



Annual report 2022-2023

# Scottish Empty Homes Partnership

scottish  
empty homes  
partnership





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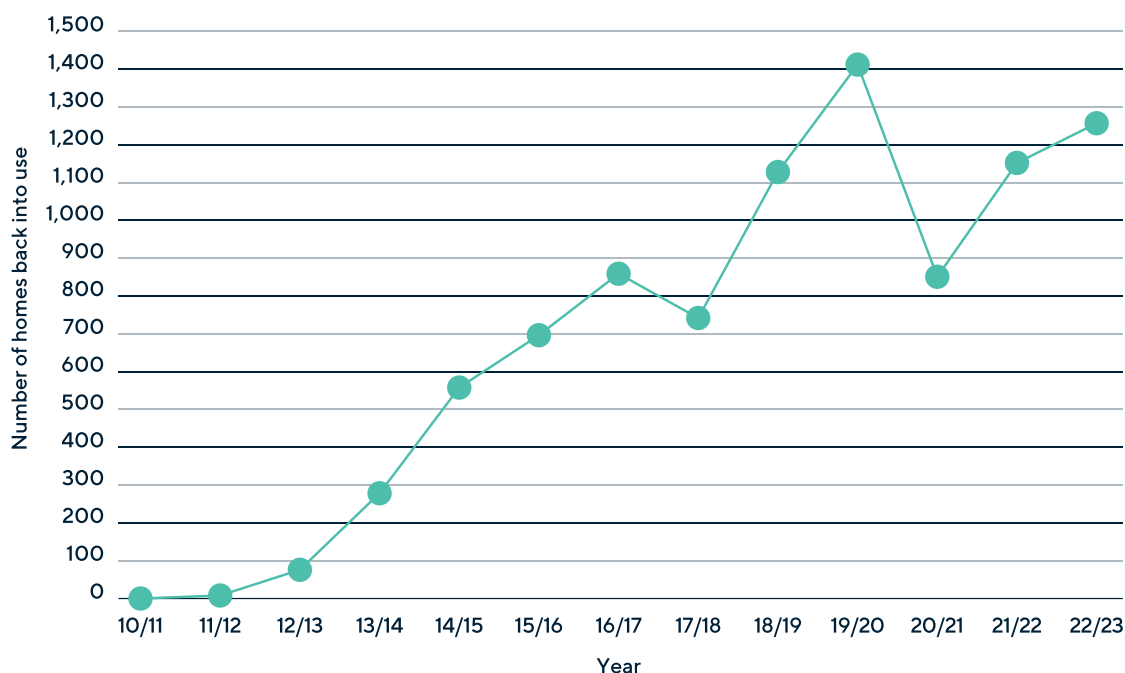
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## Executive Summary

This impact report by the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) covers the period 2022-23 and the end of Phase 1 in our plan. The report draws on survey responses received from 25 councils, as well as national statistics from the Scottish Government, National Records of Scotland, and from activity within our Empty Homes Officer (EHO) network throughout the year.

The SEHP is funded by the Scottish Government, and hosted by Shelter Scotland, with the remit to encourage privately owned properties that are lying empty to be used as homes once again. Ideally, these homes would be used for social and affordable use, where possible, and help to address Scotland's housing emergency. Bringing these homes back into productive use can be a quick and cost-effective way of increasing housing supply.

Over the past 13 years, excellent progress has been made with EHOs reporting over 9,000 homes back into use since inception.



**There is a commitment from Scottish Government to deliver 110,000 additional homes by 2032, and local authorities can help to support this aim, as well as to regenerate local areas, by acquiring empty properties.**

During the period of this report homes reported back into use are only from local authorities with an empty homes resource. 224 of the properties brought back into use have been empty for over 5 years, demonstrating the importance and value of an EHO, and empty homes work to all local authorities. These homes contribute to local supply but when left empty can cause a negative impact to a local area and community.

EHOs tell us that advice and assistance can unlock many properties, however they repeatedly call for more enforcement tools, in particular Compulsory Sales Orders. We have explored the potential of Compulsory Rental Orders as an additional measure and with demands on councils to provide additional housing, it is now more important than ever to develop this policy.

There has been a focus on strategic partnerships with other groups, as this can increase much needed investment to empty housing stock, which if left to rot, is storing up problems for the future. These partnerships are across an urban and rural split and will identify key lessons learned for future models.

The work being undertaken by the partnership, empty homes officers and other practitioners in Scotland has not gone unnoticed elsewhere. Over the last year we have been asked to give presentations about our work to empty homes conferences in the USA and Ireland. Meanwhile, attendees at our most recent annual conference included two empty homes specialists from Spain who were very interested in the active approach being taken to tackle empty homes in Scotland.

## This year's key highlights

### Contributing to housing supply



**1257 homes  
reported back  
into use**



**9014 homes  
added to  
supply since  
2010**



**16 councils  
reported having  
an empty homes  
acquisition or  
buy-back scheme**

### Increasing resources



**1 new council  
committing to  
empty homes  
work**



**1 council  
expanding its  
empty homes  
service**

### Building capacity



**Strategic  
framework  
launched**



**3 new  
strategic  
partnerships**



**90 attendees  
at our CPO  
best practice  
sharing event**



**102 attendees  
at the empty  
homes  
conference**

### Delivering advice



**441 new  
contacts to  
the advice  
service**



**Neighbour  
toolkit  
developed**

These are incredible achievements and should be celebrated. However, figures published by Scottish Government showed that there are 42,865 homes lying empty for 6 months or more, with approximately 51% of these homes spread over 6 local authorities. In the current climate, with the housing pressures faced by every local authority, it is now more critical than ever, that a data driven approach is adopted. This will help develop a more strategic focus, with the deployment of additional resources for maximum impact.

## Our key objectives in Phase 1

The SEHP was set up after the 2009 review of the Private Rented Sector identified that some of Scotland's empty homes could be used to increase housing supply. Our goals in Phase 1 have very much focussed on getting every council to employ a dedicated EHO. This has been successful with most councils now offering empty home owners advice and assistance. However, with large volumes of homes lying empty, one EHO is not enough, and for maximum impact a more tactical approach is required.

## 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 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 Officers.**

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 Values

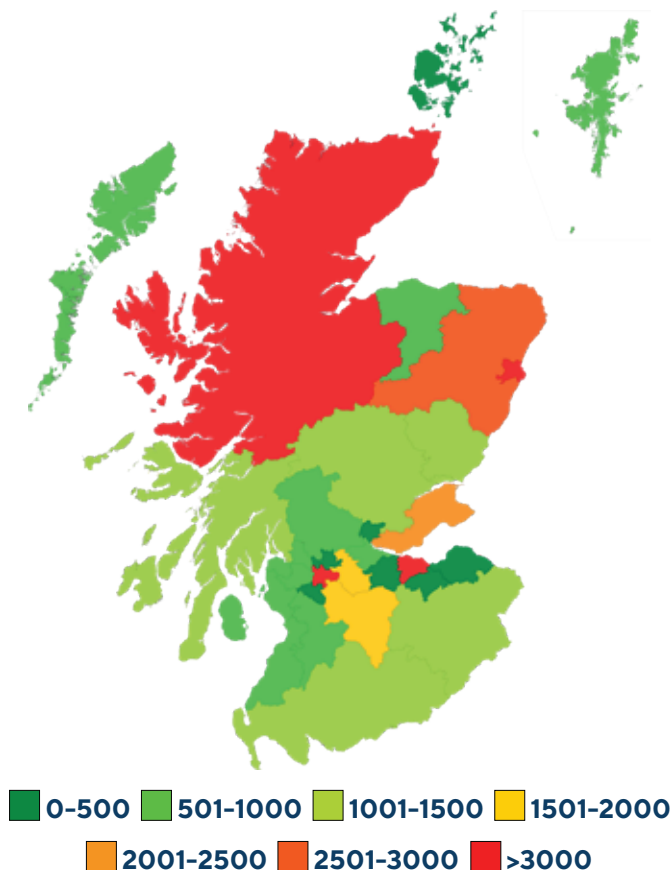
We will be driven by our values to ensure we provide a high quality service to all our customers.

- **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 home owners 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.

## Long term empty homes in Scotland 2022

Figures published by the Scottish Government in January showed that the number of homes empty for six months or longer had fallen by 2% from 43,766 to 42,865. This is the second year in a row that the number of long term empty homes in Scotland has fallen.

### Number of long term empty homes in Scotland by local authority



The figures divide into homes that have been empty for between 6 and 12 months and those that have been empty for longer than a year.

**Over 27,000 of Scotland's homes are empty for longer than 12 months and we know that the longer homes remain empty the harder it becomes to bring them back to use.**

This is shown by the fact that, in spite of the total number of homes empty falling for a second year running - from 27,854 to 27,692 this year, preceded by a larger fall from 30,551 last year - the numbers are still far higher than they ought to be. Many of these homes are likely to be also amongst the 23,358 homes that reported as empty for more than a year five years previously in 2017. Many of these may also have been part of the 16,527 homes empty for more than a year reported in 2014.

The figures highlight the uneven distribution of empty homes. **The numbers of empty homes are spread across Scotland's local authorities, but it is notable that more than 51% of all reported long term empty homes and more than 52% of homes empty for longer than 12 months are distributed across 6 local authorities. In contrast, these authorities combined account for just under 42% of all homes in Scotland.**

Long Term Empty Homes (LTE)	2022 Empty 6 Months or More	Increase/Decrease from 2021
<b>Scotland</b>	<b>42865</b>	<b>-901</b>
Aberdeen City	4029	-1977
Aberdeenshire	2543	-40
Angus	1261	70
Argyll and Bute	1169	83
City of Edinburgh	6904	64
Clackmannanshire	250	-5
Dumfries and Galloway	1418	-307
Dundee	1134	117
East Ayrshire	527	-87
East Dunbartonshire	250	53
East Lothian	444	25
East Renfrewshire	151	23
Falkirk	799	48
Fife	2421	-87
Glasgow City	3023	65
Highland	3224	449
Inverclyde	582	41
Midlothian	359	-20
Moray	834	10
Na h-Eileanan Siar	631	35
North Ayrshire	897	-37
North Lanarkshire	1846	123
Orkney Islands	211	23
Perth and Kinross	1263	-47
Renfrewshire	782	59
Scottish Borders	1431	92
Shetland	552	-7
South Ayrshire	762	25
South Lanarkshire	1531	148
Stirling	546	1
West Dunbartonshire	598	150
West Lothian	493	9

However, even in local authorities with lower numbers of long-term empty homes overall, there are still areas where levels of empty homes are above the national average. Additionally, all long term empty homes can still make an important contribution to housing stock when they are brought back to use. Over the next twelve months we will continue our work to provide more detailed data on how empty homes are distributed across Scotland as a whole and within individual local authorities.

As ever, the figures for numbers of long term empty homes, particularly for homes empty for 6 to 12 months, reflect the local housing markets and the wide range of socio-economic factors that are the backdrop to the work of EHOs. Increasing numbers of homes becoming long term empty in some parts of the country show the additional challenges faced in bringing homes back to use in those areas.

For this reason, these figures say far less about the work and achievements of EHOs than the number and variety of homes they are helping to returning to use do. 2022 has seen the second highest total of homes brought back to use in the history of the partnership.

This is a fantastic achievement that we are proud to celebrate in this report. However, we know that the commitment and hard work of EHOs can only take us so far in tackling the problem of long term empty homes in Scotland, and long term empty homes themselves can only ever be a small part of the overall answer to the housing emergency that Scotland is facing.

**Every home no longer empty counts and no effort is wasted.**

Local authority (LA)	% of all Scotland's Homes in LA	% of all Scotland's LTEs in LA	% of Scotland's 12m+ empty homes in LA
Aberdeen City	4.57	9.40	8.46
Aberdeenshire	4.51	5.93	6.52
Angus	2.16	2.94	3.54
Argyll and Bute	1.81	2.73	2.83
City of Edinburgh	9.63	16.11	8.48
Clackmannanshire	0.93	0.58	0.37
Dumfries and Galloway	2.82	3.31	4.22
Dundee	2.82	2.65	1.65
East Ayrshire	2.20	1.23	1.39
East Dunbartonshire	1.78	0.58	0.68
East Lothian	1.89	1.04	1.14
East Renfrewshire	1.49	0.35	0.00
Falkirk	2.84	1.86	1.31
Fife	6.74	5.65	6.79
Glasgow City	11.96	7.05	10.79
Highland	4.52	7.52	11.42
Inverclyde	1.47	1.36	1.22
Midlothian	1.59	0.84	1.30
Moray	1.73	1.95	1.82
Na h-Eileanan Siar	0.56	1.47	1.91
North Ayrshire	2.59	2.09	1.83
North Lanarkshire	5.92	4.31	3.87
Orkney Islands	0.43	0.49	0.55
Perth and Kinross	2.79	2.95	2.62
Renfrewshire	3.35	1.82	1.13
Scottish Borders	2.21	3.34	3.33
Shetland	0.43	1.29	1.42
South Ayrshire	2.09	1.78	0.99
South Lanarkshire	5.81	3.57	5.06
Stirling	1.58	1.27	1.59
West Dunbartonshire	1.70	1.40	0.86
West Lothian	3.09	1.15	0.93



## What happens to homes brought back into use

Just as empty homes come in all shapes, sizes and places - from remote island locations and houses that have been empty for a decade or longer, to tenements and apartments in various states of repair and disrepair in city centres - there are also a large variety of outcomes when properties are brought back to use.



Sometimes, the home may not immediately be occupied, usually where the property bought is in a state of disrepair, and the first task for a new owner is to completely overhaul the interior, possibly also changing it from one home into a group of apartments. Other times, new owners may move in straight away, contributing to the local economy as they decorate their first home and discover shops, bars and restaurants in their new neighbourhood. Increasingly, we are also seeing empty homes being brought back into use by local authorities through buyback schemes, or by housing associations and other organisations looking to increase the supply of social and affordable homes at local level.

The case studies in this report include ones from a range of initiatives that have helped to increase social and affordable housing provision across Scotland. They also include homes that stood empty for decades and are now owned and occupied by people with a passion for creating their own unique space. The case studies highlight how, just as there are a variety of reasons why homes become or remain empty, and a variety of homes that are empty, there are also a variety of ways that they are returned to use with EHO assistance, and a variety of people whose lives are changed by moving into a formerly empty house and making it their home.

**Case study****Ex-local authority empty home bought back**

An ex-local authority empty property in West Dunbartonshire Council (WDC) provided an opportunity to use empty homes to increase social housing quickly. The property became empty following the death of the owner and with a buy back policy in place, the EHO was able to progress this case and another family home is now available in council supply.

‘As an Authority it now means we have increased our housing stock and now have full ownership of this block, this will make it much easier for the Authority to carry out communal works and works to meet SHQS, which will ultimately help to reduce the tenants’ heating costs.’  
- Karen Rae, West-Dunbartonshire EHO.

The main aims of the WDC “buy back” scheme are:

- To acquire housing which can increase the stock of WDC social housing,
- To help maintain or create viable sustainable communities,
- To assist with managing the effects of Welfare Reform,
- To assist the council with SHQS /capital Improvements,
- To potentially assist with Empty homes.

In the video link at the foot of this page, John Kerr, Housing Development & Homelessness Manager, West Dunbartonshire Council talks more about the merits of using empty homes for social housing.

**Case study****A previous empty home meeting urgent housing need**

A property had been empty for 9 years as the owner had inherited the property from a relative and did not have the capacity to deal with it due to health vulnerabilities.

The EHO and Council Tax approached the case sensitively and helped the owner consider options to bring the property back into use. After talking the options through the owner decided that the Council’s Open Market Purchase Scheme was the best option and opted to proceed with this option. The property required extensive work to bring it up to the Council’s letting standard. The owner was very grateful for the support they received.

The purchase of the property helped increase local housing supply and contributed to urgent housing need with the new tenant being a homeless priority applicant.



[Watch the John Kerr video](#)

**Case study****The impact of affordable homes**

Anika lived in social housing in Glasgow with her husband. She has 2 children and needed to leave her relationship due to domestic abuse. She was not confident in her decision, with many psychological reasons but one of the main barriers being the housing options available to her. She was keen to stay close to the school her children had attended but could not find anything suitable. Anika had been involved in voluntary work supporting new Refugees from Ukraine and through this work had established a relationship with Homes for Good (HFG).

An upper cottage flat became empty after the elderly owner passed away and was referred to HFG by Glasgow City Council EHO. The family who inherited it recognised the level of work involved and were keen to get a quick settlement once the estate had been settled. HFG carried out extensive renovations and this is now home to Anika and her family.

**Case study****Privately owned empty home now let to Ukrainian family fleeing the war**

This property had been empty for just under 3 years in the city of Aberdeen. The council have high numbers of empty homes and are directing resource and policies to proactively bring empty homes back into use. In this case study, Aberdeen City Council used their Matchmake to rent scheme to match Ukrainian tenants from the Refugee Settlement Scheme to the owner of this empty property who offered it at Local Housing Allowance rates. This has provided much needed affordable housing, as well as an empty property that is now back into use.



## Case study

# A data driven project to tackle the shortage of affordable housing for health and social care workers

**Kelly Ferns, Argyll and Bute EHO talks about how data was the key in this groundbreaking project.**

Argyll and Bute (A&B) is a large area geographically, broken down to nine Housing Market Areas (HMA). There are succinct variations between the HMAs that include a wide mix of urban, rural, and island communities. Therefore the impact of empty homes can have different consequences depending on their location, size, condition and other factors.

Data on empty homes is fundamental for an EHO to investigate the circumstances, as it is crucial for understanding the local context and impacts. However, it is equally important for the EHO to have an awareness and understanding of where the housing pressures are, particularly when there is high need and demand for housing.

Over the last few years we had seen a noticeable increase in the number of enquiries from individuals and strategic partners regarding affordable housing for key/essential workers particularly from A&B Health & Social Care Partnership (A&B HSCP) colleagues. There are a number of local studies that correlated the increase of enquiries and need for affordable housing to recruit and retain staff to support local services.

A strategic partnership project with SEHP was proposed as an option to help address the demand received from A&B HSCP. It will do this by providing homes for a sector of the economy where affordable housing is much needed and to bring empty homes back to use. To inform the proposal a range of data was collated including statistical data on empty homes, ineffective stock and the identified housing need across the A&B area.

Over the next few months, following further engagement with SEHP and a positive response from co-ordinated discussions with senior housing and A&B HSCP colleagues, a project proposal for strategic partnership funding of an Empty Homes Project Officer (EHPO) post was put forward.

The focus of the proposal was to develop a model where the officer would specifically work with empty homes owners to bring accommodation back into use for key health and social care workers who help to sustain and deliver local services.

This is an example of where we were able to use data to help inform a specific project which will not only meet a number of the Council's strategic priorities but also those of our partners. It will also help to meet the needs of our local communities.

**This strategic and innovative project will help bring empty homes back into use with a specific focus on reducing housing need and providing more affordable homes for key workers.**



## Case study

## Open Market Purchase

The Highland Council is piloting a new open market purchase scheme to buy directly from owners in a bid to bolster its housing stock to meet the need for additional affordable housing and provide new homes and futures for families, young and old in communities across the Highlands.

A property that was empty for 2 years was identified by the EHO who was investigating another case in the local area. It is situated near Inverness where demand for housing is high. Investigations uncovered that the owner had moved into long term residential care. An offer of advice and assistance was made by the EHO, and some months later a family member made contact. All options were discussed including selling the property back to the council. A decision was made to go with the latter and this property is now let out to an applicant on Highland Council's social housing lists.

**EHOs reported that 6.78% of homes became empty due to the owner going into care.**



## Case study

## All Roads Lead to Whithorn demonstrating impact on a rural community

Development trust, All Roads Lead to Whithorn, worked with South of Scotland Community Housing to organise a community led housing approach. This saw a 30 year empty listed building - The Grapes Hotel - premises transformed into much needed affordable, energy efficient homes in Whithorn town centre.

Two young families are now settled in warm homes which were renovated to near passive house standard. Keeping housing costs low allowed security for tenants and the chance to build their lives in the area. This project has transformed what was previously a blight on an historic town centre, helping to restore community pride and provide opportunities for future generations. Families settling and remaining in the area will boost local services and schools, benefiting residents and the economic prospects of the town.

A short video, where Mike Staples, SOSCH CEO talks about the project, can be accessed by the link at the foot of this page.



Watch the All Roads Lead to Whithorn video

## Meeting our strategic objectives – 1

### Dedicated EHO or service in every council

There is considerable support for any council looking to invest in empty homes work. SEHP have offered seed funding to all local authorities to test the value of empty homes work, and most have done this through our Kickstarter funding. We are also able to offer ongoing training, support and one to one advice when setting up an empty homes service. Since the inception of SEHP, 25 councils are now investing in bringing homes back into use and another council has committed to recruiting an EHO this year using Kickstarter support.

**All of the homes reported back into use in this reporting period are from local authorities that have an EHO.**

Year	Number of councils with an empty homes service	Number of councils with more than 1 FTE EHO
2010/2011	0	0
2011/2012	8	0
2012/2013	15	0
2013/2014	16	1
2014/2015	17	1
2015/2016	17	2
2016/2017	19	2
2017/2018	20	1
2018/2019	20	3
2019/2020	21	4
2020/2021	22	4
2021/2022	24	4
2022/2023	25	4

**Because every empty home matters, we still believe that every local authority should have an empty homes officer or an empty homes service.**

However, we recognise that the impact some empty homes have on communities is greater than others. When we think about the commitments to more homes at the heart of great places and increasing affordability and choice set out in Housing to 2040, we know that there is a need to start targeting resources. Therefore, with more than 2/3s of our councils on board, we recognise that greater depth is now required. This means looking ahead, we will focus our attention on bringing empty homes into use in locations which have the biggest impact on the numbers of homes lying empty, and the ones that can contribute most to ending Scotland's housing emergency.

EHOs across the country are working to bring as many homes back to use as possible, but with an average ratio of more than 1,000 homes empty for 12 months+ for each empty homes service, it is never going to be an easy or a quick task. Sufficient resource, from staffing to funding and legislative tools are all required.

### The difference EHOs can make

**What have we Dunoon – Cal and Claire talk about the difference that an EHO can make**

Cal and Claire 'accidentally' purchased 4 tenement flats that had been empty for 20 years at an auction. With the help of the empty homes officer for Argyll and Bute, they began the long journey to returning the home to use, gaining a large following on social media, and seeing their story told in the BBC One Scotland show, Accidental Renovators. In this video they talk a bit more about their experience and the difference that EHOs can make.

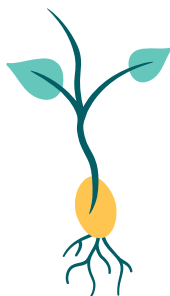
[Watch the video](#)

## SEHP seed funding

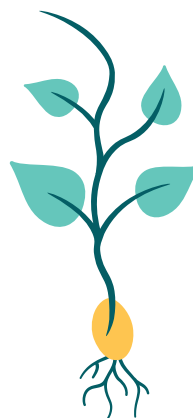
Since 2012, the SEHP has instigated and run several Kickstarter and Shared Service projects across Scotland.



**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

SEHP provided matched funding for the EHO post from August 20 - 22 to test the value of an EHO post, and since then this post has become permanent. Year one was used to put in place structures, systems and to build relationships. However, the initially appointed EHO found a new job which caused a minor setback, before getting empty homes work back on track. Positive outcomes during the funding period are below:

- 15 properties back into use
- Development of an empty homes grant scheme
- Empty homes linked to the council's Open Market Purchase Scheme
- Work on a comprehensive report to give the council a better understanding of the homes lying empty

The biggest challenge reported by the EHO has been getting owners to engage and work with them to bring the empty home back into use.

This is a common theme across the network and highlights the importance of additional enforcement tools.

### Highland Council

The Highland Council EHO started in August 2021 and most of year one was spent developing the service. Unfortunately, the staff member left in August 2022, and with various internal recruitment issues, the post was only filled in April 2023. Positive outcomes include 16 homes back into use during this period, but information at this point is limited.

### Scottish Borders Council

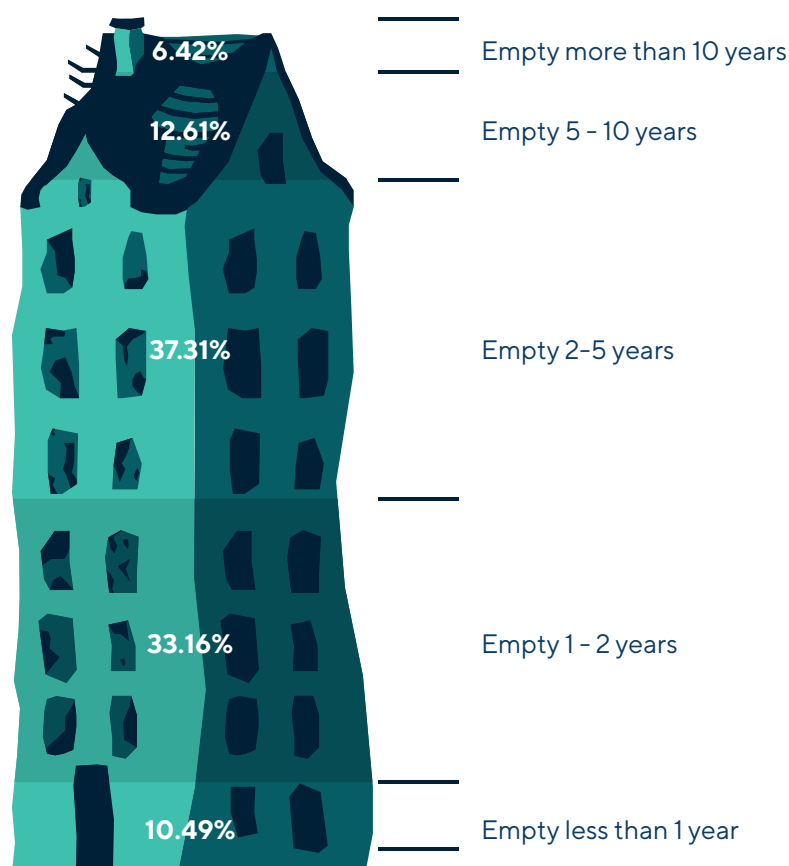
The empty homes officer started in early August 2021 and has established an empty homes service with a strategic approach taken from early on. Positive outcomes include:

- 15 homes reported back into use this period
- Development of an empty homes strategy
- GPS mapping and data collection of empty homes
- Empty homes grant scheme established
- 18 grant applications, 12 of which have been approved with a total spend of £275K
- 9 of the grant applications have brought homes back into affordable use
- Council tax discretion process streamlined
- Prevention letter sent to all owners about to be charged the empty homes levy offering advice and assistance
- Partnership working with other bodies in the local area

## Bringing homes back into use

This year EHOs recorded 1,257 properties brought back into use. This was a 9% increase on the 2021 total of 1,152 and the second highest total recorded since the partnership commenced. It brings the total number of homes brought back to use to 9,014.

### Homes brought back into use



Information on how long the home was empty for was available for 96% (1257) of these properties, substantially more than any other year, highlighting the increased amount of information EHOs are now able to draw on in their work.

### **Over 650 of the properties reported back into use this year had been empty for more than 2 years, this includes 224 homes that had been empty for 5 years or more.**

Bringing most, if not all, of these 224 homes back to use is likely to be the culmination of several years work by empty homes officers that may have initially been triggered by contact from a neighbour and have subsequently involved trying to track down owners, encouraging them to take action on their home, explaining options available to them and supporting them through the process to return their home to contribute to housing stock in their area.

Others may have been homes where owners refused to engage, and compulsory purchase orders (CPO) were used to force the home back to use. However, where this is not an appropriate measure, other tools are needed to unlock Scotland's stickiest homes.

Many other homes that have been empty for this length of time however, may be stuck in limbo, where owners can't be traced and/or the property is not suitable for compulsory purchase or the local authority are not pursuing this option for empty homes.

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. This may both be due to the deterioration of a property and the increased expenditure that will be required to return it to use. Other factors include the increased difficulty in finding owners or, when owners are found, getting them to take action to bring a home back to use rather than ignoring or avoiding any responsibility they may have to maintain the property and pay taxes in relation to it.

The SEHP welcomes any additional enforcement options, such as compulsory sale orders or compulsory rental orders, that can be used effectively to unlock stuck properties and return them to use both to increase housing stock and to remove the blight of empty homes for neighbours.



## Meeting our strategic objectives – 2

### Encouraging councils to mainstream empty homes work

Local authorities across the country are increasingly recognising the role that empty homes can play in supporting wider housing and social policy goals, at a time when they are facing increased demand for housing and high inflation is limiting their ability to deliver this.

We want to see as many empty homes as possible brought back to use as social or affordable housing to help to tackle the housing emergency in Scotland. Bringing empty homes back to use can also support local authorities to meet their statutory duty to prevent homelessness wherever possible, to mitigate the impact of homelessness where it cannot be prevented, and to increase provision of specialist housing units across categories such as wheelchair, amenity and sheltered accommodation. Where homes are brought back to use at market-based prices they can help to ease pressure on the housing market and reduce house price inflation by adding to housing supply.

As part of our continuing work to encourage local authorities to take a strategic approach to empty homes work and to mainstream empty homes work within the context of their wider housing strategy, we launched our Empty Homes Framework template and guidance at our 2023 annual conference in collaboration with housing specialists Arneil Johnston.

The guidance aims to raise awareness of the positive impact that tackling empty homes can have in helping achieve Local Housing Strategy and community planning priorities. It provides a practical step by step guide to follow and should support local authorities looking to achieve a more strategic focus for empty homes work.

It is hoped that this framework will encourage councils to:

- 1. Mainstream empty homes work which will in turn support Housing to 2040's goal of an audit of empty homes**
- 2. Bring more homes back into use to increase affordable housing supply quickly and effectively as per Shelter Scotland's strategic aim of more social housing**

The guidance and template are the culmination of a project that began with two in-person and two digital Empty Homes Strategic Framework Development workshops in November 2022 and January 2023. The theme of the first workshop was 'Understanding the challenges of Empty Homes' and explored how empty homes work could contribute to helping local authorities deliver their local housing strategy priorities, and to tackling the challenges and threats to delivery they were facing. The workshop also looked at existing empty homes strategies to provide more information on what a good framework template may look like.

This fed into our second workshop 'What works well and what would be useful' where the focus was on how a framework should be structured, what information should be covered within it, and how to identify and engage with stakeholders to develop and deliver a framework.

Arneil Johnson then developed the template and guidance, drawing on the presentations given at the workshops and the invaluable feedback we received from delegates.

An eight step process for developing a strategic empty homes framework that recognises the important role that empty homes can play in Local Housing Strategy delivery and can help to increase social and affordable housing stock was presented at our Repair, Reuse, Revitalise, conference at the Engine Shed in Stirling.

Drawing on best practice examples, the step-by-step guide provides practical advice, support and examples which will enable local authorities to:

- Showcase the contribution of tackling empty homes to LHS and community planning outcomes,
- Define the main issues that need action, intervention and resource commitment,
- Consider the ideas, options and innovation that should guide action, investment & partnership, and
- Prioritise action and intervention across a network of engaged partners.

We have now held a further walk through of the template and guidance with empty homes officers from 5 local authorities, and the finalised versions of both documents will be published shortly.



We hope that the template and guidance will encourage more local authorities to commence work on a framework that recognises that empty homes are an asset on our doorstep that can play a vital role in delivery of housing and social policy as demonstrated by many of the case studies and projects contained in this report.

#### From our annual survey results and local authority websites:



**4 local authorities** have their own empty homes strategies...



...**A further 7 local authorities** have advised they are in the process of developing one



**16 local authorities** have an empty homes acquisition or buy-back scheme

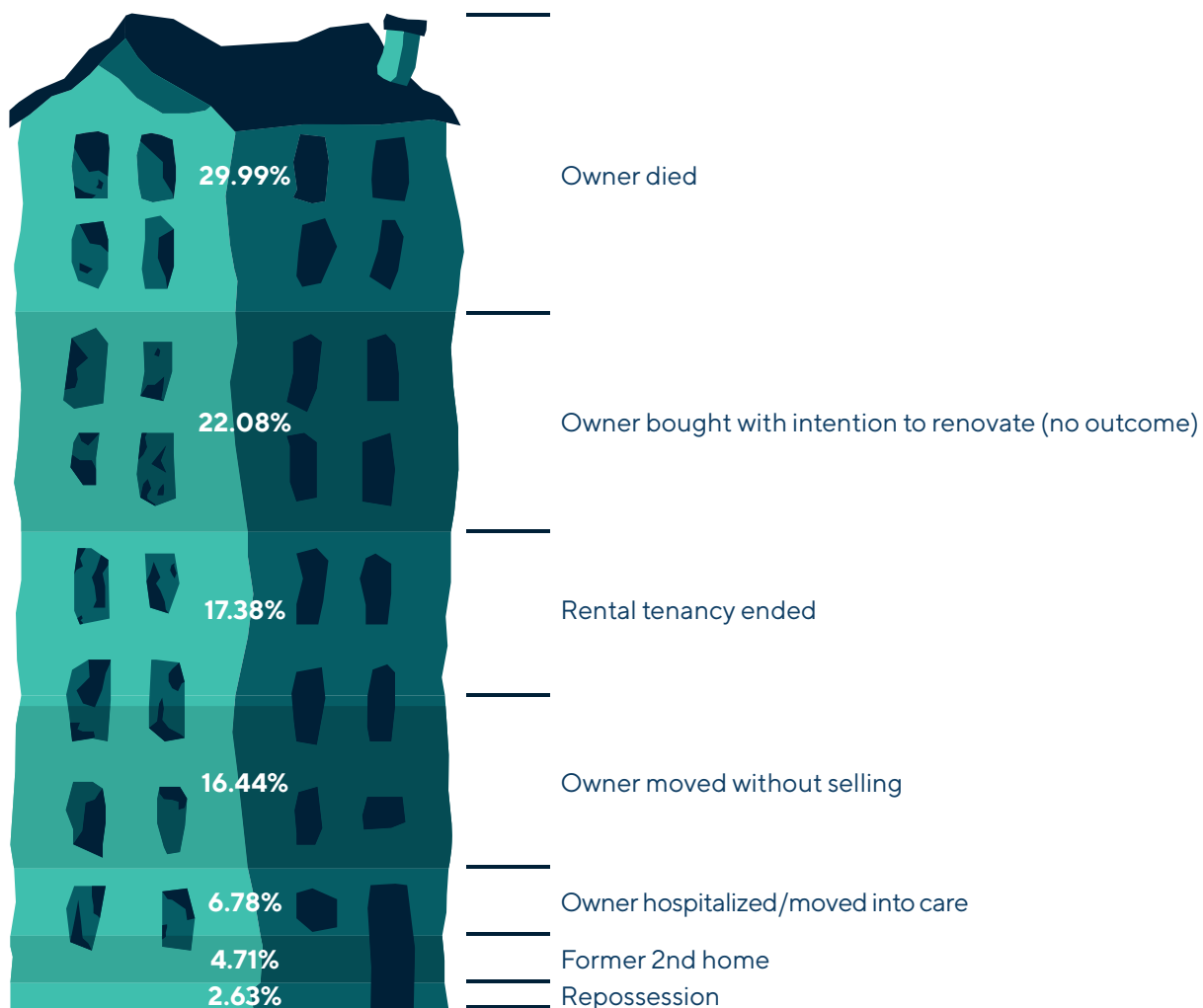
## Why homes become and remain empty

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.

In 22/23 death of the previous owner was once again the most common reason for homes becoming empty. This has been the case in most years where we have collected this information. The proportion of long term empty homes that became empty for this reason rose from 23% to 30%. This may be linked to the pandemic, given the time that can pass between an owner dying and the home forming part of an empty homes officer's caseload.

There were significant falls this year in the number of homes becoming empty because of owner moving without selling (from 24.9% to 16.44%), and from rental tenancies ending (23.1% to 17.38%). There was an equally significant rise in the number of homes that became empty as a result of owners moving with the intention of renovating (17.4% to 22.08%). The decline in homes empty as a result of the end of rental tenancies can be seen as positive if it reflects a decrease in evictions or rental properties left empty.

Other reasons for homes becoming empty accounted for broadly similar proportions to last year.



The three main reasons for homes remaining empty were

- Difficulty locating or engaging with owners (20%)
- Property awaiting grant of confirmation (18%) and
- Repairs ongoing (17%).

Between them, these three reasons accounted for over half of the reasons in all cases.

While homes in the latter 2 categories are likely to be properties that may be returned to use over the coming year as confirmation is granted or repairs completed, the cases that are currently stalled through difficulty locating or engaging owners may be a lot harder to return to use. Owners walking away from properties that they either bought or inherited and then seeing the blight they cause as someone else's problem is a common feature of some of the most difficult cases that EHOs and our advice service have to deal with.

**The limited enforcement options available to return a property to use where an owner has walked away and can't be found or refuses to engage, does nothing to incentivise an owner to bring a property back to use or penalise them for failing to do so.**

Other common reasons for homes remaining empty include:

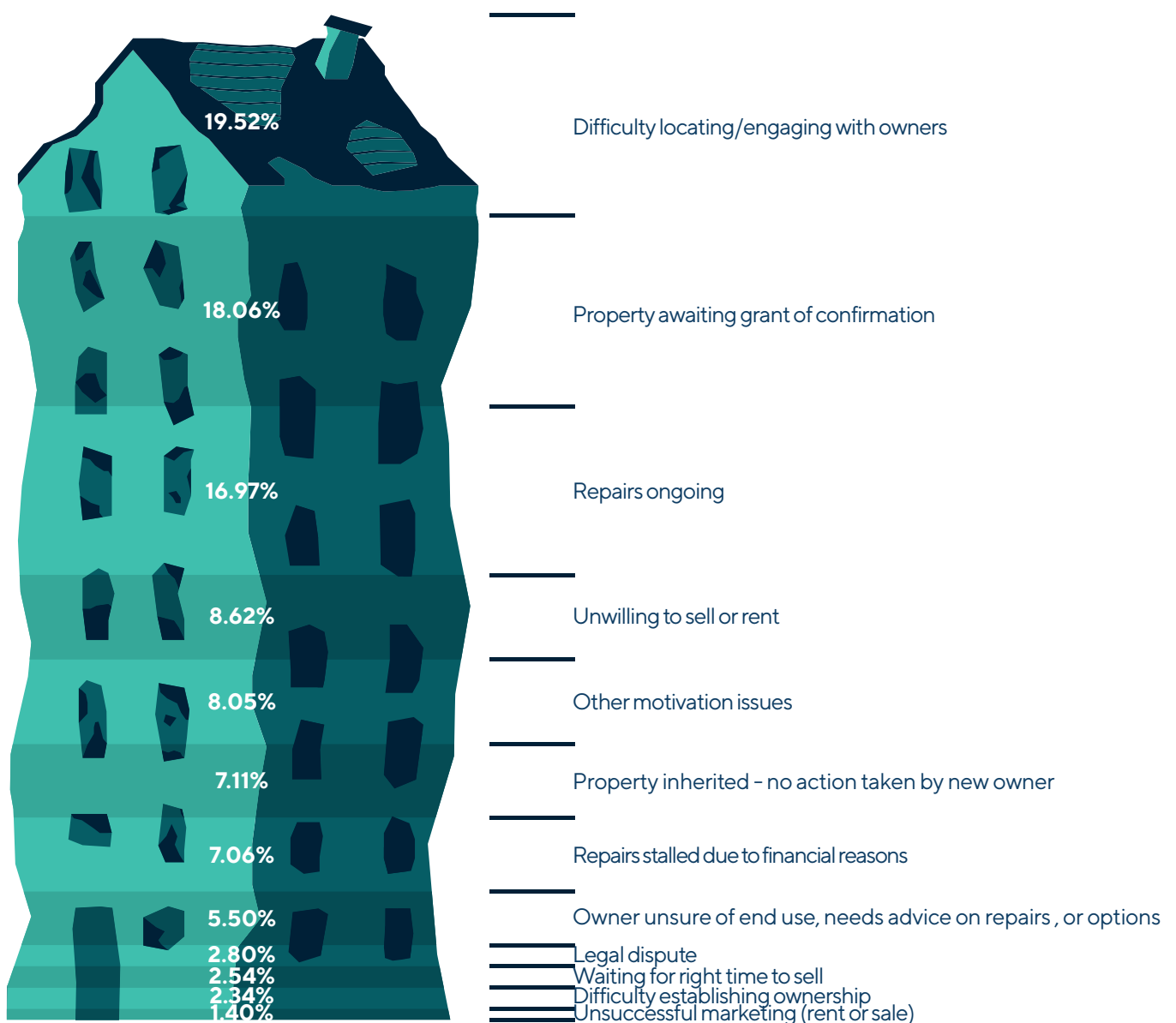
- Unwilling to sell or rent (9%) other motivation issues (8%) and
- Property inherited by owners – no action taken (7%).

**The recent announcement of consultation on increasing the council tax premium on long term empty properties, may help to bring some of these homes back to use by increasing the cost of leaving them empty.**

However, in some instances owners may simply choose to pay the additional premium while leaving the property empty, whilst for the owners of homes remaining empty because of repairs stalled due to financial reasons, an additional premium will merely add to the financial difficulties they are already facing and further delay, or even prevent, any attempts to return their property to use.

**For this reason, the partnership believe that any money raised through an additional premium should be invested directly into support for owners to bring empty homes back into use as social or affordable housing.**

We also believe that it is important that additional premiums cannot be applied in instances where a home is empty because of systemic reasons that mean there is little or no demand for property and there is little or no guarantee that any costs of refurbishment would be recovered due to limited potential to sell or rent the property afterwards.



## Case study

### Multiple barriers to bringing a home back into use

This property has remained empty for 5 years. The late owner left the home to their children but one passed away and the remaining beneficiary is living overseas. There has been no grant of confirmation applied for, so the property remains exempt from council tax. The property became unoccupied after a family member moved out due to a fire in the property.

The EHO became aware of the property after it was referred by our advice service, following concerned neighbour reports. The EHO struggled to contact the family member living overseas and by the time communication was established, it was believed the lender was considering repossession proceedings. The family member cannot afford to fund work themselves and hold ups and issues with the insurance company meant the home deteriorated further and contractors left work partially complete. The EHO has attempted to contact the lender for further information but to date has not received a response.

Neighbours have reported concerns about the home being insecure and attracting anti-social behaviour. There is limited action that can be taken to bring the property back into use however, the EHO is trying to keep it safe and so requested that community wardens add the location to their regular patrols. Building standards and Environmental Health have assessed the condition and deemed no action is required at this stage. In the meantime, despite the best efforts of the EHO, the property remains empty and is likely to deteriorate further, causing a blight on the community and the risk of increased financial burden on the public purse.



## Options available to officers

In our annual survey we asked EHOs to provide information on what methods they have used to bring homes back into use.

**'In your experience, how commonly used are the following key actions in assisting owners to bring properties back into use? With 0 being not used at all, and 10 being most frequently used'**

In your experience, how commonly used are the following key actions in assisting owners to bring property back into use?	On a scale from 1-10, how commonly Empty Homes Officer's used these options (on average).
Linked to council schemes (Buy Back, PSL, Rent Deposit Guarantee Schemes)	3.75
Linked to matchmaker scheme	2.33
Providing grant funding	5.80
Providing loan funding	2.60
Access to Vat discounts, merchants & services discounts, other discounts	6.36
Council tax discretion (including providing support to obtain discretion)	5.89
Worked/partnered with RSL, third sector, or community groups	2.18
Worked/partnered with private or commercial sector	3.08
Enforcement (e.g., environmental health, statutory nuisance, building standards regulations)	3.53
Providing advice and information to owners	8.52

### Case study

## The importance of flexibility on Council Tax premium

Our advice service assisted an owner struggling with an inherited family home which had been empty for 7 years. The owner intended to renovate and live in the property, and contacted the advice service distressed as the council tax premium was a financial burden. Paying the premium was reducing the budget for renovation work and was hampering progress with the property being brought back into use. The owner also faced several barriers, including delays in dealing with the estate, waiting for planning permission, issues sourcing contractors and rising cost of materials.

The home was in a state of disrepair and needed considerable work before it could be lived in. It didn't have any insulation, it was damp, the roof leaked, there was no kitchen, the bathroom had asbestos and it required rewiring. Renovating the home was a huge task for the owner and carrying out the work would take at least 2 years.

SEHAS was able to offer support and talk through options with the owner.

A referral was made to the local EHO who assisted in securing discretion for a year. This gave the owner reduced costs, and time to bring the home up to habitable standard.

The owner was exceptionally grateful for our assistance, and has been keeping us updated with progress. Without SEHAS' help, this owner would still be struggling with the premium and a reduced budget which may have delayed the home being brought back into use. The advice provided by SEHAS, coupled with the local Council's policy on discretion has helped this owner and it is anticipated that work will complete by summer 2023.

**"You were both amazing thank you so much for your support . We have had an extension on council tax until May 2023. This will help us hopefully finish the house in time. Thank you again for your support on this!"**

- Owner

### Meeting our strategic objectives – 3

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

A key objective for SEHP is to encourage registered social landlords, community groups, third sector organisations and other private bodies to engage in empty homes work. This objective recognised that many of these bodies are housing providers and are struggling to acquire suitable housing to meet the demand that they get for housing every day. They can attract inward investment to empty homes that could make an unattractive project viable.

### SEHP seed funding of 3rd sector/LA projects

Homes for Good (HFG) was our first test and learn project starting in August 2021. The project has a remit to increase the supply of secure, quality homes for people on low incomes or benefits.

Building on from this project, as part of our contract with Scottish Government for 2022-23 we were tasked with working with third sector organisations and local authorities to establish at least 3 strategic & innovative projects to bring empty homes back into use with a specific focus on reducing housing need and providing more affordable homes.

We have delivered on this commitment, establishing projects in Scottish Borders, Western Isles and Argyll and Bute, each of which have a specific focus on the housing needs of the individual local authorities.

For the Scottish Borders project we have partnered with South of Scotland Community Housing (SOSCH), an award winning Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation that provides support to community-led housing across the Southern Scottish region. The project aims to identify and drive new community-led conversions of empty homes and buildings to deliver affordable and sustainable housing solutions in the rural communities across Scottish Borders. An empty homes coordinator has now begun work with community organisations and with Scottish Borders Council, to develop and deliver projects that will address the specific housing needs of individual communities. As well as increasing the availability of much-needed housing, we hope that the project will have a much broader impact, by supporting other non-housing outcomes. We will be looking to extend the project beyond Scottish Borders during its second year.

The second project is with Tighean Innse Gall (TIG) a community housing development service that supports people to rent, buy and live in comfortable, affordable homes, promote healthy independent living and assist businesses and communities to be more sustainable. Working closely with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's (Western Isles Council) the project aims to tackle the issue of empty homes in Outer Hebrides through purchasing and refurbishing empty homes. These will be made available to members of the community through social rent, mid-market rent, and rent-to-buy. The homes brought back into use over the course of the two year project will help to revitalise rural communities across the Island chain, making them more attractive to people and families who wish to remain on the Island and also attracting new people and families to re-locate to the islands.

For the third project we have established a partnership with Argyll and Bute Health & Social Care Partnership (A&B HSCP), and Argyll & Bute Council that will see empty homes being brought back into use to help to tackle the shortage of affordable housing for health and social care workers across the region. The project, which is the first of its kind in Scotland, will see the appointment of an Empty Homes Project Officer (EHPO) who will work A&B HSCP in areas where an inability to source local accommodation has impacted on recruitment. The project will establish local housing needs including type, size and locations of accommodation needed and look to identify suitable 'empty home matches' to bring homes back into use for A&B HSCP key/essential workers through tenancy agreements with owners and registered social landlords.

As innovative projects, while we have looked to set ambitious but realistic targets it is important to recognise that the projects are breaking new ground and that a key part of each project will include assessing what works, testing established thinking and assumptions on what is preventing homes from being brought back into use and what will work to unlock them. As such, what we learn from the projects and the development of best practice models that may enable and encourage other organisations to invest in empty homes work, will also be important outcomes from each of the projects.

Read Friends of the Scotsman articles on TIG and SOSCH

TIG

SOSCH

## Homes for Good partnership outcomes

**17**

empty homes brought back into use for low income households

**9**

additional owners advised on their empty home that didn't progress with HfG

**1**

empty home bought, refurbished and sold with profits reinvested into the empty home scheme

**13**

owners currently discussing next stages of bringing their homes back into use

**4**

local authorities working with HfG

Dear Joey and Homes for Good Team,  
I would like to say huge thank you for everything you have done for me and my kids.  
We will always be grateful for your help in finding a safe and beautiful home for us.  
With heartfelt thanks, ❤️

In the video below, Barry Sweeney, Empty Homes Manager, Homes for Good, shows a property that will be transformed into affordable housing for a household in Glasgow through the partnership.

[Watch the Barry Sweeney video](#)



Meeting our strategic objectives – 4

## Supporting the Network of Empty Homes Officers

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership acts to support and maintain a network of EHOs throughout Local Authorities across Scotland. By facilitating best practice groups, resources and training we enable peer support and networking. Training sessions were undertaken with 19 empty homes practitioners, from 9 local authorities, in the last financial year. This helped the new officers to network with more experienced EHOs and covered such topics as case management, council tax, and enforcement. Feedback from an officer that advised they successfully gained access to council information needed for their job by quoting our training.

**“Whilst carrying out some training on the Shelter Scotland online training hub I came across some information that said that empty homes officers should have read only access to Council tax records. I proposed this using the information below and have now been granted access to the system. This has now allowed me to be more productive and contact owners quicker than before.”**

- Empty homes officer

We work to mainstream empty homes work and to make connections with other stakeholders such as national government, or other professional and community groups, looking to share opportunities or remove barriers to bringing homes back into use. We take care to tailor our events to meet the needs of the empty homes officers and seek their feedback, for example, through pulse surveys to event attendees and via our annual survey sent to empty homes officers.

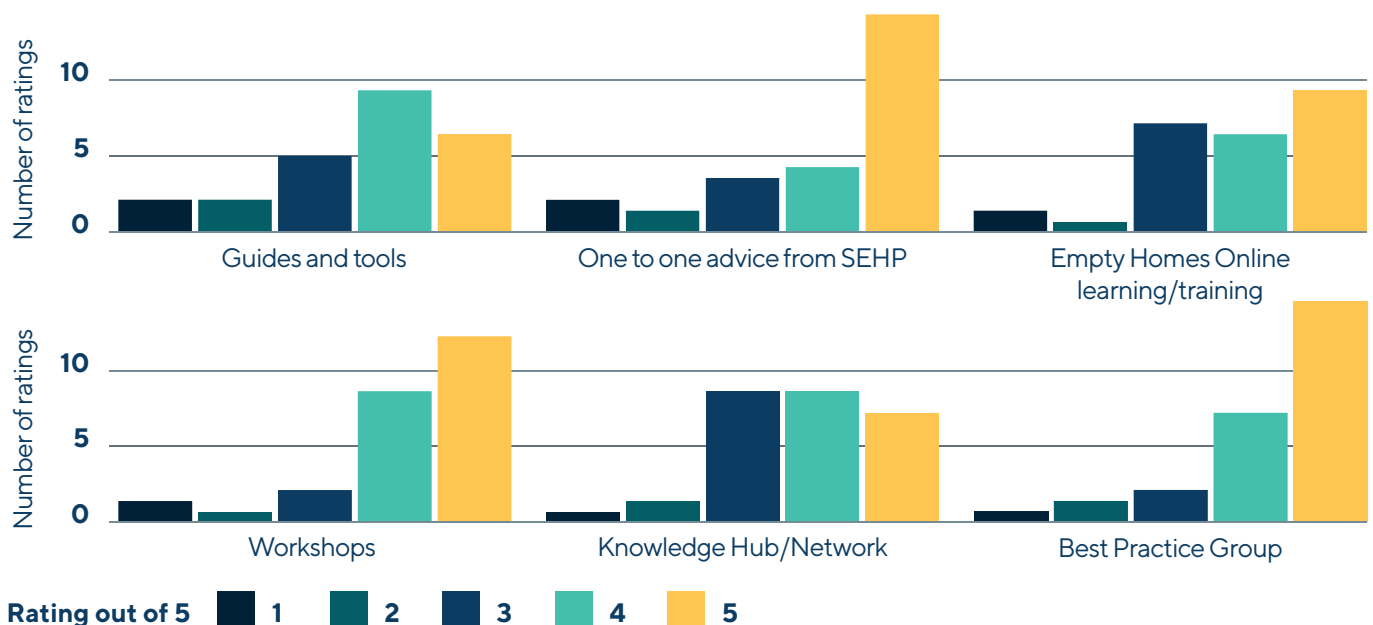
### Annual survey

We asked EHOs to rate the usefulness of Best Practice meetings



We facilitate Best Practice meetings to create a forum for empty homes officers to discuss current issues in the sector and to share practices and issues with their peers. A benefit of these meetings is that they appeal to both the new and more experienced officers. Going forward, acting on feedback from officers, there will be an increased number of best practice meetings with greater engagement with more experienced officers through a rural forum and increased visits with the officers.

We asked EHOs to rate the usefulness of different tools provided by SEHP from 1 to 5



## SEHP 2023 Annual Survey ratings

**“I really appreciate the network of empty homes officers. I have been greatly supported by them and the partnership.”**

**“We would like to mention that the service provided by SEHP has been invaluable to us as a service and council and this is reflected in the work that we are able to achieve in relation to empty homes.”**

**“Guides & tools have not been accessed this financial year. The score for these areas is related to our use and not the performance of the tools. Local authority needs differ depending on experience.”**

Acting upon feedback from Best Practice meetings we sought to provide the officers with further resources to aid their work. To this end we are funding a partnership with Brodies Solicitors who have been providing ongoing legal advice to officers. The officers can complete a referral form with anonymised case details to receive advice.

Transparency of ownership can be a challenge in Scotland, where over 30% of land and property ownership is locked in the historic 400 year old Sasine Register. We have entered into a partnership with Millar & Bryce, a property title and land register provider to support local authorities to identify the ownership of properties that may have been empty for several years or even decades.

**“The obvious route in this situation is for the co-owner to make an application to the sheriff Court for division and sale of the property. In practice, this means requesting that the court orders the sale of the property and makes an equitable division of the proceeds.”**

- Brodies advice extract example regarding remedies available to joint owners where the other owner is untraceable.

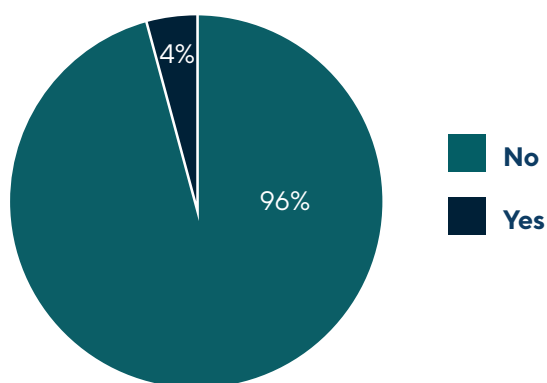
**“With the property market under pressure, it is vital that we are able to bring homes back into use to boost supply. The opportunity to deploy Millar and Bryce’s skills in complex property and land ownership identification in such a beneficial way for communities across Scotland will help to ensure we can unlock homes quicker for people.”**

- Richard Hepburn, Managing Director of Millar & Bryce, a Landmark Information Group business

## Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) Best Practice and Knowledge Sharing Network Event

We continually seek to share any solutions and means to bring homes back into use and Compulsory Purchase Orders is another potential tool. This is identified as a strategic priority as our survey data shows that this power is being used infrequently among Scottish Local Authorities.

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



SEHP 2023 Annual Survey. 27 LA responses.

Glasgow City Council is active and effective in using CPO and so the SEHP asked them to share network wide online CPO training events. The council shared a practical guide for Local Authorities to use CPO where suitable and they demonstrated how they manage the legal CPO process, their procedures and internal resources. Many councils are reluctant to use CPO for empty homes cases and it is hoped these events will inspire confidence.

The session was well attended with 92 attendees from 21 local authorities, including attendees from the Scottish Government, the Land Commission, housing services, legal representatives, and policy and senior management and strategy roles. It is hoped that other local authorities will work to replicate this example and there has been ongoing discussions between GCC and other councils after these events.

## 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

## SEHP conference

The theme of this year's conference, held at The Engine Shed in Stirling was sustainability with the title 'Repair, Reuse, Revitalise'. Speakers included Shona Robison MSP, cabinet secretary for housing, John Kerr, housing development & homelessness manager at West Dunbartonshire Council, and Chris Morgan director, John Gilbert Architects.

The conference also saw the launch of our Empty Homes Framework template and guidance, covered elsewhere in this impact report.

Finders International, the gold sponsor of the conference, also sponsored the 12th Scottish Empty Homes Awards recognising and celebrating the outstanding work and achievements of individuals and organisations in the revitalisation of empty homes across Scotland.

The next pages look at the winners and shortlisted nominees at this year's awards.



## Best use of empty homes work to create social/affordable housing

For strong contribution to increasing supply of social/affordable housing.

### WINNER - Grapes, South of Scotland Community Housing



The C listed Grapes Hotel in an Outstanding Conservation Area in Whithorn dates back to 1800 and had been empty for 30 years. With assistance from South of Scotland Community Housing, All Roads Lead to Whithorn, a local development trust, was able repurpose the hotel into much needed, community owned housing for local families. This has helped sustain local services and provided the community with an income to support other local development projects.

### Other shortlisted nominees

#### Holmhead Place, Glasgow City Council



This property came to the attention of the council in 2018. It had remained empty for 13 years. The absentee owner acted as a barrier to carrying out the significant repairs the property needed. A Compulsory Purchase Order was promoted, with ownership passing to Cathcart and District Housing Association in 2021. The property was amalgamated with another hard to let flat, creating a larger, much needed, accessible family home. The housing association has now been able to acquire all flats in the block voluntarily, creating more social homes.

Alison McIlavin, EHO Glasgow City Council tells the story of how the home was brought back to use in the video at the foot of this page.

#### High Street, Perth & Kinross Council



This building is in a prominent town centre location. It was empty for 24 years. The site was a blight on the community attracting anti-social behaviour and criminal activity. When the building came under new ownership in 2019 Perth and Kinross assisted with a vacant property feasibility grant. The owner also received assistance from the Empty Homes Grant initiative. The building now consists of 7 rental properties at affordable rents within LHA rates and has made a significant contribution to supply, at comparatively low cost.

[Watch the Holmhead Place video](#)

## Best retrofit of an empty home

For an excellent environmentally friendly improvement to an empty home.

### WINNER - Jameswood Villa, Argyll & Bute Council



This tenement of 4 flats sat empty for 20 years before being 'accidentally' purchased by Cal and Claire, the current owners, at auction. It was in a precarious condition, causing a number of issues for the local community. Rescuing materials and extending the longevity of the building was a key aspect of the new owner's sustainability goals from the offset. With a tight budget, they focused on maximising the efficiency of the building, rather than expensive renewables. The building has been reconfigured - the upper floor converted from two flats into one to create their family home - with the lower flats being refurbished as rental property to generate income.

The couple who purchased the property have gained a large following on social media, and their story was told in the BBC One Scotland show, Accidental Renovators. A specially recorded film of their empty homes journey is part of the conference programme this afternoon.

## Other shortlisted nominees

### Niddrie Regeneration, LAR Housing Trust



Lar Housing Trust, in conjunction with Edinburgh Health and Social Care Partnership, developed this building, which had been empty for seven years into homes for people with autism. It is Lar's first ever project dedicated to people with specialist housing needs.

The extensive refurbishment included new wiring, plumbing, windows and utilities as well as new kitchens and bathrooms. The 6 flats it has created will have a huge impact on people's lives allowing them to remain in their communities.

### Balantrushal, Lewis, Western Isles Council



The village of Balantrushal has several long term properties and has seen a severe population decline. This property had been empty for 24 years and had no insulation. In bringing it back to use, the concrete floor was lifted and insulation and underfloor heating fitted through a new air source pump. The full property was fully insulated and a multi fuel stove fitted to aid the EPC value. The property was also re-slatted and double glazing fitted throughout. Now restored, the house will once more have a family live there.

## Best use of data to inform empty homes practice

For outstanding examples of using information to get results.

### WINNER - Matchmake to rent, Aberdeen City Council



Analysis of local housing data identified there was a large demand for 1-bedroom properties that council stock could not fully provide at the time. At the same time, local research revealed a surplus of 1-bedroom properties on the rental market that had been empty for more than a year. This led to the creation of the Matchmake-to-Rent Scheme, the first in Scotland, to match private housing with tenants, reduce waiting list numbers and bring empty properties back into use. 146 properties that registered on the schemes have now been let or sold.

### Other shortlisted nominees

#### Empty Homes Register, Fife Council



Fife Council's Empty Homes Service working closely with their Property Acquisitions team to identify properties that can be brought back to use through the buyback process. Using data from Fife's Empty Homes Register, cross referenced with data regarding house sales, areas of regeneration, criteria of Housing Need across Fife and priorities of the Mutual Owners team, they interrogated the data to identify the empty properties which may be of interest to Fife's Property Acquisitions team. More than 20 properties have been brought back into use through buy back and there are a further 11 properties that where a Buyback letter has initiated contact with the owner and led to them bringing the property back into use with help from the Empty Homes Officer.

### Data Insights, Homes for Good



HFG uses data from several sources to bring empty homes back into life as part of its pilot programme. From identifying a property, finding the owner, assessing property condition, understanding the value, being able to purchase, renovating costs, then creating a new home - data is an essential decision making tool, enabling HFG to very quickly do a thorough assessment of an empty homes opportunity, both before visiting a property and then quickly thereafter. Where they are able to offer to buy a property, using data enables them to be certain and take action quickly - within 48hrs -and completion within 4 weeks.

## Empty Homes rising star

For a new start making a positive impact on empty homes work.

### WINNER - Michelle Morrison, Dundee



Michelle was appointed as Empty Homes Officer in 2021. She has shown a tenacity of purpose in promoting the principles and benefits of bringing empty homes back into use, within the council and further afield. Michelle has brought 19 Properties back in to use, with a further 4 currently on the market and is actively working with around 10% of Dundee's empty home owners. In addition, she has engaged with Helm Training, a local youthwork charity who specialise in supporting young people to transition into adult life, and who are looking to purchase properties which will provide a home for a young person, with Michelle's support.

### Other shortlisted nominees

#### Rachel Whale, Scottish Borders



Rachel started in post almost 18 months ago, and in this time she has made a significant, and positive, impact in relation to empty homes activity in the Borders. She has developed a wealth of knowledge, and also finds creative ways to proactively engage owners, as well as other stakeholders across the Borders. Rachel has also developed an empty homes grant initiative. To date she has been able to make grant offers available for 9 homes, with more potential projects and applications in the pipeline. Her efforts and achievements in a short space of time help to inspire and drive all of those who work alongside her.

#### Karlene Docherty, Perth & Kinross



Karlene seeks creative and pragmatic solutions to vacant and derelict properties in both a rural and urban context. She quickly grasped regeneration priorities, and since joining PKC, has built effective working relationships with colleagues in Housing and with external partners and stakeholders. Her expertise in working with community groups is helping them unlock empty buildings in their area to create affordable housing and or community facilities. This is shown in projects with YMCA Tayside who are converting 2 long term empty buildings into a community resource and affordable housing, and Breadalbane Trust in Aberfeldy, who are refurbishing 2 empty flats for affordable housing.



## 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 33 responses. Delegates rated the conference highly across all areas. Comments and feedback have also been reviewed and taken on board, so that the delegate experience is improved for future conferences.

### 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 8.3/10, compared to 8.2/10 in 2022.

Some of the comments from the day include -

**"I really enjoyed the conference and the venue was excellent and really handy in terms of travel. The day was long but quick and the presentations and speakers were brilliant, particularly Dr Moses Jenkins! It's always good to be able to network with colleagues from other LA's, makes you feel better that you are not the only one facing the difficulties, it's across the board and discussing and gathering information on other routes and ways to engage with Empty Homes owners and other services some Empty Homes Officer are able to offer is food for thought."**

**"Another great conference- thank you! The digital side worked well and the sound quality of the speakers was generally excellent."**

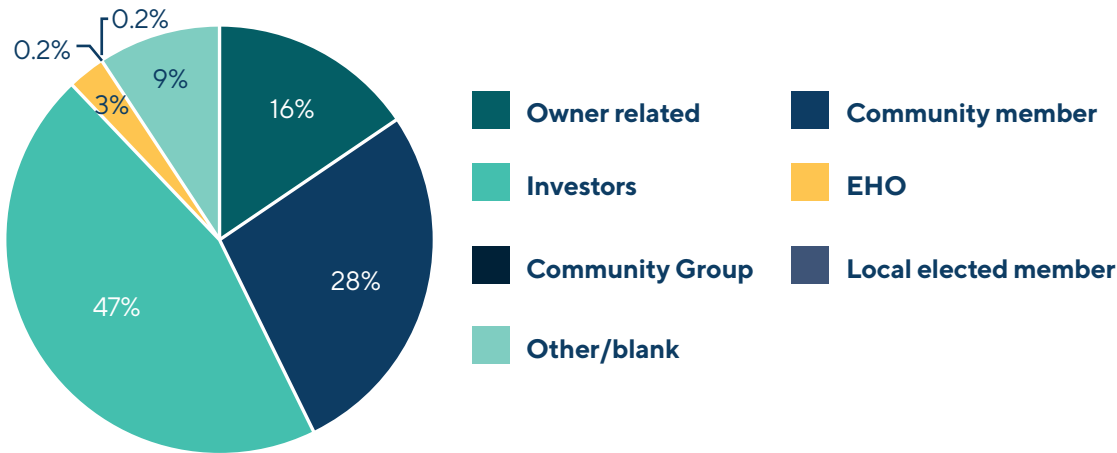
**"A lot more going on here than I thought and felt that there is a lot more scope to collaborate with different organisations who want to do this type of work."**

Meeting our strategic objectives – 5

## Run the Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service

The Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service (SEHAS) helps anyone with an empty homes issue. Since the service review in 2019 we broadened our reach and are developing resources in line with the Scottish Government’s Housing to 2040’s pledge to develop a support package for owners as a preventative measure. We received 441 contacts this year, an increase of 3.5% compared to 2021/22. This brought us close to our target number of enquiries set as 450.

### Contact breakdown by % 2022-23



Owner related contact (including family members) accounted for 16% of contacts, compared to 13% in 2021/22. This increase is encouraging against our stretch target of 25%. Direct contact is where we can be most effective in encouraging owners to bring more homes back into use.

### Number of owner related contacts 2018-2023

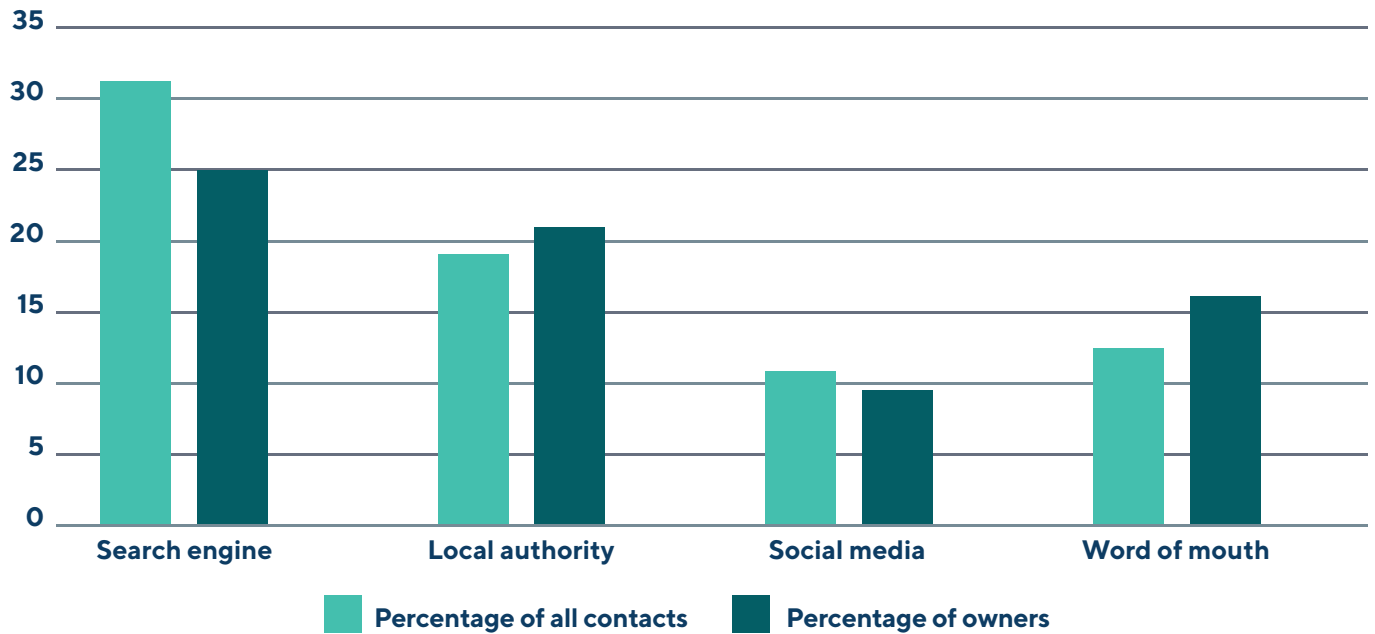


The insight from advice cases is vital to the SEHP’s overall work to promote evidence based benefits of bringing empty homes back into use and to encourage diverse involvement across Scotland.

## How is SEHAS reaching people to gain this insight?

We recorded where people heard about our service in 50% of cases. For owner related contacts we recorded this in 44% of cases.

### Where did people hear about SEHAS?



Often owners and neighbours make contact after speaking to their local authority. SEHAS is set apart as we are an independent voice.

More contacts head about us via word of mouth. This shows even where we are not reaching owners direct, word is getting out via digital marketing and wider SEHP coverage.

## Social media marketing

This boosted post was the most successful attracting 216 comments, over 2,000 likes and 187 shares. The volume of comments showed public perception of empty homes related issues, referencing connected topics including, second homes, affordable housing, planning, the rising cost of renovations, especially in remote/ rural location and owners' experiences.



## Owners

The Scottish Government's *Bringing empty homes back into use - approaches and interventions: evidence scoping review*, published this year, notes that "homes can be empty for various and complex reasons at individual, societal and structural levels". Public perception of why homes become empty sometimes differs from the harsh reality that owners face. Driving enquiries is not just about volume but about the stories behind these, the Facebook comment below is one of many that evidences how owners are feeling.

**"There is a lot more going on than simply an empty house."**

The success of SEHAS' approach lies in supporting people and not simply focussing on the property. This reflects the individual barriers to bringing an empty home back into use and providing advice on all the options as well as emotional support is often needed. The impact is demonstrated by the owner testimonies below.

**"Thank you SO much for your support and advice. I'm very grateful for your time and input, knowing I am no longer floundering, lost and alone. Your empathy and care is sincerely heartfelt and greatly appreciated."**

**"The council tax has been discounted for new tax year so that's a relief! Thanks very much for your assistance and advice, it's given me options to explore and hopefully I will have a plan in place next week or two as that's now 6 months it's been unoccupied."**

### Case study

## Raising awareness of VAT discounts as a tool to help owners

We were contacted by an owner who had recently purchased a property not realising how long it had been empty or what support was available. Thanks to their contact with SEHAS they learned of VAT discounts and received support from their local EHO to evidence the property had in fact been empty for 8 years.



Property had been empty for  
2+ years



Work on renovations  
progressed at the reduced  
VAT rate of 5%



Owner has advised that the  
property is back into use

## Neighbours

Neighbours account for over a quarter of SEHAS enquiries but there are limited tools to quickly address the problems they face. Particularly where owners can't be traced or aren't engaging.

### Case study

## Supporting a community affected by long term stuck property

SEHAS received multiple complaints over 3 years about a property that has been empty for over 20 years, in an area of high demand. With no EHO we supported neighbours to liaise with the local authority. The home has continued to deteriorate and is now an eyesore, causing considerable blight.

**Building standards, environmental health and community wardens have been involved as well as the police due to a recent break in. This is all additional cost to the public purse.**

Whilst its poor condition has been acknowledged, no action can be taken under existing legislation to force the owner to act. It is understood the unoccupied premium is in place and is being paid. The whereabouts of the owner are known, and numerous attempts to engage with the owner have been unsuccessful.

**"I have been passed around all the various departments, I have been told 'not my department' and then I am passed on to a different department only to be told 'not my department ...'"**

SEHAS continues to work with a wider community member in bringing neighbours together and has provided a template letter for them to contact elected representatives. This is a test case for our work in improving the service offered to neighbours.

As this case shows often neighbours feel frustrated with no clear understanding of why action can't be taken, or what action they can take, while properties continue to deteriorate. An extract from one neighbour's account below.



**SEHAS compiled a neighbour toolkit, split into separate guides covering the range of topics, including disrepair, environmental health, and sharing their story.**

This was the result of a wider scoping exercise to understand the limits of current building standards and environmental health legislation. This involved insight from EHOs, Environmental Health and Building Standards professionals. EHOs have provided feedback on the guides which was positive, with all agreeing they would prove informative to neighbours.

**"It's good - might encourage more people to get involved in helping to find empty properties and their owners."**

## Investors

Our work to refine the type of investor enquiry we receive continued through our Empty Homes Adviser's "Unlocking empty homes, tips for investors" blog. This was a response to a volume of speculative enquiries asking for a list of empty homes. Collating information reduced the volume of work responding to general investor queries. It also changed the type of enquiry with more investors with a confirmed plan to bring homes back into use, or identifying specific properties.

## Looking ahead

Empty homes work in Scotland was starting from a low base when the partnership began in 2010. 13 years later the picture is very different, as other parts of the UK and the rest of the world, now look to Scotland as an example. This is something that would not have been possible without the commitment of empty homes officers across the country and the continued support we have received from the Scottish Government. Proud as we are of our achievements, we cannot rest on our laurels. The coming year sees the start of a new phase for us, where our focus will be on supporting the Scottish Government in the implementation of its Housing to 2040 strategy.

We will do this by supporting local authorities taking a more strategic approach to empty homes work integrated within a wider assessment of housing need and supply and embedded in an evidence based framework of data, policies, objectives, action plans and resources. We will encourage better targeting of resources with a focus on housing delivery, to ensure that homes brought back into use are for people where they are needed most, and in turn help to reduce local affordable housing need. These are bold ambitions and to achieve this, we will continue to lead on developing an enhanced understanding of the homes that are lying empty, their locations, housing type, condition, and size.

At the same time, there must be a recognition that many homes remain empty due to wider socioeconomic factors, rather than simply being a choice made by owners. A cross-cutting local and national policy approach needs to be taken, combining effective enforcement options and financial sanctions for owners who choose to leave their homes empty, with meaningful support and assistance for owners living in areas where no one is buying because of systemic empties. There is also the need to ensure that the appropriate level of resources are allocated to empty homes work, in particular that local authorities have the appropriate number of EHOs to make meaningful inroads into reducing numbers of long term empty homes while still providing practical support for owners and neighbours whose lives are affected by empty homes.

## Our recommendations and the year ahead

Our aim is to support the Scottish Government's commitment to bringing empty homes back into use as affordable housing where possible. We will do this by meeting our Phase 2 objectives.

### Our recommendations:



A cross cutting policy approach both nationally and locally to tackle empty homes effectively.



Local authorities improve and enhance their use of data to adequately link empty homes with meeting housing supply challenges.



A basket of measures to be explored by the Scottish Government and introduced where appropriate including Compulsory Sales Order and Compulsory Rental Order.



Local authorities maintain, or increase, investment in empty homes resources, including staffing and funding measures to reflect the level of empty homes in their local area.

Our new objectives reflect the need for a more targeted approach to empty homes work as we enter into phase 2 of the partnership.

### Phase 2 new objectives:

- Support the Scottish Government in the implementation of its Housing to 2040 strategy and commitment to empty homes aspects of a National Acquisition Plan.
- Encourage every LA to adopt a strategic approach to bringing empty homes back into use.
- Promote evidence-based benefits of bringing empty homes back into use to encourage diverse involvement in empty homes work across Scotland.
- Support the network of dedicated empty homes officers through the provision of training and best practice sharing.
- Run the Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service.



