

Why Empty Homes Matter

How bringing empty homes back to use can contribute to delivering the vision and principles in Housing to 2040.



Why Empty Homes Matter

How bringing empty homes back to use can contribute to delivering the vision and principles in Housing to 2040.

Empty homes have an important role to play in helping to deliver the right homes, in the right places for people in Scotland. The Scottish Government has published Housing to 2040. It sets out an ambitious vision of what housing should look like by 2040 and a plan of how to achieve this vision.

Bringing empty homes back into use will help deliver on all four parts of this plan;

More homes at the heart of great places

Bringing empty homes back to use can help to meet the demand for affordable homes in our most densely populated towns and cities.

It can also help to revive and revitalise town centres, villages and rural communities that have seen population decline, helping to once more make them great places that people are proud to call home.

Affordability and choice

By bringing empty homes back to use, alongside delivering on the ambitious government commitment to provide an additional 110,000 affordable homes over the next ten years, of which 70% must be social homes, local authorities can make full use of the housing resources at their disposal. This will ensure that there is the widest possible range of types and tenures of homes available to all, irrespective of which part of the country or council they live in.

Affordable warmth and zero emissions homes

Bringing empty homes back in to use can help to drive down the carbon emissions caused by housing and housing construction. Where the home is retrofitted to improve energy performance, it can also help to drive down the cost of heating and reduce the operational carbon emitted.

Improving the quality of all homes

Every empty home has been a home for someone in the past, and could potentially be a home for someone again in the future. By working to support renovation of suitable empty homes and returning these homes back to use, local authorities can help to breathe new life into old homes, improving the quality of housing stock and improving the quality of life in the communities with empty stock.

Our Why Empty Homes Matter information pack focuses on how empty homes work can contribute to meeting the vision and principles that underpin each part of the Housing to 2040 Route Map.



Part 1: More homes at the heart of great places

Our aim is for everyone to have a safe, high-quality home that is affordable and meets their needs in the place they want to be.

Bringing empty homes back to use can help to:

Increase affordable homes supply;

Housing to 2040 and the SNP/Green Party cooperation agreement give a commitment to complete the delivery of the 50,000 affordable homes target set during the last Parliament and also to deliver a further 110,000 affordable homes, (of which 70% should be social homes) over the next ten years up to 2032.

This is an ambitious commitment, which, if delivered on time, will reduce housing need. However, it is important that we also consider other ways to provide the homes people need alongside this.

We have seen an increase in the use of temporary accommodation, as well as an increase in the amount of time people are spending in this temporary accommodation, as many local authorities struggle to provide the homes that are needed to meet urgent demand.

Through operating buyback schemes or encouraging owners to bring empty properties back to use at affordable rents, local authorities can increase the supply of affordable homes in villages, towns and cities across the country.



Buy-back schemes

Case study: North Lanarkshire Buyback and Open Market Purchase Scheme

North Lanarkshire Council, Scotland's largest local authority landlord, launched its open market purchase scheme in April 2018, as an expansion to its Empty Homes Purchase Scheme, to provide new homes and futures for families and individuals across the authority area.

The scheme enables the purchase of properties that are for sale on the open market and are generally former council houses which were purchased under right to buy. The council receives a grant funding contribution from the Scottish Government towards the cost of each purchase.

When North Lanarkshire Council launched this scheme, they identified properties which would boost their current housing stock, represent good value for money and most importantly, make a real difference for people within our communities.

Some homes had become an eyesore having been abandoned or neglected by owners, while others were being sold in areas in which they knew there was high demand for council properties. North Lanarkshire Council are delighted the scheme has proven such a success and has meant they can get more people into homes in the communities they want to live in.

North Lanarkshire Council have ambitious plans to enhance and improve their housing stock and deliver 5,000 new homes for rent by 2035. The Open Market Purchase Scheme has recently hit a new milestone with a 500th property being purchased.

The main criteria for the purchase of homes on the open market is:

- There is demand for the type and size of property in that area,
- The combined cost of buying the property and bringing it up to letting standards would represent value for money to the council,
- Where the purchase of a property will enable the council to take complete, or majority, ownership of blocks of flats making communal repairs much easier to complete, and
- Homes purchased would meet the particular needs of households not currently available in the council stock, e.g. homes suitable for people with disabilities.

Case study: Perth & Kinross Council's Empty Homes Initiative

Perth & Kinross Council's Empty Homes Initiative was initially launched in 2012 as a means to target the 900+ empty homes in Perth & Kinross. The scheme built on a long standing relationship with private sector landlords offering an incentive to bring empty homes back into use as affordable housing. As such, it not only tackles the issues associated with empty homes but also directly contributes to the supply of good quality affordable housing.

Empty Homes Initiative Grants of up to £7,500 per bedroom are available to owners of long-term empty properties to bring them up to the Repairing Standard and/or to undertake work which would be required to obtain an HMO License.

On completion of the work there is a requirement for the property to be let at the Local Housing Allowance rate via Perth and Kinross Council's rent deposit guarantee scheme.

The success of the scheme has been clear to see in terms of the number of homes brought back into use and the number of households that have benefited from this affordable housing.

Provide a wider range of options for private sector investment to deliver more homes;

Empty homes can often be renovated and returned to use without the need for planning permission, land acquisition or the starting from scratch approach needed for building new homes.

For this reason, they can be a less costly option that delivers a quicker return for small scale developers and investors, while also providing additional housing and improving existing neighbourhoods.

A number of local authorities run matchmaker schemes where empty home owners can find out about people looking to purchase empty properties in their areas.

Our 2021 annual survey found that 32% of long-term empty homes remained empty because of ongoing repairs or because the owner could not afford the repairs needed to bring their empty property back to use. Matchmaker schemes can help these owners by matching them up with buyers looking for homes to develop. It can help developers to find investment opportunities that work for them, and it can help local authorities by increasing the housing stock available in their area.

Case study: Baltic Mill, Arbroath

Having been built in 1861, Baltic Mill began life as a working mill and was later used as a whisky bond. It had been lying vacant and unused since 1990.

The property was identified in 2016 as a potential site for redevelopment as housing and was bought by developers who offered it to Hillcrest Homes for provision of social housing.

Angus Council identified the building as being in an area of sufficient housing need, warranting inclusion of the project in their 2016-2021 Strategic Housing Investment Plan, thereby allowing funds to be allocated to the development from the Scottish Government's Affordable Housing Supply Programme.

The conversion was completed in early 2021 after a short delay caused by the pandemic. The redevelopment of the building has resulted in an additional 24 homes being made available for social rent in the town, and has resulted in the preservation of a prominent local historical landmark.

Case study: Aberdeen Matchmake to Sell and Rent

Aberdeen Council's Empty Homes Service has established ground-breaking Matchmake to Rent and Matchmake to Sell schemes that allows the council to facilitate a match between owners of empty homes and people on council housing waiting lists.

This practical approach helps the city to tackle the twin problems of empty residential properties and reducing housing waiting lists.

As part of this, the Empty Homes Officer contacted third sector organisations, including Aberdeen Cyrenians, to raise awareness of the schemes. This led to Aberdeen Cyrenians applying for funding from Social and Sustainable Capital to bring up to 30 empty properties back into use via purchase and to rent a further 50 empty properties.

The empty homes service is now helping to identify potential pilot properties from the matchmake lists.

Build stronger and more vibrant places;

When we talk about building stronger and more vibrant places, we often mean re-building places that used to be strong and vibrant.

Empty homes can have a detrimental effect on people's wellbeing and sense of place as they send out negative messages about a neighbourhood and can become the focus of anti-social behaviour. This in turn can have a spiralling effect, with more people leaving, homes remaining unsold and remaining residents feeling trapped in a declining neighbourhood.

Bringing empty homes back to use can help to reverse this trend, making areas feel safer, healthier and livelier, and once more making people proud to call it home. It can create a positive feel about communities that draw new people towards them, helping to support wider regeneration.

Where this happens, it can also support the development of 20 minute-neighbourhoods, as set out in Housing to 2040, by bringing people, shops and businesses back to neighbourhoods, thereby providing easier access to essential services, reducing reliance on out-of-town facilities and creating new opportunities to work and relax.

Case study: Midsteeples Quarter, Dumfries

Midsteeples Quarter is a community benefit society breathing new life into Dumfries town centre by redeveloping empty High Street properties to create a new neighbourhood with a vibrant town centre centred on community ownership, a diverse High Street and bringing people back to live in the town. The vision for the redevelopment has emerged over a number of years of continued community engagement programmes.

Midsteeples Quarter began with an application for a Community Asset Transfer on 135-139 High Street, formerly known as The Bakers Oven. The property had been acquired by Dumfries and Galloway Council in 2009 and had lain empty until it became used as a pop-up venue for local charities and groups to run fundraising events and exhibitions. Midsteeples Quarter was granted the ownership of 135-139 High Street by a Community Asset Transfer and the Midsteeples Quarter Board made the decision to focus on developing this first property as a 'proof of concept' for the Midsteeples Quarter vision.

In September 2020, Midsteeples Quarter purchased two High Street buildings - 113-115 and 117 High Street, marking the beginning of Phase Two in the regeneration efforts for the town centre. Following a successful Crowdfunder at the start of 2021, Midsteeples Quarter announced the purchase of a further two High Street buildings, 109 and 111 High Street.

The people power which is breathing new life into Dumfries High Street has been hailed as an inspiration for other Scottish towns, in Scotland's Towns Partnership's (STP) Town Toolkit. Nick Wright, a town planner who developed the toolkit for STP, said: "What's inspirational about Dumfries is that members of the local community - largely volunteers - have stepped forward over the last decade to lead the town centre's renaissance. Rather than complain about the state of the town centre, they decided simply to get on and do things.

"This fresh and invigorating approach has reopened empty premises on the high street, brought countless more people into the town centre for events and activities, and implemented dozens of projects."



Place communities at the heart of shaping their future;

Many smaller urban and rural communities have had to face the challenges of depopulation as young people move away due to difficulties finding employment or housing that they can afford. At the same time, the areas may also have several streets with high levels of empty homes and community facilities in urgent need of repair.

Encouraging and supporting community groups to take ownership of empty properties and return them to use as affordable housing has a vital role to play as part of long-term strategic plans to revive and sustain fragile communities.

It places the community at the heart of work that will shape and secure their future, as well as providing skilled work opportunities for local people, and delivering affordable housing that enables younger people to stay in the area, and families and others to move there.

Case study: The Pairc Trust

The Pairc Estate extends to an area of approximately 10,840ha. The majority of the estate is under crofting tenure, the main exception being an area of grazing land at Steimreway. In total, there are 213 crofts on the estate, spread between 11 townships. The estate is mainly hilly moorland with a large number of fresh water lochs.

The Pairc Trust was established in 2003 and completed purchase of the estate in December 2015. The trust has a long term vision to reverse a century of population decline in South Lochs, by providing additional local jobs, more affordable good housing, and improved community facilities to improve the quality of life for all local residents.

The community now consists of around 400 residents plus a number of others who manage crofts in the area. The majority of local people are Gaelic speakers although the social composition of South Lochs is changing rapidly as new families move in.

One of the first buildings the trust returned to use was The Care Unit in Gravir. The building, which had been empty for 8 years, was damp and derelict, a dark and unwelcoming sight on a dated housing scheme. The trust completely stripped back the property so that only the gable walls and foundations remained. They changed it from one building into two separate houses, insulated to the highest standards and with solar thermal panels on the roof and an air source heat pump.

The completed houses stand out as being modern and new and are a visible demonstration of how a Community Trust can improve an area and build a community led, positive future.

Part 2: Affordability and choice

Our aim is for everyone to have access to a home that is affordable and choices about where they live, no matter what tenure they live in.

Bringing empty homes back to use can help to:

Increase active housing stock;

Every empty house is a place that has been someone's home and, unless they are beyond repair, could be someone's home again. It may be the first home they own or rent, a place they move to when they have started a family and want somewhere bigger, or the place they move to after children have left home and they want to downsize.

In 2021, Scotland had over 43,000 long term empty homes. More than 27,000 of these had been empty for over one year. These homes are spread across the whole of the country, in towns and cities as well as villages, islands and rural communities. Bringing homes back to use can help to ease pressure on the housing system, providing more opportunities for people to move on from existing accommodation where they want to, by increasing the choices available to them.

Case study: YMCA Glenrothes

YMCA Glenrothes has actively responded to the issue of homelessness in Fife through its 'Empty Homes' renovation programme. Working closely with the local council EHO and other departments and with support from grant makers and trusts, YMCA Glenrothes refurbishes empty properties and transform them into longer term tenancies for Fife people who have experienced homelessness. The properties are renovated to the Scottish Housing Quality standard and designed to be as energy efficient as possible. The homes are managed by the charity and support is also provided to tenants.

As well as housing, 'Empty Homes' has provided additional benefits for the local community. Work experience was enabled pre-Covid for 29 Fife College construction students who completed their Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQ).

One example of the people helped by the YMCA Empty Homes Programme was a 23 year old (who sought help from a YMCA partnering agency - Trust in Fife,) who was living in a single flat let by a private landlord when she became pregnant, and realised that her flat would be too overcrowded and no longer suitable following the birth of her baby. Trust in Fife referred the young woman to YMCA Glenrothes as a suitable tenant for its newly renovated two bedroomed house.

YMCA Glenrothes involved her in the re-design of a house that had been empty for several months and required a complete renovation to transform it into a home. They obtained external advice for her on how to operate her boiler and heating as well as legal advice on her property rights and responsibilities. She was also provided with financial advice regarding rent payments and any entitlements she could benefit from when the baby arrived. With support, she moved into the newly refurbished property with her four week old baby in November 2017.

Deliver housing that meet people's needs;

Housing to 2040 recognises that certain groups, including victims of domestic abuse, young people leaving care and individuals released from prison sentences and remand, are at risk of experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping. People in these groups can find it hard to access housing as a whole.

Accessing housing that is tailored towards addressing their specific situation and can support them in the transition to independent living can be even harder.

Across the UK as a whole there are many examples of third sector organisations taking ownership of empty homes to improve the quality and range of services they can offer to adults and young people.

Organisations such as Social and Sustainable Capital, Habitat for Humanity, Scottish National Investment Bank and others offer tailored funding that can enable community groups and other non-local authority providers, to move into property ownership, or extend their property portfolio, using empty residential and commercial buildings.

This enables housing and wraparound support to be delivered by the same provider, with rental income reinvested to help the vulnerable groups at the heart of the providers remit, providing them with security of tenure and life changing support.

Case studies: Latch (Leeds Action to Create Homes)

Latch was established in 1989. They purchase empty and rundown houses and refurbish them to create good quality homes.

When they're fully modernised and furnished, their properties provide energy efficient supported housing for people who are homeless or in housing need and are ready to make positive changes in their lives. Most of the refurbishment work is done by Latch staff and unemployed trainees. Some have construction experience already, while others learn new skills, and gain confidence and work experience as they work on site.

Latch supported housing acts as a stepping stone to independent living. Tenants have their own Latch support worker, who helps them to move in to their new home and ensure they have all the assistance they need while they get settled. They then continue to support them as they adjust gradually to independent living and become able to move into permanent independent accommodation.

The properties Latch purchase will often be in areas that have become run-down. By buying them and returning them to housing stock they help to regenerate these neighbourhoods reducing the risks of anti-social behaviour and improving the lives of people already living there.

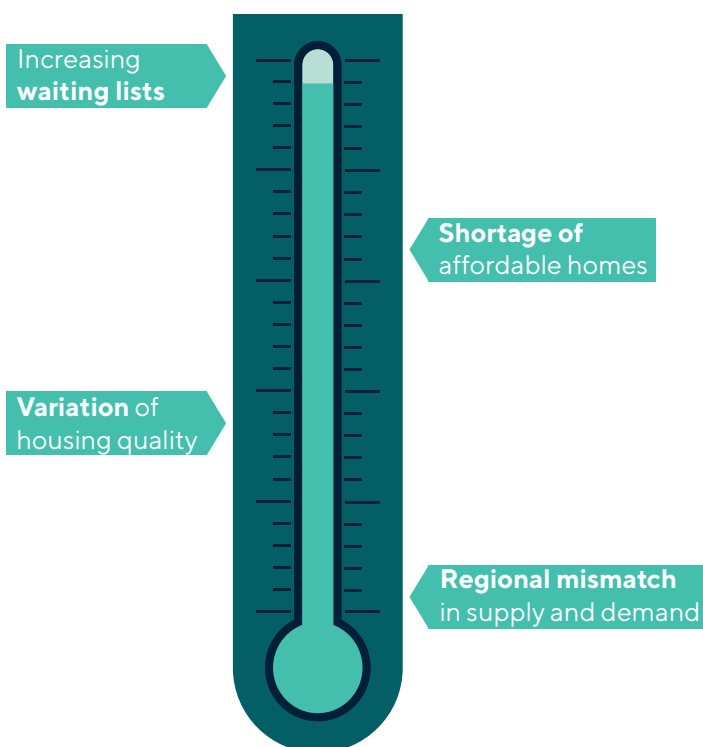
Case study: Hull Women's Network

Hull Women's Network has brought back into use a number of empty homes to provide comfortable and safe homes for vulnerable women and children fleeing domestic violence, to enable them to make a permanent break from the perpetrator and transition to independent living.

They have 195 one bedroom, two bedroom and three bedroom properties in different areas of Hull which are available for women and children needing homes. Social and Sustainable Capital's CIF loan has enabled the network to purchase an 82 additional homes.

Each property is safe and secure and is located close to a school and other local amenities. Rents are set at affordable rent levels which means that Local Housing Allowance will cover at least most of the cost. No deposit or bond is required and women and children can stay in the property as long as they need to.

By moving into home ownership, the Network has been able to use rental income from the properties to improve the range and quality of services it can offer, further helping to make a difference to the lives of women and children feeling domestic violence.



Part 3: Affordable warmth and zero emissions homes

Our aim is for housing to contribute to tackling climate change by 2045 by delivering homes that are warm and affordable to heat and reducing the emissions caused by housing and housing construction.

Bringing empty homes back to use can help to:

Reduce carbon emissions and tackle climate change; Requiring all new homes delivered by Registered Social Landlords and local authorities to be zero emissions homes by 2026 will help to ease fuel poverty for a large section of the population while also helping to combat climate change with a switch to clean energy.

Retrofitting existing homes can improve the energy efficiency of occupied housing stock. This is recognised in Housing to 2040's commitment to seek to ensure that existing homes are adapted and retrofitted to improve their energy efficiency and decarbonise their heating.

At the same time, it is increasingly being recognised that the operational carbon emissions from heating a home are not the only way that housing contributes to climate change. Emissions from building or demolishing homes, known as Embodied Carbon also need to be addressed. This is why part 3 of Housing to 2040 also refers to reducing the emissions caused by housing construction.

Retrofitting empty stock can help to reduce the carbon emissions caused by housing and housing construction because the bricks and mortar responsible for the largest proportion of embodied carbon are already in place. It is mainly the interior that is being improved, alongside possible additions to the exterior.

Once the energy efficiency of an empty property is improved, whether through a full retrofit or other measures, it also becomes more appealing to future buyers or tenants, therefore helping to return it to use, increasing housing stock and decreasing the emissions created by housing construction.

Case study: Woodside Flats

Woodside Flats are three 18-storey tower blocks in Glasgow that were originally built in the 1960s and signposted an important gateway into the city.

The original design of the flats was sophisticated for the time, but the prefabricated structural frame offered poor insulation while thin internal partitions brought limited soundproofing. Over time, the external appearance deteriorated, and the blocks were earmarked for demolition.

However, Queens Cross Housing Association undertook an initial options appraisal of possible futures for the three blocks, seeking the views of residents, community and public service groups. From this, it was clear that residents wanted the buildings improved and not demolished.

Following planning approval and an outline specification, retrofitting of the three towers commenced and was completed in 2019.

The overall cost for the retrofit work was £13.3 million, which meant an average cost of around £43,000 per flat. The project adopted a fabric first approach to radically reduce energy demand and associated carbon emissions. Project architect Rupert Daly noted that this meant 'The energy savings would be locked into the building's fabric. By retrofitting rather than demolishing, the whole life carbon footprint of these buildings is likely to be closer to net zero than most new builds.'



Demolition contributes to carbon emissions

Bricks and mortar are responsible for embodied carbon

Retrofitting can improve energy efficiency

Part 4: Improving the quality of all homes

Our aim is for all homes to be good quality, whether they be new build or existing, meaning everyone can expect the same high standards no matter what kind of home or tenure they live in.

Bringing empty homes back to use can help to:

Improve the quality of all homes;

The quality of a home is more than just the quality of the rooms inside it. In a tenement it's the quality of the homes above, below and alongside it. In suburbs, it's the quality of the neighbouring properties. And everywhere, it's the quality of the neighbourhood.

An empty home can be the blight that spreads out to all homes around it. Overgrown lawns, damp floorboards, and unchecked subsidence are just three ways that the damage to one empty home can spill over into neighbouring properties. As properties decline further they can become magnets for a wide range of anti-social behaviour. All of this has a detrimental effect on the quality of neighbouring homes and the lives of the people that live in them.

Neighbour quotes on harm of living next door to an empty home

'My mental health is seriously affected now. It's a lovely day today and I am on a day off and I used to sit in my back garden. But when your outlook is hedges, weed and grass some of it roof height. It's approaching all my windows. He has weeds growing inside his house.'

'I have stress related alopecia and my hair falls out when I get stressed and to say the last few days have been stressful isn't even the half of it with this neighbour. Our other neighbours have advised that they've been asking him for years to contribute towards maintenance but that he simply hasn't been contactable until now when he left a number with my neighbour who is considering doing work for him. My house is becoming very damp and no matter how much I have my heating on there is nothing I can do if he isn't willing to maintain his property and I'm scared it's going to affect my health. I really really need help.'

'I can't take much more. I don't have the means to go to lawyers and pay large legal bills chasing a person who runs from his responsibilities. I have lived in my house and brought up 3 girls here and I used to love it. I hate living here but I have no choice. I am trapped and a prisoner I couldn't sell my house even if I put it on at half the value.'

Empty Homes Officers work to bring empty homes back to use so that neighbours can once more feel safe and secure and in charge of the quality of their own homes.

Case study: Buy Back in Irvine

A 1960 four bedroom two storey end-terraced villa had been empty for ten years. The property had attracted anti-social behaviour including vandalism, fly tipping and fire-raising, and there were ongoing complaints from neighbours, the local tenants and residents association, Police Scotland, as well as reports in the local press.

The Housing Services Private Sector Team for the local authority had worked tirelessly with the owner for a considerable time to try to encourage them to rectify the outstanding repair issues and bring this property back into use. Unfortunately, due to their financial circumstances, they were unable to undertake the required repairs or maintenance which resulted in the property continuing to deteriorate.

Facing the prospect of a potential Compulsory Purchase Order, the owner finally agreed to sell the property back to the council at a price which reflected its current value.

Once brought back up to standard the property will provide safe, attractive family accommodation as well as improve the visual appeal of the area. It will also be a huge benefit to the local community who have been suffering as a result of living next to it for a decade.



Support independent living;

Housing to 2040 notes that ‘most older people and disabled people live in mainstream homes and want to continue to do so, but these properties may or may not meet their needs.’ New properties, while being designed to allow people to live independently, may be away from the communities they have lived in for most, if not all, of their lives. Where they are out of town it can make it harder to access facilities and harder for friends and family to visit them.

Empty homes come in all shapes and sizes and in all locations. Local authorities can incorporate empty homes work into their plans for delivering homes that meet the housing need in their communities. One way of doing this can be to support work to repurpose empty homes so that, for example, larger older homes are converted to smaller units that can help to meet demand from older and disabled people looking to move within their existing community.

This in turn means that the home they are moving away from can become a home to someone else, helping to sustain communities and welcome new generations to places that may otherwise see more empty homes and declining population setting in.

Case study: Flat conversion in Crieff

A block of flats in Crieff which had a poor reputation as a result of vandalism and other anti-social behaviour both prior to and after becoming long-term empty was purchased by a new owner. With the assistance of the empty homes service in Perth and Kinross, the owner renovated all 3 flats in the block (along with a number of neighbouring properties).

The ground floor flat has been converted to a wheelchair accessible property with the work being completed to allow for further adaptations, including fitting of tracking hoists, remote door entry, that may be needed by residents in the future. This was done to meet the needs of an applicant on the social housing waiting list, whose needs were struggling to be met through the existing social housing provision.

Not only has the property met the specific needs of the family, but the area has been improved to remove the previous stigma of the anti-social behaviour.

Empty homes matter

Housing to 2040 sets an ambitious long term transformative agenda for housing in Scotland. Scotland's long term empty homes are a vital resource that can be used to help deliver the route map to Housing to 2040 and support the provision of the additional housing Scotland needs now.

Every home matters. Every empty home matters.

The case studies in Why Empty Homes Matter are taken from submissions from empty homes officers as well as the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership annual reports and the following websites of organisations referred to in the case studies;

Midsteeple Quarter, Dumfries:
www.midsteeplequarter.org

The Latch:
www.latch.org.uk

Pairc Trust:
www.pairctrust.co.uk

Social and Sustainable Capital:
www.socialandsustainable.com/our-funds

Woodside Flats/Queens Cross Housing Association:
www.qcha.org.uk/news/389-greener-high-rise-flats-attract-cop26-praise

To find out more about the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership and how we can help you to bring empty homes back to use, visit our website at: www.emptyhomespartnership.scot

To read the Housing to 2040 Route Map published in March 2021 please go to the Scottish Government website at: www.gov.scot/publications/housing-2040-2