



Annual impact report 2021-2022

Scottish Empty Homes Partnership

scottish
empty homes
partnership



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Executive Summary

This impact report by the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) covers the period 2021–22. The SEHP is funded by the Scottish Government, and hosted by Shelter Scotland, with the remit to encourage private sector long-term empty homes back into use, as social and affordable homes, wherever possible. (Long-term empty homes are homes that are recorded as empty on council tax records for 6 months or more.) Long-term empty properties represent a lost opportunity in areas where demand for housing is high and housing supply is inadequate. By bringing suitable empty homes back into use, housing need will be reduced and will in turn help to address the housing emergency. Bringing homes back into use can also help to revive and revitalise town centres, villages and rural communities and contribute to reducing carbon emissions.

Figures published by Scottish Government reported that there are approximately 43,766 long-term empty homes. Of these 15,912 have been empty for anywhere between 6 and 12 months, and 27,584 have been empty for over 12 months. The 6-month figure is a 7.5% fall from 2020 figures, but this is still 6.5% higher than the pre-pandemic 40,963 long-term empty homes in 2019.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on long-term empty properties being brought back into use; many empty homes officers (EHOs) report that owners advise that empty homes work has stalled due to a rise in the cost of materials, shortages in supplies and the lack of availability of local tradespeople. Against this backdrop of significant challenges, and with home working, restrictions on visits to properties and varying access to IT equipment still affecting all EHOs, the achievements of empty homes officers are all the more impressive for 2021/22.

Over the past year, Empty Homes Officers, supported by the Partnership, have reported that 1,152 empty properties have been brought back into use. This compares to 851 homes back into use for the previous year and to 1412 in 2019.

We now have 24 councils that report having an empty homes service. During the period of this report, we have had 2 new empty homes officers appointed and a further 2 councils restarting an empty homes service by appointing a new officer. However, several local authorities have advised us that since the pandemic, empty homes work has been deprioritised, or in one council, completely stopped. We remain committed to realising our ambition to see empty homes services in every local authority in Scotland and will continue to work with and support all Local Authorities to ensure that, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic, each Local Authority prioritises bringing suitable empty homes back into use.

Looking ahead

We know that there is only so much that an empty homes service can achieve where owners are unwilling to return their home to use or where owners cannot be traced. Our Impact Report shows the significant problems these empty homes can cause for communities and why we believe that existing powers such as Compulsory Purchase Orders should be used more widely. Empty homes officers and local authorities across the country have also told us that they agree with the view expressed in our last annual report that further powers, including Compulsory Sale and Rental Orders, should also be introduced to prevent homes from being left to deteriorate indefinitely at a time when Scotland desperately needs more homes.

We want all councils to consider empty homes work in the round and encourage councils to have an integrated empty homes strategy that aligns with their strategic housing investment plan and local housing strategy. We recommend reviewing empty homes data and compiling a targeted action plan for all homes that have been stuck for over 24 months as well as reflecting on what homes may not be an immediate priority.

We are testing innovative approaches to encourage a wider range of stakeholders to be involved in empty homes work. The benefits of registered social landlords, community groups and other private bodies bringing empty homes back into use are being demonstrated on a small scale in Scotland and we would like to see more of this nationally. The impact of this work is evident from the case studies in this report.

Finally, consideration must be given to how to motivate more owners to bring their empty properties back into use. EHOs tell us that owners are difficult to engage and our initial user research on the advice service told us that owners did not know help was available; so we would encourage local marketing campaigns to highlight the benefits to an owner of bringing their empty property back into use. As well as this, we recognise that fiscal initiatives such as the vacant dwelling council tax levy can be used effectively with a carrot and stick approach, but additional resources at a local level, such as small grants can unlock empty properties that are stuck.

Click here to watch the video:

[Watch the video](#)

Who are we and what are our key objectives?

Our Vision

Our vision is that privately-owned empty homes do not remain empty for 12 months or more without good reason.

Our Aim

Our aim is to bring as many privately-owned empty homes back into use (as social and affordable homes where possible), by meeting our five key strategic objectives:



Strategic objective 1 –

Encourage every council in Scotland to have a dedicated Empty Homes Officer.

We know that more homes are returned to use where owners access advice and information from an Empty Homes Officer who can offer tailored solutions to turn their house into a home again. We want to see a dedicated Empty Homes Officer or Empty Homes Service in every council in Scotland.



Strategic objective 2 –

Encourage councils to mainstream empty homes work.

It doesn't make financial sense to allow properties to remain empty and deteriorate, or to ignore the contribution empty homes can make to meeting housing and other social needs. We want every local authority to see empty homes work as a key part of housing strategy, not a standalone optional activity.



Strategic objective 3 –

Encourage registered social landlords, community groups and other private bodies to engage in empty homes work.

A single empty home can cause a nuisance to a community and clusters of empty homes can lead to a spiral of decline. We want to make sure that other organisations recognise the important role that turning empty properties into homes can make in helping them meet their wider aims.



Strategic objective 4 –

Support the national network of Empty Homes.

Empty Homes Officers give advice and information on a range of issues to owners and neighbours of empty homes. We support them with tailored training, workshops and facilitated best practice meetings ensuring that knowledge, expertise and case studies are shared in a supportive and friendly environment.



Strategic objective 5 –

Deliver the Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service.

We know the difference that speaking to a dedicated empty homes professional can make to people who are struggling because of an empty home. Where councils don't have an Empty Homes Service or Empty Homes Officer, our Advice Service provides information and support to owners directly so that no one has to deal with an empty home on their own.

Our Outcomes

The outcomes that will be required to deliver this vision are:

- National and regional commitment to empty homes work
- More homes reported back into use following intervention by empty homes officers
- More options for owners and local authorities to bring empty homes back to use
- Fewer homes becoming empty for a year
- Fewer homes remaining empty for longer than a year

Our Values

We will be driven by our values to ensure we provide a high-quality service to all our customers.

- **Helpful.** We are an encouraging voice for all.
- **Determined.** We are a team dedicated to turning all empty homes into forever homes.
- **Supportive.** We are here to offer everyone from homeowners to local authorities, first-level advice and support.
- **Informed.** We seek to provide expert knowledge and advice in an understandable and reassuring way.
- **Local.** We work in local communities where we strive to make a positive change.

Why is empty homes work important?

There are many reasons why local authorities need to work to bring empty homes back to use. All of them come down to people.

It is important for people who are struggling to find an affordable and secure home to rent or buy in the cities, towns or villages where they work or grew up in, while properties that could be their homes are lying empty.

It is important for people who live in the same street as an empty home and whose physical and mental health can be adversely affected as the condition of the house deteriorates and it becomes the focus of anti-social behaviour.

It is important for people who have inherited a property and are looking for practical help and support to bring it back into use, but instead are receiving bills for double council tax.

And it is important for people who are trying to bring an empty home back to use, whether they underestimated what would be involved in renovating a home, had to leave a home for work or family reasons, or have found that the second home they used to occasionally visit is now a luxury that they can't afford.

Where empty homes are brought back to use it helps people and it helps places.

For each empty home brought back into use, a family will benefit and be able to put down roots. This means that another family is contributing to the local community. Whether they are providing an essential service through their work, going to local shops, cafes, pubs and leisure facilities or carrying out work on the property using local builders and contractors they are supporting the local economy. Scottish Government figures show that every £1 spent on renovating property in Scotland generates £1.60 for the economy.

Empty homes can quickly have a negative effect on the local property market, creating buyer suspicion and reducing interest in an area. Bringing homes back to use can turn this into a positive message, as confidence and pride in the community returns.

In areas where there is a shortage of homes and rising prices, empty homes can make the difference between people staying in the area they grew up in, living and working in it and helping to sustain the community, or moving away from it and adding to the skills drain that many smaller communities are facing.

These are just some of the reasons why empty homes work is important.

The difference it can make to people and communities is highlighted by many of the case studies in this report. At the same time, the problems that get worse the longer a home remains empty are also shown in the case studies.

We see people whose lives have been ruined by the problems of living next door to nightmare empty homes, but we also see people who, through the intervention of empty homes officers or the Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service, have been able to bring homes back to use and end the problems they were causing them.

Elsewhere, we set out the wider contributions empty homes can make to the delivery of the Scottish Government's Housing to 2040 route map, which was the subject of our Why Empty Homes Matter paper launched at our recent annual conference.

All of this shows why it is important to work to bring empty homes back to use and why doing nothing to address the problems of empty homes is not an option.

Turning empty spaces...



...into thriving places

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/about-supply-use-input-output-tables/>

² <https://sp-bpr-en-prod-cdnep.azureedge.net/published/LGC/2019/11/10/Empty-Homes-in-Scotland/LGCS052019R10.pdf>

³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/housing-2040-2/>

Case Study – YMCA Glenrothes

The difference empty homes work makes to people's lives

Through the intervention of the Fife EHO, YMCA Glenrothes acquired the opportunity to purchase a two-bedroomed terraced house from executors of a property that had been empty for nearly three years.

Tracy and her partner moved into this property just before the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to this the couple and their new-born baby had been living in a third-floor flat. It was a private let and in Tracy's words "not a good place". There was damp present, and the landlord advised them to wash the walls daily to remove the ongoing damp. The mould inside the flat exacerbated Tracy's anxieties. Tracy often struggled to get her pram up the stairs with her baby and shopping and the flat was located on a busy street with no garden.

Tracy has described this move to a home as making a "massive difference" in their lives. She and her partner always wanted a house, a quiet life, and a garden. Now, they have not only a garden, but a driveway and a shed. Tracy described the neighbours as "amazing" and commented that "everyone in the area is so nice" and the house in her own words is now "homely". Their young child has just joined the nursery and is very settled.

On hearing that there are 43,000 empty homes in Scotland, Tracy was quite clear: There should be more affordable, decent homes and the local authorities have a responsibility. From being so unsettled to now feeling "safe" Tracy described the situation for many people like herself. "For someone who has been homeless, I have no money to buy my own house and I can't afford the high private lets. Everyone should have the opportunity to feel safe".



Case Study – Aberdeen City Council

Using empty homes to meet affordable housing supply need

A well-maintained one-bedroom city-centre flat in Aberdeen had been lying empty for almost 2 years, as a consequence of the recent slowdown in the regional housing market.

A tenant was found for the property within 6 months and they remain in the property 12 months later. So, there is evidence of the tenancy being sustained.

By registering on the Matchmake to Rent scheme (MM2Rent)(see below), the property was listed on the council’s website page as a housing option available in the private sector. Within 6 months, a tenant who had struggled to find suitable accommodation was offered the property, with the help of the Council’s Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme, as an option. They remain in the property 12 months later.

This approach has shown that owners/landlords in the private rented sector are willing to rent to households in acceptance of the Local Housing Allowance, if they are currently working with the council’s Housing Access & Advice Team, and that these properties increase the choice available.



“I found the scheme to work well in terms getting someone into my flat, and I would like to see more efforts like this to bring empty properties back into use.”

– Empty homeowner, Aberdeen

Aberdeen City’s MM2Rent

Aberdeen City’s pioneering MM2Rent scheme matches owners of empty properties with potential tenants who the council is working with. The scheme now forms a key part of the advice given by Housing Officers, with potential tenants signposted to the website page when discussing housing options.⁴

The scheme aligns with the following objectives in Aberdeen City’s Local Housing Strategy:

- To ensure there is an adequate supply of housing of the right size, type, and location, and
- Homelessness is prevented and alleviated

The Matchmake to Rent scheme is a holistic tool by the council to promote the use of the private rented sector, where appropriate, and reduce demand on social housing. Through the collaborative approach by all housing-related teams.

- (1) owners can access council services including information on landlord registration, council tax registration and the repairing standard
- (2) Customers can access services including but not limited to housing advice, Rent Deposit Guarantee schemes and tenancy support information.

This joined up approach contributes to shortening the homelessness journey time for Aberdeen City Council’s customers; reduces the need to provide temporary accommodation; opens up more choices for the customers and increases access to all types of properties thereby removing limitations of choice.

⁴ <https://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/services/housing/advice-and-information-empty-home-owners/matchmaker-scheme>

Long Term Empty Homes in Scotland 2021

Figures published by the Scottish Government in December showed that the number of homes empty for six months or longer had fallen by 7.5% from 47,333 in 2020 to 43,766.⁵ However, this was still 6.5% higher than the 40,963 long term empty homes in 2019.

	2021 LTE	2021 6-12m	2021 12m+
Scotland	43766	15912	27854
Aberdeen City	6006	2954	3052
Aberdeenshire	2583	676	1907
Angus	1191	240	951
Argyle and Bute	1086	417	669
City of Edinburgh	6840	4657	2183
Clackmannanshire	255	159	96
Dumfries and Galloway	1725	297	1428
Dundee	1017	548	469
East Ayrshire	614	150	464
East Dunbartonshire	197	59	138
East Lothian	419	150	269
East Renfrewshire	128	0	128
Falkirk	751	391	360
Fife	2508	506	2002
Glasgow City	2958	19	2939
Highland	2775	67	2708
Inverclyde	541	117	424
Midlothian	379	0	379
Moray	824	343	481
Na h-Eileanan Siar	596	134	462
North Ayrshire	934	458	476
North Lanarkshire	1723	691	1032
Orkney Islands	188	61	127
Perth and Kinross	1310	555	755
Renfrewshire	723	410	313
Scottish Borders	1339	481	858
Shetland	559	140	419
South Ayrshire	737	513	224
South Lanarkshire	1383	149	1234
Stirling	545	129	416
West Dunbartonshire	448	222	226
West Lothian	484	219	265

⁵ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/housing-statistics-empty-properties-and-second-homes/>

What the figures tell us

It was encouraging to see that the largest share in the fall came amongst homes that had been empty for 12 months or longer. This suggests that many of the homes that became or remained long term empty as renovation work was put on hold, rental properties stood vacant, people put off house moves and private sector landlords held back on further investment in the property market due to the pandemic, have now been returned to use.

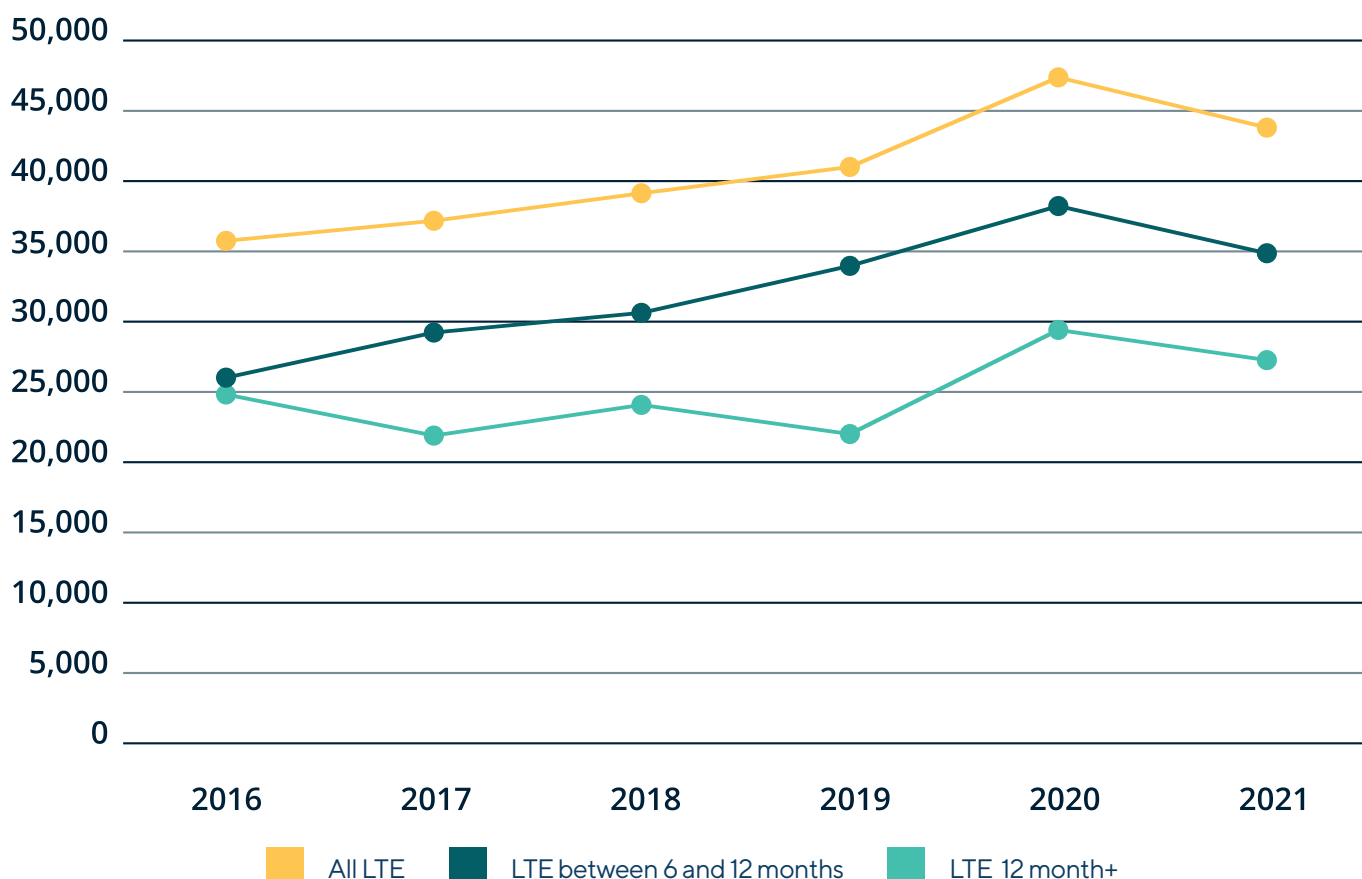
Nonetheless, many of the 27,854 homes reported as empty for over a year are likely to have been empty for considerably longer than this, and we know that the longer a home remains empty the harder it becomes to bring it back to use. The property may suffer from deterioration, making it less aesthetically appealing to potential owners. Buyers can be put off by the overgrown gardens, flaking paint on windows and cracked roof tiles that are just the early signs of a long-term empty home. After a few years, that can be accompanied by rubbish from fly tipping, moss in drainpipes, and obvious signs of neglect inside the home for anyone who peers in through the windows.

With empty homes often acting as a magnet for wider anti-social behaviour, the broken windows and door frames together with signs of vandalism or vermin inside a house empty for several years, not only make the property less appealing to look at, they also further reduce its value and add to the costs any potential owner faces before they can return it to use.

The percentage of empty homes that have been vacant for more than a year varies considerably across the country. At one extreme, less than a third of empty homes in South Ayrshire and Edinburgh have been empty for longer than twelve months. At the other extreme, 11 local authorities reported that more than 70% of their empty homes had been empty for this length of time.

Empty homes officers and others have made inroads into reducing these numbers, but the commitment and hard work of EHOs can only take us so far to deliver lasting results that enable these homes to provide some of the homes that Scotland needs now. We are continually told that their work is hampered by the limited options currently available to local authorities where owners cannot be traced or refuse to take any action to return their homes to use.

We know that any new enforcement measures that may be proposed will need to be compatible with rights to property under the European Convention on Human Rights. However, we hope that the human rights of neighbours whose day to day life may be adversely affected by very long-term empty homes, as well as those of people who currently do not have a home of their own, are given equal consideration when the sufficiency of existing legislation is next considered.



Case Study – Pauline’s Story

The impact of empty homes on communities

Below is a clip from Pauline’s story. In it she talks about the impact on her mental health of living next door to an empty property for over 2 decades. The issues ranged from water ingress to her own property, to overgrown foliage extending into her garden.

Pauline told SEHAS “I can’t take much more; Please I beg you to help me. I don’t have the means to go to lawyers and pay large legal bills.”

This property had been brought to the EHO’s attention, who had been attempting to engage with the owner. We can report that this property has now been sold at auction after 22 years of being empty, with the intention of now bringing it back into use.

While this case is extreme, it is not isolated. Last year, 27% of calls to our advice service came from anxious neighbours struggling with a property in their local community. Enforcement of disrepair or statutory nuisance provisions will only deal with the symptoms of an empty property, when neighbours are understandably seeking reassurance that action can be taken to alleviate their situation or at least stop it from getting worse.



Click here to watch the videos:

[Watch video 1](#)

[Watch video 2](#)

Case Study

An empty home that is causing distress in an area where there is no EHO

The Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service (SEHAS) was contacted by a neighbour who had moved into a first-floor flat in 2019, where the home directly below her was empty. At this stage there was no immediate visible signs or issues with the empty property. It should be noted that this flat is in a local authority area without an Empty Homes Officer.

As time passed, the flat started to cause problems for all the residents. Neighbours reported a strong smell emanating from the property; it turned out that the empty home had flooded due to a congested drain. The neighbours tried to contact the owner as they were concerned both about the impact to the empty property and to their own homes, but the owner did not respond. A complaint was made to Building Control and Environmental Health departments, and both became involved in the case, however no work had progressed to bring the property back into use.

The neighbour was grateful for our support and advice, although without an Empty Homes Officer, there is limited resource in the council, and it is likely that the property will remain empty. The neighbour has indicated that they are considering selling up and moving on.



Bringing homes back into use

This year EHOs recorded 1152 properties brought back into use. Information on how long the home was empty for was available for 69% of these properties. Almost 50% had been empty for between 2 and 5 years and a further 19% had been empty for more than 5 years (including 43 properties that had been empty for more than 10 years).

This reflects a continued shift in the age profile of empty homes brought back to use that we first noticed in our 2020 annual report. In the year prior to that, 24% of homes brought back into use had been empty for less than a year and 30% had been empty for 1 to 2 years. This year those figures have fallen to 7% and 24% respectively.

Evidence gathered from our annual survey, case studies and best practice meetings have all shown that the longer homes remain empty the harder it becomes to bring them back into use. 2 and 5 years are particular milestones after which work to bring a home back to use becomes both more complex and costly. The role EHOs must play in unlocking stuck properties and returning them to active use is clearly demonstrated by these figures. Each of the 394 homes in the 2 to 5-year category will now not reach the next milestone.

At the same time, the figures showing EHO's active caseload highlights just how many properties do reach this milestone and can also remain empty after 10 years.

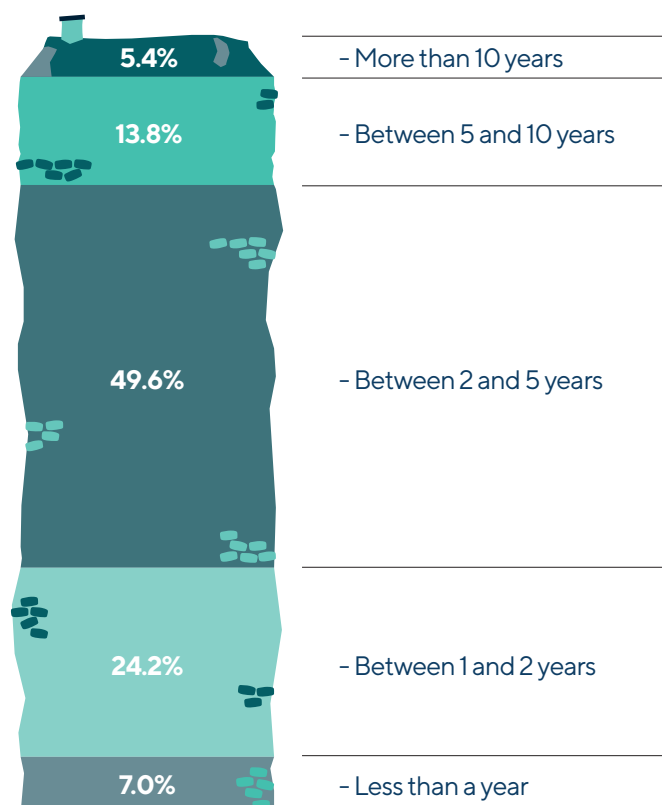
Of the 2,157 active cases EHOs have at present, information was provided on length of time empty for 85% of properties. Properties empty for 5 to 10 years and 10 years or longer combined make up just over 46% of current active caseload.

There are many obstacles to bringing these properties back to use. Amongst the most common cited are difficulties locating and engaging with owners. Linked to this, there are several cases that are stalled either because no grant of confirmation has been issued following the death of a previous owner, or notification of a grant has not been given to a local authority.

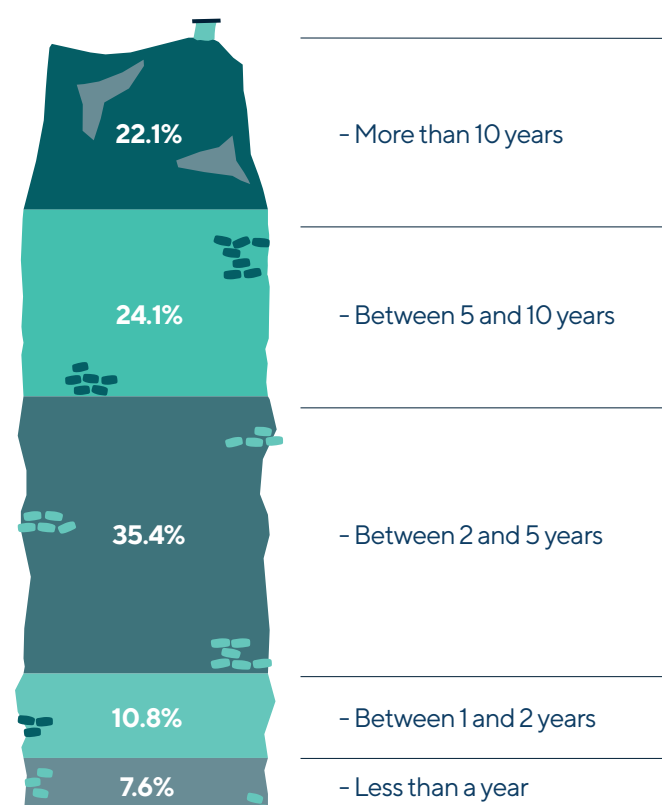
Two local authorities have provided us with data on this, which showed that both have more than 50 homes that have been empty for three years or more where no grant of confirmation has been issued following the death of the owner. Of these, 20 became empty prior to 2010 in one local authority, and 14 became empty prior to 2010 in the other. Both authorities also reported that some of these had been empty throughout this century.

While some of these can eventually be brought back to use through EHO intervention, in other cases legal obstacles may prevent the property ever being returned to use even where there appears to be no direct descendent of the deceased or anyone else with an interest in taking the property on.

Homes brought back to use



Active cases



Case Study

No Grant of Confirmation

A community member contacted the advice service about a property on their street which has been empty for over 25 years.

After the original owner died it had been occupied by one of their children until they died. The remaining sibling was elderly and in poor health, with caring responsibilities. After such a long time empty, there are now visible signs of disrepair to the property with a hole visible in the gable wall.

The property remained in the original late owner's name as neither the child who had occupied the property, or the remaining sibling, had obtained a Grant of Confirmation.

The neighbour themselves has expressed an interest in purchasing the property to be nearer to family, but no action can be taken to bring the property back into use until legal processes have concluded.

The EHO tried to make enquiries to find out what was happening with the property. They were informed that the case was in the hands of solicitors but there had been no update in some time.

It is unclear whether the original owner had made a will, and, if they had, who they had left the property to. This could add further layers of complexity to attempts to transfer ownership of the house so that it could be brought back to use.

The case highlights the difficulties of bringing such homes back to use, even where there are people interesting in purchasing the property.

What happens to homes brought back into use

EHOs provided us with information on the outcomes of the cases that they had concluded during the year. EHOs reported 1,039 outcomes (please note, this may include some cases where more than one outcome was recorded).

These provide a snapshot of how properties have been utilised when back in use.

Outcome	Number of homes	% of total
Sold via an estate agent	285	27.4
Sold at auction	11	1.1
Purchased by the council (including buybacks)	116	11.2
Let privately	304	29.3
Let at affordable rent	56	5.4
Let through a private sector leasing scheme	2	0.2
Let through a Housing Association management scheme	27	2.6
Owner occupied	237	22.8
Closure order/Demolition	1	0.1



Meeting our strategic objectives - 1

Dedicated EHO or service in every council

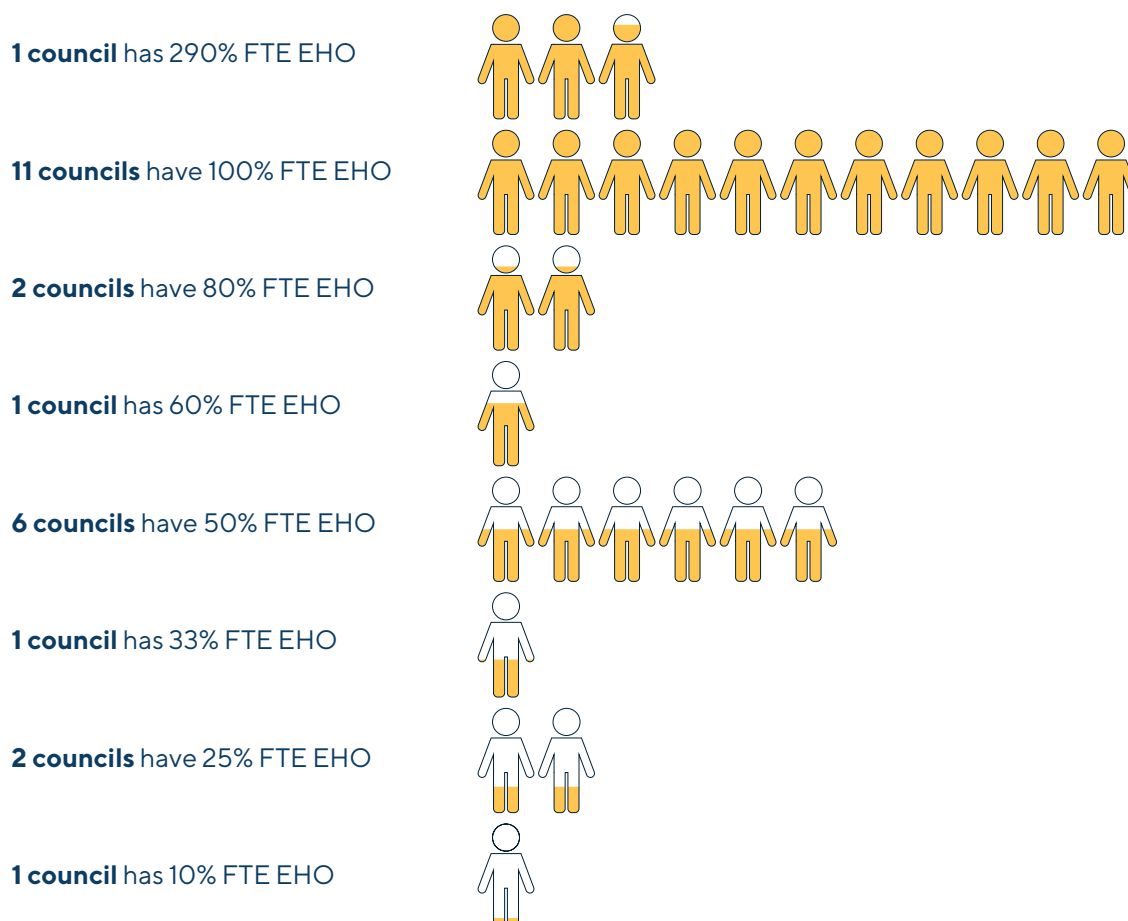
A critical lesson learned since the inception of the Partnership is that having a local dedicated officer is central to tackling empty homes effectively. This is due to the officer being able to focus on the role proactively which is necessary to homes being brought back into use. Over the years, we have seen a direct correlation between the increase in the number of empty homes being brought back into use and the employment of a dedicated empty homes officer in a local authority.

There have been instances where there is a successful empty service across a team of people with shared responsibilities, however, with competing priorities empty homes work can sometimes be downgraded or deprioritised. Several local authorities told us that empty homes work has been deprioritised or stalled since the pandemic.

This year in our annual survey we asked the question –

“Please tell us what % FTE (full time equivalent) is dedicated to empty homes work in your council?”

These are the responses received –



95% of the homes reported back into use this year have been in areas where there is at least 50% FTE EHO.

Many EHOs report that the pandemic has impacted numbers being brought back into use, where owners advise that empty homes work has stalled due to a rise in the cost of materials, shortages in supplies and the lack of availability of local tradespeople. This may impact the numbers of homes being brought back into use in the following year.⁶

⁶ <https://www.rics.org/uk/news-insight/latest-news/news-opinion/construction-materials-cost-increases-reach-40-year-high/>

The difference EHOs can make

Karis (shown below) and her partner David got in touch with the local empty homes officer in the Western Isles after receiving a flyer about the service with their council tax bill. The property they have purchased has been vacant for over 70 years and will need significant effort to bring it back into use. The empty homes officer arranged a property visit and since then has been able to provide advice on VAT, additional discounts that have been secured from local companies, and information to progress a property survey.



Karis said –

“Undertaking a large scale renovation of an old croft house is daunting, and having a locally based Empty Homes Officer to offer guidance in those initial stages was crucial. Murdo helped steer us in the right direction to get the project off the ground and offered support in favour of renovating over a new build which will, once completed, mean a traditional property is brought back in to use...breathing life back into its walls once more!”

This is a quote from an owner who purchased an empty property in Argyll and Bute with the support of the EHO. This highlights the importance of support from an empty homes officer and the impact of empty homes work to a community.

“In rural communities every house is an asset and should be lived in. I have been fortunate to renovate an empty property into my full-time home in Cullipool on the Isle of Luing. Like many rural areas, Luing faces an aging population and a big reason for this is a lack of appropriate housing for younger people and families. The process to bring an old house back to a habitable state was fairly daunting. I faced many obstacles and challenges throughout the process including finding a builder willing to take on the work. The house being situated in a Conservation Area added to the complexity of the project. The property required a total rebuild including a new roof. I did all the preparation work myself, stripping the house back and removing the old roof leaving only the 4 original walls. This helped to keep costs down before builders and joiners came to start the main renovation work. By renovating this house, I have managed to live in the community where I grew up; something which would have been very challenging if I didn’t renovate the property. Not only that but I have achieved a far bigger, better-quality home than I would have been able to afford on the local market. Although a lot more work, it is a very satisfying process to take an empty property and make it into a full-time home once again.”



SEHP seed funding

Since 2012, the SEHP has instigated and run several Kickstarter and Shared Service projects across Scotland.



This involves the SEHP supporting a council, and in the case of a shared service, a partner, to submit a proposal to attract seed fund money.



This part funded grant can then be used to set up an empty homes service with a dedicated officer.



The overall aim of the project is to provide local evidence of the need for an empty homes service over a two-year funding period.



The desired outcome is that after the pilot period, the council will continue with the post and self-fund.

During the period of this report, the SEHP part funded Kickstarter projects across 3 local authorities. The funding comes with consultancy support from the empty homes team as well as an advisory steer. Any council that does not have an EHO can be provided with tailored empty homes information that can help to make the case for a service.

South Lanarkshire Council

The empty homes officer started in August 2020 and put in place much of the foundations of the empty homes service. However, there was a minor setback when this officer left, and a replacement was recruited in July 2021. The new officer is struggling to get ongoing engagement with owners of empty homes, especially as there is no current ability to grant discretion with the vacant dwelling council tax, which is shown in other authorities as an incentive for contact. However, it should be noted that the officer has so far been successful in supporting 11 homes to be brought back into use.

Scottish Borders Council

The empty homes officer started in early August 2021 and since then has made considerable impact. The officer started with reviewing the empty homes data available and has established 3 postcodes where there are concentrations of empty homes. This has helped to inform the council's wider strategic plans. In December 2021, a report was put to council committee asking for approval to allocate £500k from the second homes council tax affordable housing investment budget to provide grant assistance to owners of empty properties to help bring them back into use as housing. This has been approved and the EHO is working on some of the outline terms and conditions.

Since coming into post, the EHO has sent out 753 letters to owners of empty properties, and an update has been received that 204 of these homes are no longer recorded as empty.

Of these the three main reasons for occupation are:

- 26% have been rented
- 19% owners have moved into following renovations and
- 20% have been sold with new owners occupying the homes
- 14% are now either on exemption, been revalued or now a second home and
- 21% other.

Highland Council

The Highland Council EHO started in post at the end of August 2021. Since then, various activities have been carried out to develop the project. This has included setting up digital infrastructure, the development of a database and correspondence for owners of empty properties. The officer is currently writing the criteria for the empty property purchase scheme and compiling details for the development of an empty homes loan and grant scheme. The EHO is in discussion with colleagues in other services about the setting up of an empty homes working group to share initial information. Information sharing between services has been positive, and the EHO is looking to standardise this sharing of information through a form similar to a model employed by colleagues in Aberdeen. Initial discussions regarding a quarterly working group have been encouraging, with Environmental Health and Building Standards committing to being part of the group. While there have been no completed outcomes recorded as of yet, there are many interesting case studies that are progressing.



Meeting our strategic objectives - 2

Encouraging councils to mainstream empty homes work

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, in partnership with COSLA and ALACHO, launched our Why Empty Homes Matter information pack at our 2022 annual conference. The pack makes the case for mainstreaming empty homes work by showing how bringing empty homes back to use can contribute to delivering Housing to 2040's four-part plan of: More homes at the heart of great places; Affordability and choice; Affordable warmth and zero emissions homes, and; Improving the quality of all homes. Bringing empty homes back into use can help 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, helping to once more make them great places that people are proud to call home.

By bringing empty homes back to use, alongside delivering on the government's ambitious 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.

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

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 them 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.

To realise the potential of empty homes, we believe that empty homes should be an active component of housing strategies, and all local authorities should have a standalone Empty Homes Strategy in much the same way as they have a Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP) to demonstrate how they will use empty homes to address housing needs and other issues.

In our annual survey, 8 respondents reported that their local authority had an empty homes strategy, but only 3 of these reported that they are currently easily accessible on the local authority website.

We hope that Why Empty Homes Matter will be a useful resource for everyone involved in housing strategy and will lead to more active empty homes strategies across the country.

The next pages of this report looks at examples of how empty homes work has been mainstreamed by local authorities and the contribution this is making to delivering their housing priorities.

Read the full report at –

Why Empty Homes Matter Full Report



Click here to watch the video:

[Watch the video](#)

Case Study

Encouraging councils to mainstream empty homes work

Cllr Mark Rowley, Scottish Borders Council, Executive Member for Economic Regeneration and Finance talks about the importance of empty homes work in the round.⁷

Scottish Borders Council recently hired its first dedicated Empty Homes Officer to help deliver long-term empty properties back into use. In just a few short months, the new officer has reached out to and supported multiple owners of empty properties. She has also developed our new matchmaker service to connect owners of empty homes with investors, and is utilising data and information on empty homes to strategically tackle empty homes. Importantly, the officer also co-ordinates a cross-council working group on empty homes, as multiple issue areas are affected.

For example, addressing empty homes and wider condition and repair issues forms part of a staged approach to reach near zero carbon. Scottish Borders Council is committed to reducing fuel poverty and reducing greenhouse gas emissions through promoting energy efficiency improvements in the housing stock. When empty homes are being brought back in to use, we will be championing energy efficiency upgrades and the installation of renewable options where practical and feasible.

Addressing empty homes also contributes to the strategic objectives highlighted in number of key local housing plans. Housing has a fundamental impact on the lives of people across the Scottish Borders and good quality housing makes an important contribution to many aspects of our region including supporting local economies, improving individuals' health and well-being, and making communities safer.

We also recognise that reducing the number of empty properties can help improve the sustainability of our region, and the re-provisioning or re-purposing of existing buildings in town centres can help better meet the needs of the current and future population. Bringing empty properties back in to use aligns with the objectives of the Borderlands Growth Deal to stimulate the repurposing of towns and centres across the area and to attract and retain the working age population in the South of Scotland. This means more homes of all types, as more people recognise that the Borders is a great place to work from.

Triggering action on with empty homes will also help the Council to support the local construction sectors, create jobs and support supply chains while also significantly improving the quality of homes available across the region. We hope by stimulating action on empty homes we can further enable the region to attract inward investment, bolstering the areas economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, the impacts of which have been felt throughout the Borders.

In terms of next steps, we have recognised the need to explore the creation of a specific fund to assist owners of empty properties to bring these properties back in to use, as the most common hurdle for empty home-owners is the financial cost of bringing the property back into use. We are also aiming to pilot an empty homes grant, which would prioritise bringing properties back into use that would contribute the supply of affordable housing.

Housing is not just a matter of bricks and mortar. Our homes are an integral part of the Borders' physical, economic and social character, and we are committed to tackling the issue of empty homes head on for the benefit of our local economy, strengthening our communities and reducing our environmental footprint.



⁷ <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/tackling-issue-of-empty-homes-in-the-borders-will-strengthen-communities-mark-rowley-3483723>

Why homes become and remain empty

As part of our annual survey, we gather information from EHOs on why homes became empty and why they remain empty. EHOs provide this in relation to their active caseload where known.

2021/22 saw a change in the breakdown of reasons for homes becoming empty, as death of the previous owner ceased to be the most common reason mentioned in our survey.

In 2020/21 this was cited in almost 30% of cases, with three further reasons (property brought with intention of renovating/owner moved to alternative accommodation prior to selling/rental property tenancy ended) accounting for between 18% and 20% each.

In 2021/22, the reasons were more evenly split:

- Owner moved to alternative accommodation without/prior to selling: 24.89%
- Rental property tenancy ended: 23.13%
- Death of the previous owner: 22.98%
- Property brought with intention of renovating: 17.40%

This may to some extent be linked to the pandemic, with the increase in people moving without selling, or rental tenancies ending being a result of the lifting of restrictions on moves that affected many people during 2020/21. The fall in people buying properties to renovate may also reflect people being reluctant to take on renovation projects with the rising cost of materials.

Why homes become empty	Number of homes	% of total
Owner moved to alternative accommodation without/prior to selling	339	24.9
Rental property tenancy ended	315	23.1
Death of the previous owner	313	23
Property brought with intention of renovating	237	17.4
Owner moved into hospital or care home	80	5.9
Former second Home	47	3.5
Property repossessed	31	2.3

The two main reasons for homes remaining empty were difficulty locating or engaging with owners (25.85%) and repairs ongoing (19.79%).

In 2020/21 difficulty locating or engaging owners was cited in almost 21% of cases, while difficulty establishing ownership was cited in a further 10.61% of cases. The latter category accounted for only 2.84% of cases this year. This may reflect the increased use of genealogy services to establish next of kin in cases where owners are deceased. However, the rise in cases where owners cannot be located or will not engage indicates that knowing who should own the property will not in itself bring the property back to use.

Added to this, the proportion of homes remaining empty where a property has been inherited but no action has been taken by the owner or where a grant of confirmation is yet to be issued, together account for more than 13% of active cases. The extent to which owners or next of kin are interested in taking active steps to return the property to use is unknown.

Some owners of inherited properties may want to return the property to use but be unaware of options for doing this or unable to afford repairs and renovations needed. Others may have no interest and simply see the property as an inconvenience that they are happy to ignore and see as someone else's problem.

While the percentage of cases with repairs ongoing increased from 16.12% last year, cases where repairs had stalled due to financial reasons fell to 6.12% this year (from 16.12% in 2020/21). This is encouraging to see and perhaps indicates how exercising discretion on applying the council tax levy, where home owners are working to bring a property back to use, can help owners by freeing up money to complete repairs.

Why homes remain empty	Number of homes	% of total
Difficulty locating/engaging with owner	418	25.9
Repairs ongoing	320	19.8
Owners unsure of end use, needs advise	207	12.8
Unwilling to sell or rent	167	10.3
Property inherited – no action taken by no answers	131	8.1
Repairs stalled due to financial reasons	99	6.1
Awaiting grant of confirmation	81	5
Other motivation issues	80	5
Unsuccessful marketing (sale or rent)	72	4.5
Legal dispute	70	4.3
Waiting for right time to sell	57	3.5
Difficulty establishing ownership	46	2.8

Options available to officers

Empty homes officers have a limited range of options available to encourage a home to be brought back into use.

As part of our annual survey we asked –

“In your experience, how commonly used are following key actions in assisting owners to bring properties back into use?”

Empty Homes Officers were asked to grade each option on a scale of one to seven; with one being not used at all, and seven being most frequently used.

Options and responses are shown below:

Options available to Empty Homes Officers to encourage a home to be brought back into use	How often Empty Homes Officer's used these options (averages)
Providing advice and information to the owner	6.5
Access to VAT discounts, merchants & services discounts, other discounts	5.3
Council tax discretions (including providing support to obtain discretion)	4.5
Linked to Council Schemes (Buy back, PSL, Rent Deposit Guarantee Scheme)	3.6
Enforcement (eg environmental health, statutory nuisance, building standards regulations)	2.9
Worked/partnered with RSL, Third Sector or community group	2.7
Linking to matchmaker scheme	2.5
Worked/partnered with the private or commercial sector	2.4
Providing grant funding	2.4
Providing loan funding	1.7

We then asked –

“Of those options that you listed as most frequently used, how useful did you find these in bringing properties back in use?”

Below are some of the varied comments, overall though, it is confirmed that officers say that providing advice and information is the best way to encourage owners to do something about their empty property.

“Quite useful particularly the info & advice. Just chatting to owners of empty homes can be enough to allow them to recognise there are options available and assistance & support.”

“My background in Landlord Registration has been useful to provide information to those who are interested in letting.”

“VAT & discounts / council tax discretion help but only really help the owners that are going to bring them back into use anyway – maybe just helps to bring them back quicker. The stuck properties need better tools/options.”

“The majority of conversations with owners of empty homes are around the cost. So, it is extremely useful to be able to either provide support in taking some of the financial burden away with discretion. Grant Funding has also created a mode to start conversations for more reluctant empty home owners.”

We asked -

“Does your council have an empty homes acquisition or buy-back scheme?”

In areas where there are buy back schemes, EHOs tell us that this a useful way of increasing affordable housing supply and unlocking empty homes.

YES

13 councils

NO

9 councils

Case Study - Angus Council

Acquisition/buy back

This 1-bedroom Milton Park property in Monifieth, Angus was empty for 13 months, and identified as potentially suitable to be purchased via Angus Council's 'Open Market Acquisition Scheme'⁸. The local housing area office and housing technical teams were in agreement that this property was suited to be included in council housing stock and a viewing arranged. This decision was based on the fact that 60% of housing demand in Monifieth is for a 1 bedroom property, and given the adaptations made internally, this property will assist in housing a household with limited mobility.

This scored well on the council's priority matrix with:

- additional points for it being empty over a year,
- an ex local authority property,
- a house/bungalow and
- the capacity for it to be adapted for accessibility purposes

On completing this assessment, a request was made to management to make an offer on the property, which the owner accepted. The 'Open Market Acquisition Scheme' serves to supplement the new build programme within the council's strategic housing investment plan and increasing the re-use of empty homes is now an active consideration around what properties are given priority for purchase through this scheme.

This case aligned with other objectives such as increasing supply of 1 bed's and increasing supply of properties suitable for households with limited mobility. Near the end of each financial year, a grant claim is submitted for all properties that purchased through the 'Open Market Acquisition' and 'Buyback schemes', so Milton Park has been funded by Angus Council and the Scottish Government.

“These schemes are a cost-effective way of supplementing our new build programme and require partnership working both with Scottish Government and our own internal departments including Housing Strategy, Housing Technical, Local Housing Office, Legal Services, and the Finance Department, who all play a role to bring these properties back into use.”

We asked -

“Does your council have a policy to use discretion when applying the council tax levy to long term empty properties?”

YES

17 councils

NO

6 councils

One empty homes officer commented on the lack of discretion available in the council -

“It impacts on the offers of assistance I can provide and if available it could encourage the owner to bring the property back into use, especially if discretion were applied and renovation monitored”

⁸ [https://www.angus.gov.uk/housing/private_housing/support_for_home_owners/open_market_acquisition_scheme_and_buy_back_initiative#:~:text=Open%20Market%20Acquisition%20Scheme%20\(OMA,of%20location%2C%20size%20and%20type.](https://www.angus.gov.uk/housing/private_housing/support_for_home_owners/open_market_acquisition_scheme_and_buy_back_initiative#:~:text=Open%20Market%20Acquisition%20Scheme%20(OMA,of%20location%2C%20size%20and%20type.)

Case Study - Advice Service & Highland Council

Discretion on the council tax levy

Our Advice Service was contacted by an owner who was in the middle of renovating a property which her partner had inherited from his late aunt. The property was a former croft in the Highlands and the couple planned to relocate and make it their permanent home once work was complete. Unfortunately, they uncovered unexpected issues when they first started renovations which extended their budget. They then had to continue on a piecemeal basis, so the project was taking much longer than expected and they were struggling financially. The Council Tax levy had also been applied.

They originally had assistance from their MSP in requesting discretion on the levy. Although some progress had been made, there were further delays due to covid, difficulties with contractors and other personal circumstances. With the house remaining empty the levy was re-applied for 2021/22. The owners were unsure if they would be granted further discretion but the advice service assisted with a template letter referencing Scottish Government guidance, highlighting progress made and further difficulties out with their control. In February 2022 their review was successful, and they received a refund of over £2000 of Council Tax.

This came at a crucial time when they were trying to get the property to a condition where they could move in. Using discretion in cases like this helps ensure the levy doesn't become a barrier to bringing homes back into use.

We then asked -

“Has your council used Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) in the last year to bring empty homes back into use?”



Case Study

The benefits of CPO and what more is needed

Duncan Thomson Group Manager – Private Sector Neighbourhoods, Regeneration & Sustainability at Glasgow City Council talks about the benefits of CPO and what more is needed.

At Glasgow City Council we have been at the forefront of using compulsory purchase orders (CPOs) to tackle the problems of long-term vacant properties, increasing affordable housing supply and ensuring the upkeep of pre-1919 tenements.

CPOs are a way of responding to the blight caused by derelict/abandoned flats/houses that have been left vacant for a variety of reasons or properties which have previously been let out but are below tolerable standard (BTS).

The promotion of CPOs send a message that this Council will take action where private landlords or other individuals fail to address problems with their properties. While they are used as a “last resort”, 52 homes across Glasgow have been pursued for compulsory purchases since 2019. While almost three quarters of these have been progressed or confirmed (i.e a compulsory purchase order has been made and approved by the Scottish Government) in other cases the home has been returned to use without the need to progress to a CPO. 13 owners have opted to sell voluntarily to housing associations and a further 2 properties have either been sold or occupied by family members meaning that the planned CPOs were discontinued.

In all cases to date where CPOs have been confirmed, once the council has vested in the property, it has entered into a ‘back to back’ agreement with a local housing association which carries out necessary repair work to bring it up to standard and back into use to provide affordable housing for those who need it.

Some of the properties targeted have been lying empty for more than 14 years while other properties have been designated as being BTS for more than 5 years. All empty properties create environmental blight and the community benefit derived from bringing these and other homes back into use is significant particularly for those tenants and owners who live in close proximity, some of whom or their properties have suffered as a direct consequence of these abandoned neighbouring properties which have continued to deteriorate while they remain empty.

But there is a limit on how much we can achieve through CPOs alone. The steps in making and obtaining CPOs are complex, time consuming, costly and also resource intensive. They are also dependant on knowing that we have a partnering housing association willing to take on the property after we purchase it. Without this, there is the risk that we are paying out money to acquire assets



that will cost further sums to repair and may still be left on the council’s balance sheets. Even with back to back purchases, like the ones we have used, the cost and resources of seeing a case through to confirmation limits the number of CPOs we can promote.

A Compulsory Sales Order (CSO) provision, as proposed by the Scottish Land Commission in 2018, would help to increase the number of homes that could be returned to use through compulsory processes. As well as removing the need for the council to purchase the property and identify a follow-on buyer before doing so, it would also open up the sale of neglected and abandoned properties to the wider market, clearing the way for buildings to be redeveloped and returned to active use.

With the right safeguards in place CSOs and compulsory rental order (CRO) powers, modelled on provisions that have been trialled elsewhere in Europe, could both be additional enforcement tools that local authorities across the country could use to increase housing stock. We know that many homes are empty not because of any deliberate intention on the part of the owner, but rather because of individual circumstances, however, that is not always the case.

As with CPOs, CSOs and CROs would not necessarily compel an owner to give up their property as the owner would always have the option to bring the property up to standard and to sell or let it themselves. However, where owners are unwilling or unable to take action to repair and maintain their property or simply do not understand that responsibilities come hand in hand with the right to own property, then such issues require to be addressed as their lack of action can negatively impact the lives of neighbours and their homes and also wider communities. Local authorities need more powers which CSOs in particular will provide to help tackle the problem of long term empty homes.

The CPO procedure outlined

1. Council's resolution to make the CPO

This involves a decision by one of Council's Committees competent to deal with the proposed project. All committee documents are in the public domain and are available Online.

2. The making of the CPO by the Council

This procedure involves the drafting of the Compulsory Purchase Order and other statutory documents.

3. Notice of making of the CPO by the Council

This is done by observing statutory procedures.

4. 21 days for objections to the CPO

The Notice of making the Order gives interested parties at least 21 days for objections from the date of the first publication in the newspapers. Any objection must be done in writing directly to the Scottish Government.

5. Submission of CPO by the Council to the Scottish Minister for confirmation

6. Confirmation of the Order by the Scottish Government

The final step of the CPO procedure is confirmation of the order by the Scottish Ministers.

7. Notice of Confirmation of the CPO

CPOs in Glasgow

There have been 52 promoted orders to date. The Greater Pollok and Southside Central wards have been the main focus. CPOs have been promoted 14 times in Greater Pollok and on 12 occasions in Southside Central over the last three years.

The full breakdown of CPOs by council ward is:

- **Greater Pollok – 14**
- **Southside Central – 12**
- **Hillhead – 8**
- **Govan – 7**
- **North East – 6**
- **Cardonald – 1**
- **Pollokshields – 1**
- **Langside – 1**
- **Victoria Park – 1**
- **Baillieston – 1**



Click here to watch the video:

[Watch the video](#)



Meeting our strategic objectives – 3

Encourage registered social landlords, community groups and other private bodies to engage in empty homes work

We recognise that there are a range of organisations that may not have considered empty homes as part of the solution to meet their housing needs. We would like to encourage them to make best use of existing stock, as they may be in a place to attract grant and loan funding not available to councils. To do this we hope to trial strategic & innovative projects to demonstrate the benefits of empty homes work, how this work can be carried out, what are the barriers to success and any lessons that can be shared. We believe that these projects can help to reduce overall housing need and help to provide more affordable homes.

Our first strategic partnership was formed with Homes for Good (HfG) a social enterprise letting agency. We successfully recruited an Empty Homes Manager in August 2020, with the aim of bringing empty homes back into use. It is anticipated that these will either be purchased outright by HfG, or leased by HfG or purchased and flipped.

Situation 1

HfG purchase property outright, refurbish property to quality standards and then offer for rental as part of HfG portfolio to anyone on a low income.



Situation 2

HfG lease the property below market levels from an owner, refurbish the property to a quality standard, and provide for affordable rental as part of HfG portfolio for at least 5 years



Situation 3

HfG purchase the property, refurbish it and then sell on the open market. This would be for a limited number of properties and would be for properties that don't fit in with HfG rental model. However, 100% of the profits generated would go back into HfG empty homes scheme, thus providing a recycling of funds



The project is in its infancy but has come up against initial barriers due to local authority data sharing protocols. From this, we have learned the importance of engaging with councils at a much earlier stage of any project agreement. However, significant inroads are now being made, with Glasgow City Council in particular, and the Empty Homes Manager is working with 42 owners of empty properties.

Case Study – Homes For Good

Using empty homes work to make a difference to communities

This flat had been empty for 6 months after the previous tenant moved out. It fell into disrepair after the owner moved away from the area and struggled to finance repairs. The Empty Homes Manager at Homes for Good visited the property and spent time with the owner to explore their options. They couldn't afford repairs to bring it up to lettable standard and, after assessment, it wasn't a candidate for Homes For Good's rent ready scheme.

The owner had found the process of dealing with their empty property very difficult and the Empty Homes Manager's sensitive approach helped them consider other options. They thought sale on the open market wasn't an option due to outstanding mortgage and debt. After talking things through the owner requested a final settlement figure from their lender and this allowed an informed decision to be made. The owner then opted to proceed with sale on the open market and the Empty Homes Manager was able to provide a list of local estate agents and assist with a warm handover to their chosen agent.

The property required extensive renovation to bring it up to standard but it was sold on the open market and it is hoped the new owner will be in a position to bring it back into use.

The owner was extremely thankful for the support she received from Homes for Good's Empty Homes Manager.

"Thank you so much for your advice, your time and for just listening and offering to help. It's greatly appreciated"

"You've restored my faith that there are good honest people out there"

– Owner of former empty home



Case Study – LAR Housing Trust

From a colourful past to a bright future with LAR Housing Trust

Using empty buildings for affordable housing

Scottish based charity, Lar Housing Trust, is currently converting a semi derelict and disused church into high quality mid-market rental homes. While this did not start off as an empty house, this building will be transformed into quality, affordable homes showing what is possible.

Designed by renowned Scottish architect John More Peddie in the late 19th century, St Kentigern's Church in the Polwarth area of Edinburgh has been lying empty for several years. The church and grounds have been a high profile, canal-side eyesore for some time and achieved some notoriety as the subject of a police raid several years ago, which unearthed a cannabis farm at the site.

Lar decided that this derelict building with a colourful past, deserved to also enjoy a bright future. Their plans will have been warmly welcomed by the local community.

The superb external façade of the building is being retained and construction is underway to convert the church itself into four much needed three and four bedroom homes. Sitting alongside the conversion will be a new block of flats consisting of four one-bed, four two-bed and two-three bed homes. This marriage of old and new will breathe new life into the area and make better use of a building that has also served as a garage and warehouse before falling into disrepair.

This is just one of a number of projects completed or underway by Lar, with the organisation having already taken on complex conversions of empty homes, offices and commercial premises across Scotland.

Whilst many organisations avoid empty properties, largely due to the financial and design risks involved, these are projects that Lar actively seeks out. Building a new home that people are proud to live in is always a joy, but to take something that is derelict, abandoned, dangerous and unloved and turning it into a fabulous affordable new home brings twice the pleasure. Lar's aim with projects that repurpose buildings is also driven by a sustainability agenda aiming to keep as much of the original structure on site as possible, so that the carbon capture within those buildings is retained. With the character of the building remaining and fitting seamlessly into its immediate surroundings, the new homes already have their roots within the community and make for a much more sympathetic build.

Lar has already completed projects to convert an empty office block in Edinburgh's west end into 47 flats and a derelict block of flats in Edinburgh into six specialist homes for people with learning disabilities and autism. The organisation's pipeline also includes conversion plans for two commercial premises in Glasgow and a former naval barracks in Port Edgar, with others still to come.



Click here to watch the video:

[Watch the video](#)



Meeting our strategic objectives – 4

Supporting the Network of Empty Homes Officers

The SEHP supports the national network of EHOs. This includes providing comprehensive training and introduction to empty homes work for newly recruited officers, advice on complex and difficult cases, ongoing consultancy and advice for the officer network, as well as supporting the case for empty homes work in authorities which are not yet part of the network. To achieve these aims, we organise regular best practice groups, provide topical workshops, deliver face-to-face training, provide guides and tools, and host an annual conference.

For this section of the report, we received 23 responses. What has been reflected from these returns is that all of the network value the opportunity to meet and learn from each other.

We asked officers –

Rate the usefulness of Best Practice meetings.

21 officers

Useful or very useful

1 officer

Somewhat useful

1 officer

Not useful or not very useful

After the initial lockdown in 2020, meetings have been held digitally using MS Teams. To make these meetings as useful as possible, we sought opinions from officers' mid-year, on what actions we can take in the future. There seems to be a split in opinion, with some calling for smaller regional in person meetings and others preferring digital attendance. Some of the comments are captured below:

"Hosting them online means everyone can attend one meeting and no travel issues – better for work and environment"

"I've answered 'where possible in person' for the first one but I think it would be good to be a mix of online and in person throughout the year"

This is reflected in the conference feedback as well, where there was a balanced split between wanting to participate in person and online due to the ongoing pandemic, which is why we made the decision early on to host our conference in a hybrid format. There were 90 delegates in total.

Conference feedback

After the conference, a survey was prepared on Survey Monkey and distributed to all delegates in person at the event and via email for digital participants. There were 28 responses. Delegates rated the conference highly across almost all areas:

Network with peers



Share knowledge and best practise



Celebrate success in your area of work through an awards ceremony



Opportunities to hear about new ideas and inspiring ways of working



Ability to connect with suppliers of relevant products and services



The average across all ratings was 8.2/10, up from 7.2/10 in 2021.

Some of the comments from the day include –

“This event gave me a great insight into how an empty home affects the community and what help is available to the owner and empty homes officer”

“I have recently been asked to come up with a new empty homes plan, and feel this conference gave me quite a few ideas on how to link empty homes work up to wider issues surrounding housing and sustainability”

We asked officers to rate our digital workshops

17 officers

Useful or very useful

3 officers

Somewhat useful

3 officers

Not useful or not very useful

We asked officers to rate the usefulness of 121 advice from the SEHP

14 officers

Useful or very useful

6 officers

Somewhat useful

3 officers

Not useful or not very useful

We asked officers to rate the usefulness of guides and tools that we provide

12 officers

Useful or very useful

5 officers

Somewhat useful

6 officers

Not useful or not very useful

We asked officers to rate the usefulness of our online learning package

12 officers

Useful or very useful

9 officers

Somewhat useful

2 officers

Not useful or not very useful

What we have learned from this data, is that officers with less than 5 years' experience in the role, in the main, find all of our support very useful. More experienced officers find the opportunity to learn from other officers at best practice meetings and conference useful. It is our aim to establish if any more can be done to support all EHOs.

"I found the support of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership invaluable as I began my role as an empty homes officer. The one to one training provided by the Partnership quickly brought me up to speed on the basics of the role, while the regular network meetings they run allowed me to learn from and connect with experienced empty homes officers across Scotland."

- A new EHO



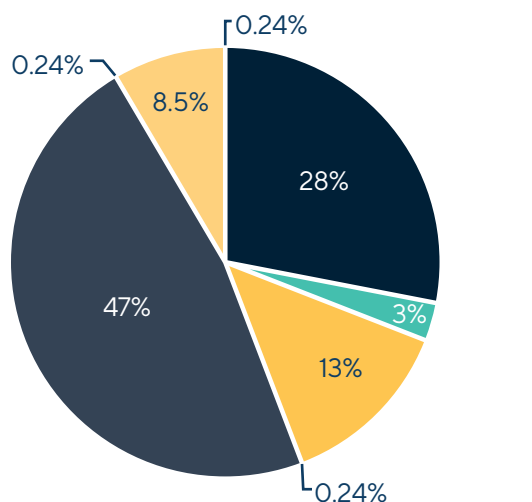
Meeting our strategic objectives - 5

Run the Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service

What is the aim of the service

The Advice Service is there for anyone to call about or report a home that is lying empty. Our aim for 2021/22 was not just to focus on the volume of enquiries to the Advice Service but to concentrate our efforts on encouraging more owners to get in touch. This is because we can have maximum impact on our efforts when we can directly support owners to bring a home back into use.

This year we saw 426 total contacts to the Advice Service with 13% of the contacts from owners of an empty home.

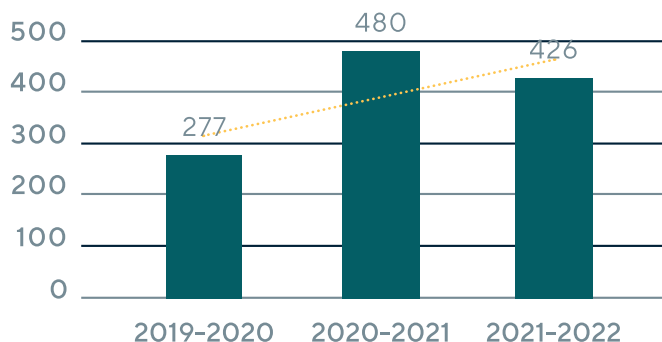


We know that the key to bringing properties back into use is engagement and cooperation from owners and so they remain our key target.

2021/22 saw staff changes meaning from May to August (quarter of the reporting period) there was only one member of staff to respond to enquiries and less resource for service promotion. This explains the slight decrease in total contacts this year (426-480).

The 3 year comparison shows a more positive trajectory.

Total contacts to the Advice Service



Using Service Design Principles to improve the Advice Service

We used the Service Design process to improve the experience of contacts to the Advice Service and we had 3 key objectives:

- To establish where there are opportunities for the service to have maximum impact
- Understand what motivates contact and whether the service meets the users' expectations.
- To identify themes and trends that may influence longer term policy asks

We started our research with ideation sessions which very quickly highlighted that to have maximum impact we should try to engage more with owners of empty properties.

Following on from our user research last year we identified 2 clear themes as below:

- owners are unclear what to expect when they contact us and
- if they did find our webpages, the information is limited.

However, feedback was not all negative, because once through to our advisers, we asked the question "Is there anything we could have done better?" and 75% responded there was nothing the service could have done better.

This work culminated in working with search engine optimisation specialists to identify top key words to include in our content and adding more information on topics of particular concern to owners.

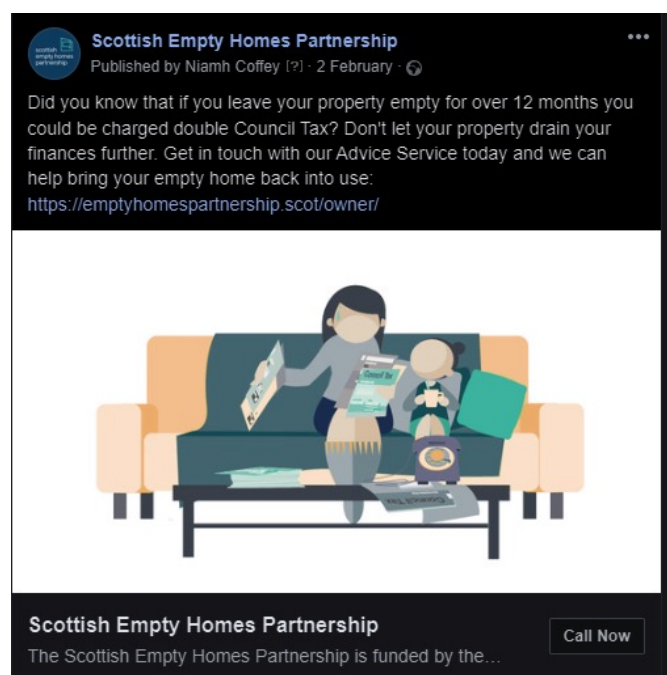
Click here to watch the videos:

[Watch video 1](#)

[Watch video 2](#)

Raising the profile of the Advice Service using social media

We are using test and learn approaches to improve reach to owners of empty homes. After consideration of the data we currently hold, Facebook has been deemed the most relevant social media platform. Using the information from our previous service design research, we have updated our messaging to focus on key concerns for an owner of an empty property. Some examples of posts below.



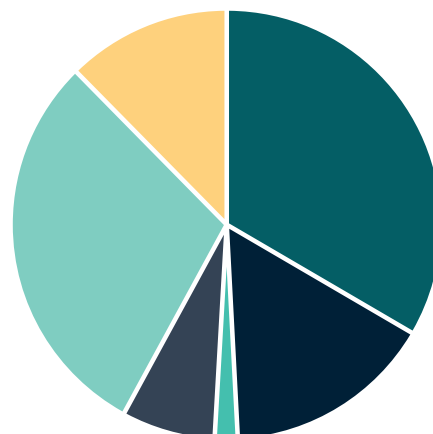
Cost of empty calculator

One of the key messages to attract owners has been around empty homes being a financial drain and this has helped promote use of the 'cost of empty calculator'. From June 2021 to March 2023 the calculator has been filled in by 13 owners.

Key issues for owners who contact us

Funding remains the issue most commonly cited as a reason for contacting the advice service, followed by difficulty selling/letting.

Major damage and owner passing away were the 2 top reasons for homes becoming empty when we are contacted for advice. With financial issues and ongoing repairs listed most often as barriers to bringing properties back into use.



Funding issue

Difficulty selling/letting

Complaint - Neighbouring

Complaint - Non-neighbouring

Seeking to buy

Council tax advice

Other

Unknown/blank

Social media remains the third most common route for people to get in touch the Advice Service.

⁹ <https://emptyhomespartnership.scot/calculator-cost-of-an-empty-home/>

Outcomes for owners who contacted us

For those cases where the outcome is known, a positive outcome (ranging from advice and information provided, Council Tax discretion discount achieved, referred on for further support from EHO, property back into use or let out or sold) was achieved in 70% of cases.

Whilst owners may feel stuck in a difficult situation with limited options this goes to show that owners benefit from the contact they have with us.

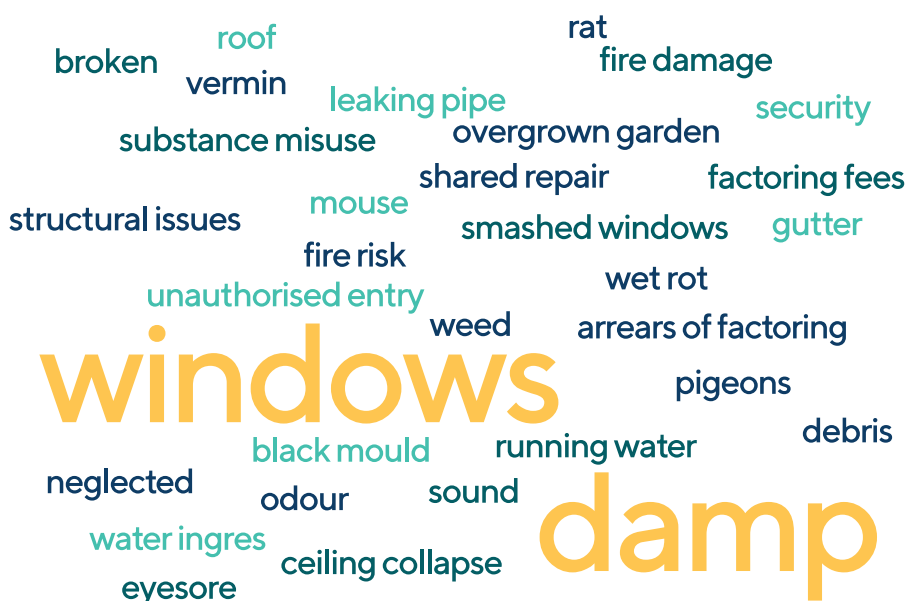
Whilst our focus is on encouraging these owners to explore options to bring properties back into use, this work is as much about supporting people as it is about dealing with property. The value in the support we provide is shown by testimonials of owners who have used our service.

“I really do want to forward my absolute appreciation to you for every single last bit of support you have given and you are a true credit to people like me who needed an advocate....”

“Thank you so much for continuing to seek advice for us...I will now seek to move forward with renewed vigour and look forward to hearing any more information you can give us...”

In areas where there is no empty homes officer we are limited to the support on offer. However, we are considering what we can do to mobilise these frustrated contacts and support the case for an EHO.

Here are the myriad of issues that neighbours have mentioned to us within the last year about the empties they live next to:-



Next steps

- **Advice Service contacts** – Increase total number of contacts (aim 480) and increase proportion of owners (aim for 25%).
- **Enforcement** – Gather more information on enforcement options and why these aren't being used/ might not be appropriate for many of the neighbour cases we see
- **Develop a 'neighbour toolkit'** – to assist owners as to how they can highlight empty homes issues in their local area
- **Matchmaker review** – Work with the network of EHOs to understand how the schemes are operating and how they could be made more effective

Our recommendations

All councils to have
at least 1
dedicated empty
homes officer or service

All councils to have an
**empty homes
strategy**
and an action plan
for homes stuck empty
over 12 months

Councils to consider
empty homes work
to meet affordable
housing needs including
introducing policies such as
**“empty homes
buy backs”**

Existing legislative
powers such as
**Compulsory
Purchase Orders**
to be used
more frequently

**Additional
legislative options**
including Compulsory
Sale Orders and
Compulsory Rental
orders required to
unlock empty homes

Registered social
landlords, community
groups and other
private bodies should
**consider empty
homes work**
to meet their supply
challenges

Councils should
**proactively
support**
the work of
strategic partners

The year ahead

Bringing empty homes back into use is a cost-effective way of increasing housing supply and can contribute to some of the goals as set out in Housing to 2040. In particular, we want to ensure where possible, more empty homes are made available as affordable or social homes. This year 148 homes were brought back into affordable housing supply through empty homes buyback schemes. We know these homes represent value for money and can play a small but important contribution to the 110,000 affordable homes commitment, (of which 70% should be social homes) over the next ten years up to 2032 and we will share any best practice on this.

It is still our ambition to see at least one empty homes officer in every council in Scotland, but in areas of greatest housing need and higher volumes of empty homes, we would recommend increased capacity at a local level, so that there is enough of a focus on both operational and strategic priorities. The Scottish Government have committed to an audit of empty homes and to do this effectively, councils will need to have a better handle of their empty homes data.

We will continue our work to raise the profile of empty homes work both at a local and national level, telling the stories of the negative impact that empty homes can have on communities and the positive difference of bringing these homes back into use. We will provide support to any local authority looking for further information in their local area.

We know that further legislative powers are needed, however we will encourage councils to use the Compulsory Purchase Order powers which already exist. We will proactively seek to collaborate with other council departments including, planning, environmental health and council tax to ensure that there is a better, more coordinated approach across relevant departments to bring more empty homes back into use. And we will continue to call for Compulsory Sale and Compulsory Rental Order powers so that there are more options available for homes that are causing a blight on the community and cannot be brought back into use with any other approach.

We will actively develop partnership work to ensure more key organisations and stakeholders are engaged and supporting empty homes work. These strategic partnerships will be formed based on local housing priorities and will demonstrate how more homes can be brought back into circulation, leading to better neighbourhoods and places. It is hoped that these will attract further investment to unlock more homes.

We have seen an improvement in feedback from the officer network and we will build on this to meet our objective of supporting the network. We will work in an environment of continuous improvement and we will plan policy specific forums in collaboration with the Scottish Government, to explore what is working well and what is required or could be improved.

Finally, we aim to launch online self help tools for owners and neighbours of empty homes, encouraging more homes back into use. The Advice Service sees the impact of empty homes on our communities on a daily basis. Bringing these back into use alleviates the blight they face. To this end we will continue to use creative approaches to encourage more owners to seek help with their properties. By providing them with the tools they need, we will help to highlight the issue and facilitate more action being taken. We are also seeking to build closer links with other organisations to expand the Advice Service's reach.

