Again West Dunbartonshire/Renfrewshire Project began in August 2012. It involves one Empty Homes Officer shared between the two councils. The original Empty Homes Officer who started in this post has since moved on to a new role in West Dunbartonshire Council. However, positively, the two councils mutually agreed that there was a continued need for an Empty Homes Officer in their areas and subsequently appointed a new Empty Homes Officer who starts in June.

John Kerr, from West Dunbartonshire Council, said; "***We have renewed the post, to ensure we built on the success which has seen over 90 empty homes in West Dunbartonshire/Renfrewshire brought back into use. We were also keen to ensure the smooth implementation of our refreshed Empty Homes Strategy which will build and strengthen our existing approach to tackling empty homes in the area.***" This continuation will extend what has already been the longest running continual shared services project in Scotland.

Glasgow

The Glasgow Shared Services Empty Homes Project is now into its second year, having started in August 2015. This shared service project concentrates on a single geographical area. It is the first to include a Registered Social Landlord (RSL), Glasgow Housing Association, as a full partner, together with Glasgow City Council. This has proved a catalyst for other similar projects (see below). The project has brought a considerable number of properties back into use in the relatively short time that it has been running. It has pioneered several new approaches including widespread assistance for RSLs in the area, targeted acquisitions of empty homes and also VAT savings for RSLs carrying out renovations in Glasgow. These savings have been noteworthy, amounting to over £1million over the course of the project. This saving will give a significant boost to the supply of affordable housing in Glasgow. The Council was also successful in securing loan and grant funding in the sum of £2,000,000 from

the Scottish Government for four housing associations under the Town Centre Empty Homes Fund (see below). Five projects will deliver 37 units for affordable housing across the city.

Dundee and Angus

The Dundee/Angus Empty Homes Project began in December 2015 with one full time Empty Homes Officer shared between Dundee City & Angus Council. The Empty Homes Officer, Sean Maxwell, has worked proactively to ensure that the service met its target number of empty homes brought back into use in the first year. He is now on course to deliver and exceed those numbers in the second year. Furthermore, Sean Maxwell, has been nominated for the Practitioner of the Year Award at the Empty Homes Network Annual Conference in Birmingham for his outstanding work in a number of areas including the promotion of the Angus Empty Homes Loan Fund.

Amongst the many strengths that Sean has brought to the role, his widespread sharing of best practice has been a real boon to the network, providing fellow EHOs with a number of useful, relevant case studies that they can then use as inspiration for their own work. He has also attended many Best Practice Group meetings and conferences and has been an active contributor on many occasions, assisting his colleagues around the country to expand their knowledge and understanding of the subject. His proactive work to increase the project's profile in the media is also something we would like to encourage other officers to do.

Case Study - Empty home brought back into use in Dundee



The Empty Homes Officer (EHO) first made contact with the owner of this property in early April 2016 after this property was highlighted to the EHO through an empty homes survey. This property was empty because of antisocial behaviour issues. Prior to the implementation of a door entry system on the block youths were abusing this property, breaking in, stealing furniture and damaging the properties walls.

The EHO was able to help and the main actions taken were advice on selling, advice on renting, as well as the delivery of information regarding the savings available through builder's merchant's discounts. The owner highlighted that in the past this property was previously let, but was misused by the tenant. The property was subsequently left in poor condition and after the tenant moved this became a target for antisocial behaviour. Youths were frequently seen breaking in to this property, and as a result Dundee City Council boarded up the property's door to prevent further entry.

The owner confirmed that the decision to rent this property had already been made, but required help and advice from the EHO to assist them to bring the property back into use. The EHO undertook a site visit with the owner and discussed various incentives that would help bring the property back up to standard. The EHO provided the owner with information and guidance related to the Builders Merchants Discounts, as well as providing detailed advice related to obtaining a door entry system as fitted in all other properties in the block.

The owner contacted the EHO again in early 2017 to highlight that there had been little interest in this property. The owner highlighted that this property was being advertised in a local newsagents and post office. The EHO advised the owner that it may be beneficial to consider other advertising options, for example advertising in the closely related Ninewells Hospital, online using websites such as Gumtree, or using a local letting agent.

As a result, the owner confirmed in late February 2017 that this property had been successfully let. The owner improved advertising by using a local letting agent (subsequently being advertised on both Rightmove and Zoopla) and also advertising on the Ninewells Hospital NHS noticeboard.

Case study details supplied by Sean Maxwell (Empty Homes Officer), Dundee City Council

Inverclyde

An innovative shared service between an RSL and Local Authority has commenced in Inverclyde. The post has been recruited and will be managed by River Clyde Homes, to be shared with Inverclyde Council. The new Empty Homes Officer, Barbara Crichton, started work on the 22nd May 2017. It is envisaged that this project will showcase partnership working between a council and a housing association in an area which has traditionally suffered from high levels of deprivation. There are a number of well-known, long term, intransigent empty properties. It is anticipated that the EHO will work with council tax in relation to the increased council tax charge for long term empty properties. This is currently set at 130% in Inverclyde. As with the other shared service projects, this will be an initial two-year funded post, with the intention the partners choose to acquire the project themselves after this period.

Orkney

Orkney Council and Highlands & Islands Enterprise have joined up to create a new shared services part time post in the Orkney Islands. The Council are currently in the process of recruiting for this post. It is hoped that the Empty Homes Officer, as well as carrying out usual tasks, will work innovatively with local community groups who have their own unique, rural challenges. The SEHP sees community-led solutions to housing shortages as excellent best practice, encouraging local people to invest in their own futures. It is hoped that this element of partnership working will highlight a successful model for subsequent projects and should provide some inspirational case studies.

The SEHP is currently in discussions with potential partners for two new Shared Service Projects to begin in the financial year 2017/18.

Funding for Incentives and Enforcement measures

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.

This Act came into effect in April 2013 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 categories ².

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. Further 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 consider 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.”

Exempt properties include those being actively marketed for sale or let for up to 2 years.²

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. It should also be noted that in the aforementioned Supplementary Guidance, it was stated that;

The power is intended as an additional tool to help local authorities encourage owners to bring empty properties back into use, both to increase the supply of housing for those who

² [The Council Tax \(Variation for Unoccupied Dwellings\) \(Scotland\) Regulations 2013](#)

need homes and to reduce the blight on communities caused by houses being left empty and allowed to fall into disrepair.

In other words, this is not intended as a revenue raising tool, but as a measure to help reduce the number of empty properties in an area. Through our Best Practice Group meetings, we know of a number of councils currently applying a blanket charge, without offering any discretion from the charge at all. Feedback from front facing empty homes practitioners is that this approach can be counterproductive and can actually act as a further blockage to problem properties from being brought back into use. We will continue to work with all councils using the charge to share best practice and new ideas for how the charge can most effectively meet its aims.

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.

According to our research, this year 23 councils are applying the vacant dwelling council tax powers with 22 applying the full 100% increase at this point. One council is charging 130%. Of the 9 remaining councils who do not currently use this power at all, we know anecdotally from speaking to our contacts that many are having internal discussions about introducing the power and we believe that around half the remaining councils will have introduced this charge by the end of the financial year 2017/18.

Empty Homes Loan Fund

In 2013, 17 projects across Scotland were allocated £4.5m under the Scottish Government's Empty Homes Loan Fund. The projects vary, however, most are managed by local authorities or housing associations with the aim of bringing long term empty homes back into affordable use. A loan is usually awarded to the empty home owner to bring the property up to a quality standard on the premise that the property will be let out below Local Housing Allowance 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 includes 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. Angus Council are also included on this list. They originally were granted Scottish Government funding, however, this was spent in full and the council has a new loan fund set up on almost identical terms. Notably, this is funded by revenue generated by the 200% council tax charge for long term empty homes in Angus.

In an effort to drive take up, the Scottish Government introduced a loan to sell (at affordable levels) option and is currently exploring whether successful models, such as the Glasgow Housing Association Loan Fund in partnership with Glasgow City Council, can be replicated elsewhere.

Empty Homes Loan Fund Case Study – Friockheim, Angus



Location: Lillybank Street, Friockheim

Total Length of time empty: 2 years 8 months

The owner of this property contacted the Angus Council Empty Homes Officer in January 2016 as she required help and assistance to bring this property back into residential use. The owner was struggling to fund the necessary repairs to bring the property up to the repairing standard. The EHO discussed the available options with the owner and suggested the Angus Council Empty Homes Loan Fund. Once the loan agreement was in place the Empty Homes Officer also engaged with the Angus Council revenues department to secure a reduced council tax charge for a period during the renovations. Similarly, the Empty Homes Officer also worked alongside the owner to provide access to both a VAT reduction on eligible renovation works; as well as discounted rates within national builder's merchants.

After the owner highlighted an interest in accessing the Angus Council Empty Homes Loan Fund an eligibility assessment was subsequently undertaken. This assessment highlighting that the property failed on several Repairing Standards for Scotland as it was experiencing severe water penetration and the electrical wiring and heating system were both dated and dangerous.

The owner of the cottage highlighted at an early stage that the layout of this property did not lend itself to modern living and had subsequently decided to alter the internal layout of the property throughout renovations to create a functional and attractive living space. Renovation works were started in October 2016 at which point the previously extended section of the property was removed due to the constant water penetration and functionality issues.

The renovations were completed in May 2017. The cottages internal layout was drastically changed and all the furnishings including the kitchen and bathroom were replaced to improve the desirability of the cottage and bring it up to the repairing standard. This property was also extended to create one further bedroom.

The EHO continues to work with the owner to provide information related to the rental of this property. This property will be advertised for let in early June 2017. the required EPC as well as registering with Angus Council as a landlord.

Case study details supplied by Sean Maxwell (Empty Homes Officer), Angus Council

Rural Housing & Island Fund

The Rural Housing & Island Fund (RHIF) opened in Spring 2016, and is a three-year rolling fund, which includes a feasibility funding element. In September 2016 the Scottish Government announced the expansion of the Fund specifically to support increasing affordable supply for Island communities. The fund is made up of 90% grant funding and the remainder in loan funding, which has made the fund far more attractive to potential bidders. The longer bidding window compared to, for instance, the previous Town Centre Empty Homes Fund, has attracted bidders who may have been put off by a shorter bidding window. The funds have two parts:

1. a main fund that offers capital support (grants and loans) for direct provision of new affordable housing, and refurbishment of existing empty properties
2. a small fund that contributes to feasibility studies

To date 28 applicants have been referred by the Scottish Government to the Partnership, for guidance with their applications and further assistance beyond. Not all of these applicants have gone on to apply for the RHIF as for some it has not been appropriate, but those applicants have still received support to identify alternative sources of funding. For those who have gone forward with the fund, assistance has ranged from assisting with the application form, to arranging shadowing visits to other local projects to see how such a project can work in practice.

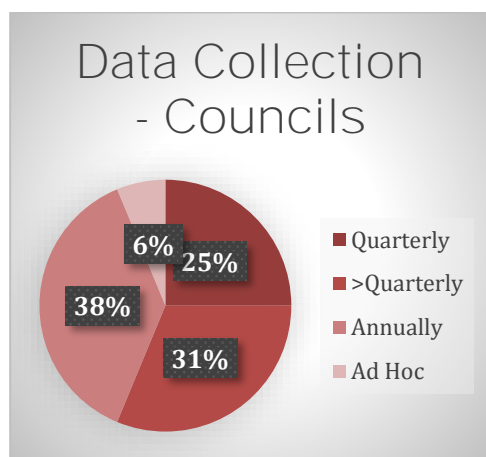
Town Centre Empty Homes Fund

In 2015, ten projects were awarded a total of £4m funding to bring town centre properties back into use. These were a wide variety of different properties, including a former church and an old high street shop, but all were being converted into residential use. The total number of units that are projected to be brought into use by the time all projects have been completed is 87. As with the Rural Housing and Island Fund, the Partnership was on hand to provide help and assistance to all applicants.

Bringing empty homes back into use

Data Collection

It has been recognised that to know how many empty properties there are in a given area and where they are located, councils would have to establish data collection. This year from the survey responses, we can identify that 2/3 of councils keep a database. ***SEHP are querying this data as it suggests a reduction in data collection which we don't believe to be the case. The partnership will aim to contact councils again to clarify the survey responses and update this at the next quarterly report.*** Council tax is listed as the main source of data. Councils update this information at different points throughout the year.



These figures are important as they are indicators of a more in-depth engagement with empty home owners. It is this systematic engagement that brings empty homes back into use.

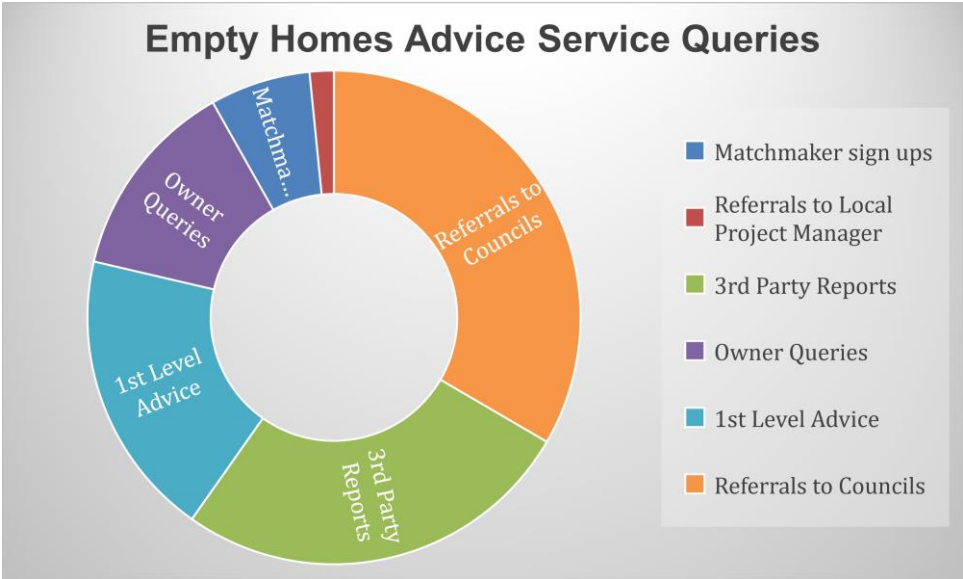
It appears that less councils are keeping a database this year and this may be due to turnover in staffing in some councils. Or it may be that the survey question needs re worded and councils are to be approached for clarification.

Empty Homes Advice Service

The Empty Homes Advice Service (EHAS) is a central reporting point for empty homes enquiries available to owners, neighbours, practitioners and organisations in Scotland. It was launched in June 2015 with the appointment of an Empty Homes Adviser on a part time basis. Since 2016, the post has been extended to 0.8 FTE.

The adviser has specialist knowledge and uses this on the dedicated helpline to provide first point of contact advice and assistance, available options, collaborative working with empty homes practitioners and signposting where necessary. Furthermore, the empty homes adviser maintains and contributes to the suite of Scottish Empty Homes Partnership first advice leaflets for empty home owners.

This year the advice service responded to 397 individual enquiries. 177 (44%) of these contacts were complaints from third parties or requests for assistance from owners about long term empty homes throughout Scotland. This year, there has been regional representation in contacts from the public from all but one of the 32 local authority areas in Scotland. Below is a snapshot of the activity of the Empty Homes Advice Service including a breakdown of cases resulting from a report or complaint about an empty home and those initiated by empty home owners themselves. The categories below are not exclusive, i.e. an owner could receive first level advice and also be referred on to their local council Empty Homes Officer.



There are several routes for enquiries once open. The Empty Homes Adviser can give first level advice and refer on to a local empty homes advice service, where one exists. For straight forward cases this is the end of the Adviser’s involvement as an Empty Homes Officer will take the case forward. For some more complicated cases, or for council areas where an Empty Homes Officer is not in place the Empty Homes Adviser will sometimes work with the council contact (usually in the private sector housing department) to help them tackle the case. In a smaller group of cases the Empty Homes Adviser will work with the owner to pursue the case to a conclusion. In both of these later scenarios the aim is to create a demonstration case that helps make the case for establishing or increasing the empty homes service in that council.

This year, the Empty Homes Adviser made a significant contribution to directly bringing 10 empty homes back into use. These have resulted from casework of active cases working in partnership with the contact in the council as well as working directly with the owner to

support a successful outcome. The Empty Homes Adviser currently holds 38 'active' cases with priority given to areas where there is not yet an active empty homes service. These can include straightforward work with owners as well as inputting alongside the council to some more complicated case. Both these approaches are with a view to providing demonstration work for areas where provision at a local area is not available or limited.

Empty Property Back in use Inverclyde	Empty 1 year
<p>The owner's uncle got in touch with the advice line after reading about the empty homes advice service in the local newspaper. After providing first level advice to him, the empty homes advisor was able to make contact with the owner direct, establishing that the property was in a difficult to let area affected by anti-social behaviour and communal repair delays. The property had been occupied by a long term tenant, but when he moved the owner had tried to sell the property without success.</p>	
<p>It was established that selling was her preferred option. She felt overwhelmed by longstanding problems relating to the communal building. Continued ownership of the now unoccupied flat was causing her financial hardship. The empty homes advisor established a working relationship between the owner, herself and the lead contact for empty homes at Inverclyde Council. The in-house council contact checked for the availability of council and wider investment schemes as well the best contacts for the owner to link in with to progress the condition and care of the communal building.</p>	
<p>Together an action plan was agreed. The empty homes adviser provided advice about ways to improve the marketing of the property for sale while at the same time engaging with the factor for the building to improve the amenity of the communal parts. At the same time the owner was encouraged to consider a plan B for the end use of the property and set a date when she would action this, if the property continued to fail to sell. Letting the property again was agreed as a plan B if no realistic offers or significant interest was obtained after a period of 2 months. The empty homes adviser provided information and signposting on private landlord</p>	

responsibilities and an estimate of the cost of the property remaining unoccupied versus obtaining the rental value of the property.

After continuing to market the property for sale for a further 2 months, the owner decided to rent the property again. She continues to work toward driving forward the communal maintenance and condition of the building and is keen to ensure her new tenant makes the flat his long term home. As a result, the property was occupied by a private tenant in July 2016.

Empty Property Back in use – West Lothian

Empty 3 years 6 months

The owner contacted the Shelter Scotland National Helpline in July and was referred to the Empty Homes Advice Service. The property had been unoccupied for over 3 years as she'd been living with her partner during this time and lacked the motivation and finances required to bring the property up to standard for occupancy.

The owner experienced multiple health, social and debt problems and was at risk of homelessness having had to leave her partner's home.

The empty home adviser engaged with the owner and linked in with the empty home contact for West Lothian, as well as the homeless health support services there to ensure appropriate health and tenancy support was put in place urgently. The local authority arranged for a deep clean to be done on the property and provided an emergency packing to assist the owner to re occupy her property quickly. The empty homes adviser referred the owner to the Shelter Scotland BGET Advice Project where she obtained support to obtain legal representation, to maximise income including Support for Mortgage Interest and to take control of her debts. She was supported with a successful application for a brand new boiler and central heating system which was a significant barrier to staying in the home.

The owner was able to re occupy her property in August with continued support to maintain her home, to take control of her finances and to recover her health.

The Empty Homes Adviser also supports a Scotland wide empty homes network. Interacting with the network of empty homes partners and delivering the empty homes advice service work hand in hand. The empty homes advice service has logged 117 (29%) responses to queries and best practice sharing from the growing network. Sharing information and best practice is also supported through The Knowledge Hub, a secure online platform where members connect, discuss and exchange knowledge. The Empty Homes Adviser posts relevant updates including but not exclusive, sharing in best practice, innovative ideas, status and availability of loans and grants, contributing to difficult cases collective 'brainstorming' as well as feeding back the network needs and suggestions.

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 in the last two years so now almost all councils 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 – 23 councils now include a specific numeric or percentage target for empty homes brought back into use (up from 15 last year), and a further 3 a less specific target to “reduce” or “decrease” the number of empty homes. Some local housing strategies that have been recently updated have also increased their targets.

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.

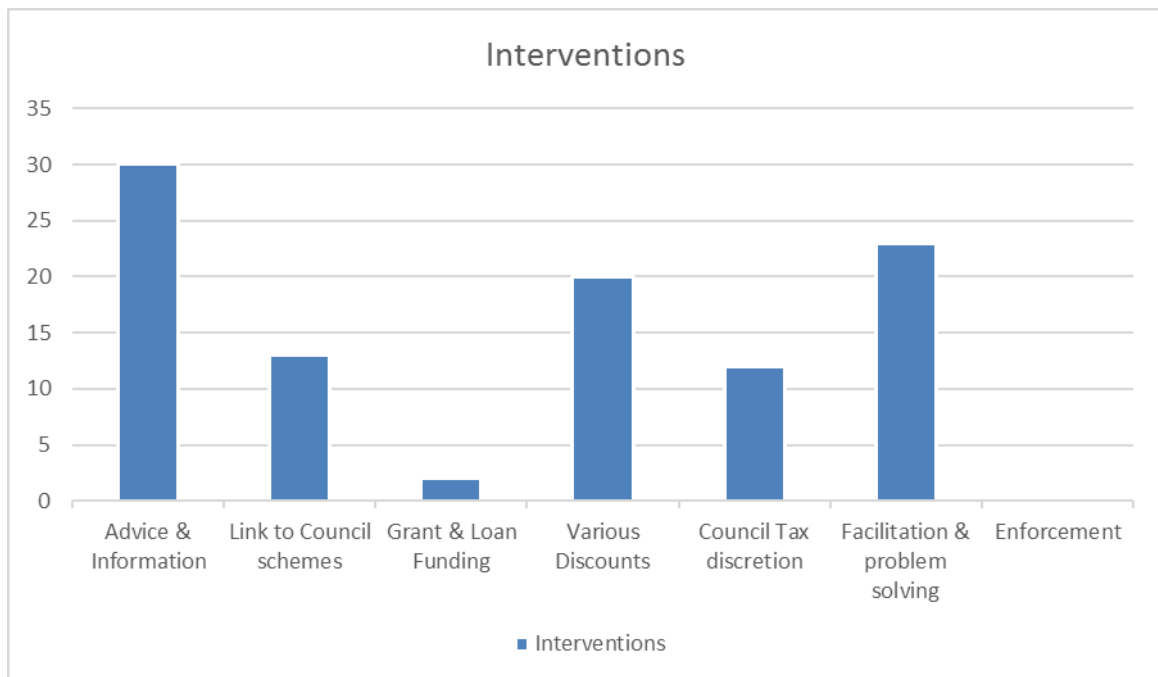
Of those that responded to this year’s survey, 11 councils indicated they had a specific Empty Homes Strategy or Action Plan in place (up from 10 last year). One council answered that an Empty Homes Strategy was being developed and would be appended to the upcoming Local Housing Strategy and another council indicated they would also be including empty homes in their next Local Housing Strategy.

Empty Homes Targets

Last year we reported 22 councils with a specific target for bringing empty homes back into use. This has gone up by one this year, to 23. Unlike previous years, this number is now the same as the number who have a target set within their strategy. A number of officers reported that they did not have a target for properties brought back into use, however their Local Housing Strategy does have a target set; in these cases we referred to the strategy, not the officer’s response.

Use of interventions

The graph below shows the percentage breakdown of interventions used by officers to bring the properties back into use in their area;



The most notable aspect of this graph compared to previous years is the increase in the use of council tax discretion as an intervention. We have been aware for a number of years that several councils were using discretion in regard to the council tax variation increase, and that in some cases this contributed a significant number of active cases for those councils, but this is the first time that discretion has had a significant impact on the overall tally for interventions which have led to properties back into use.

As with previous years, enforcement has not registered on the graph, as the figure for these cases was 0.1%. Whilst this highlights that the approach taken in Scotland, which focuses on working with owners to find a resolution, has produced strong results, it does also suggest that more could still be done in terms of encouraging more enforcement for problem cases.

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. NB - Not all respondents answered every question.

Table 5: 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 & Tools	14	5	
Empty Homes Advice Service	14	5	
Scottish Empty Homes Conference & seminars	11	8	
One to one advice from SEHP staff	17	1	1
Staff Training	10	8	
Knowledge Hub	12	5	
Best Practice Group	10	6	

Most respondents answered 'very useful' or 'useful' for most of the questions. Of particular note is the high score received for one to one advice; further evidence that one of the aspects of the Partnership which is most valued by network members is the face-to-face advice and support that we strive to provide as much as possible.

The Scottish Empty Homes Conference 2016

The sixth annual Scottish Empty Homes Conference was held in November in Edinburgh. The theme of the event was 'Sharing Successes and Filling the Gaps' which highlighted some of the successful projects from around the country, but also looked at some areas where more needs to be done. The event was well attended with 82 delegates ranging from councils, to private landlords, housing associations and community groups.

The keynote speakers for the event were John Maher and Brian Whittington. John is a former drummer for the punk band, Buzzcocks, and currently works as a critically acclaimed photographer, based on Harris. He was invited to come along and talk about his experiences photographing a number of stark empty homes in the Western Isles and his collaboration

with the Living Demonstration Homes for the Western Isles project. Brian works with Tighean Innse Gall, who are also based in the Western Isles, and was there to discuss TIG's contribution to bringing back long term empty homes into use as sustainable, energy efficient properties.

In the morning, we also had Minister for Local Government and Housing, Kevin Stewart, address the conference. He spoke of the need to not only maintain the good work already done by officers, but to continue expanding the work that is done, including those councils who do not currently have any empty homes provision. He also reiterated the Government's commitment to support empty homes work, which included a promise to legislate for Compulsory Sale Orders within the next term of parliament.

Best Practice Group

The Scottish Empty Homes Best Practice Group (BPG) has been in existence for nearly five years, holding its first meeting in August 2012. This group is open to staff with a stake in empty homes work with its core group being front facing empty homes practitioners based within local authorities. 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. In September 2015 the first Northern Best Practice Group was held in Aberdeen, allowing practitioners from northern councils such as Aberdeenshire, Moray and Aberdeen City to attend. The two Best Practice Groups (Northern and Central) tend to be held on alternating months.

The Central BPG continues to have higher attendance figures, due simply to the higher concentration of Empty Homes officers in the central belt. In the last year, attendance at this group averaged 15 attendees, just slightly below the previous year's figure of 16. This slight drop could be explained by the success of the Northern Best Practice Group, and also the fact that the Central BPG's have been closer together than in previous years. Discussions with the network on reducing the number of these meetings, but making them longer, are ongoing, and any changes that are made will only be with the consensus of the majority of Empty Homes Officers. In terms of the Northern BPG, the average attendance figure for this year has been 6, a slight increase from 5 the previous year. Given the logistical difficulties for many officers in the north of the country in reaching this meeting, any increase, no matter how slight, must be seen as a step forward and it is hoped that a similar increase will take place in the next year.

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. Members regularly contribute agenda items and have discussed issues surrounding supply of funding initiatives, such as the Rural Housing & Island Fund (see above), and often discuss topical issues such as how to respond to increased council tax charges in their area, for instance. A number of guest speakers from external organisations have been invited along to present at Best Practice Groups, including Retrofit, Aberdeen Considine and Campbell Dallas solicitors. These guests have provided valuable insight into their various areas of work, to help officers understand better some of the processes that can affect empty homes, and have allowed officers to ask them open questions, again allowing officers the opportunity to challenge any practices which they feel may be problematic. On one occasion the officers were invited along by Auction House Scotland to spend an afternoon after a Best Practice Group witnessing a live auction, many for the first time. Again, this provided an opportunity to see something they normally wouldn't, enabling them to better inform owners who may be considering property auctions as a route for selling their property.

Local Project Service

The Local Projects Service was launched in April 2015 and exists to provide support for local multi-unit empty homes projects. This support is available to all types of organisations from local authorities to community groups and developers.

The support on offer includes:

- help to identify viable one off multi-unit projects in your area
- sourcing funding and assisting you to secure it
- liaising with third parties and bring interested partners together
- producing a project plan & providing assistance right through the process until the project is delivered

There is no restriction on the kind of empty property being brought back into use, provided that the intended end use is residential.

To date at least 28 contacts have been in touch with ideas about projects in their area. 16 of these projects are progressing well with a number due for completion shortly. Some of the

properties being looked at for renovation include a former primary school, an old pub, a former care home and a farmhouse.

Since last year's annual report the number of community groups and social enterprises linking in with the Local Projects Service has continued to increase, and there are now also two charities working with the service too. The Local Projects Manager has spoken at the DTAS conference and other similar events focusing on community led solutions to housing shortages, with the intention to keep on increasing the number of locally based groups that work with the Partnership to bring empty properties, of any description, back into use as residential units.

Local Projects Case Study

The Local Projects Manager (LPM) started working with this project in June 2016 as they were referred via the Scottish Government, whilst applying for the Rural Housing Fund. Whilst the developer, Carling Properties, were experienced at such projects and had a good idea of what they wanted to do, they were struggling to meet the criteria for the RHF.

The LPM met with the developer and talked them through each stage of the application, and how to deal with each individual criteria. An example would be that they had been asked to illustrate community support for the project, but weren't sure how to go about that; the LPM recommended mechanisms such as local councillors and community councillors too. There were a number of other difficult questions that the LPM helped the developers to answer, and also just gave basic advice to answer the questions where they already had an answer in mind.

The project was successfully awarded RHF funding in autumn 2016 and is now progressing well towards its stated target of converting a former primary school into 7 units of affordable housing, to be allocated to people from the waiting list in a rural village with a very high demand for housing, due to the limited supply available.

Barriers & Recommendations

Staff Resources

This year there are 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.

Along with the issue of a full time dedicated resource is the issue of continuity and permanence. The current short term nature of empty homes 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. Encouragingly there are now 4 permanent Empty Homes Officers in Scotland and a further 2 due to be take up post in July 2016.

The financial and social outcome return of an Empty Homes Officer has consistently been shown to be good value for money. These returns for councils could be greatly increased by establishing permanent posts that attract the highest quality staff and encourages them to stay and hone their skills.

Recommendations:

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

Enforcement Powers

It is clear from officer views, the number of 'no hope' empty homes cases and the low level use of Compulsory Purchase of problem empty homes that a new enforcement power is needed to unstick the worst cases.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership is in favour of the adoption of a Compulsory Sale Order Power for vacant and derelict land and buildings. The power as proposed by the Land Reform Review group involves the ability to put a long term empty property or piece of land on to the open market if it has not been used in 3 years and shows no prospect of reuse. 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 without having to acquire the property, find a back to back investor, or pay compensation, would be invaluable in tackling some of the worst problem empties.

The joint briefing, we submitted with Shelter Scotland, Scotland's Towns Partnership and Rural Housing Scotland on the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill gives a fuller description of the case for a Compulsory Purchase Order.

Recommendations:

The introduction in legislation of a Compulsory Sale Order power for vacant and derelict land and buildings.

Funding

The Rural and Islands Housing Fund (see above) has been a success so far and has been met with a positive reception by all potential bidders. Many of these bidders had also previously been involved in bidding for the Town Centre Empty Homes Fund in 2015. The RIHF has a longer bidding window, and a feasibility funding element, which were not present in the TCEHF. It is also a much higher fund, £29m as opposed to £4m for the TCEHF.

At the same time, the issues which cause empty properties in town centres continue to grow. The combination of online shopping and out of town shopping centres has meant significant change for our town centres, with footfall notably decreasing and businesses becoming unsustainable. This leads to town centres becoming visibly rundown, with the effect of further discouraging customers from coming to the area. If these properties could be converted to residential use, it would increase footfall in the town centre areas again, and would also make them more attractive to be around. Whilst we may have to accept a decreased high street in years to come, there will always be a place for a high street of at least some extent and this would help sustain those businesses that are able to survive, and may even help them to thrive.

The Partnership feels that it would be beneficial to go back and look again at the possibility of a new Town Centre Fund along similar lines to the RIHF, to address the many issues with empty properties in town centres.

Recommendations:

A new revolving town centre fund operating along the same lines as the Rural and Islands Housing Fund.

Progress on Project Milestones

The following table is an at-a-glance summary of progress from the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership team against key project milestones:

Scottish Empty Homes Partnership Objectives 2016-17

Objective	Targets for 2016/17	Progress at the year-end
Negotiation of new shared services projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contracts negotiated and 2 Empty Homes Officers in place by end of 2016/17. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Orkney Islands & Highland and Islands Enterprise contract negotiated and currently recruiting Inverclyde Council and River Clyde Homes Shared Service contract negotiated and just recruited
Empty Homes Local Projects Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 6-8 projects completed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 28 projects currently underway with some near completion
Promotion of financial products and affordable housing models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased uptake of existing models reflected in increase in numbers of empty homes reported back into use. New products or funding streams developed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empty Homes Financial Incentives Recommendations 2016 Angus Empty Homes Loan Fund promoted
National Phone & Web Advice Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10 cases complete with property back in use by end of financial year that EHA has facilitated bringing back into use. 30-40 Adviser owned cases open at any one time. Follow up work with councils on referral cases to contribute to targets. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empty Homes Advice Service directly influenced 10 properties back into use Ongoing caseload reflects this Ample follow up work with councils

Maintain and Develop Best Practice Framework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attendance levels and examples of where engagement in Best Practice Group led to solutions/results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Central Group = average attendance of 15. Northern group = average attendance of 6.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Annual survey responses from Network Members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responses received from 24 Local Authorities
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SG Milestone: Number of training - sessions given to all new empty homes staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5 Training sessions delivered to 21 EHO and/or Housing Officers beginning EH work.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1-3+ events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conference held in November
Encourage more people, organisations and groups to bring private sector empty property back into use as housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SG Milestone: A significant increase in the number of empty homes brought back into use year on year. Partnership to play a role in reaching SG aim of 1,200 in year 17/18. We will record Shelter Scotland empty homes OTVs and work to a target of 25 million positive in 2016/17 More community groups, social enterprises and local organisations accessing Local Project Service, attending empty homes events and reporting empty homes brought back into use. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 859 by end of Sept. 2016 OTVs for year = 37.6 M
Encourage councils to "mainstream" empty homes work within existing housing services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> SG Milestone: Evidence of additional councils developing an empty homes service including – commitment to empty homes staff; putting tools in place (i.e. database, advice package); including empty homes commitments as key parts of their housing strategies:- Measure through yearly survey and information gathered from one to one engagement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 21 councils employing an EHO Renfrewshire /West Dunbartonshire post is being continued and has been recruited. Dumfries & Galloway new EH and private sector housing officer recruited. East Ayrshire EHO post recruited

