

Scottish Empty Homes Partnership MSP briefing – Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan, November 2023

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership work to support the Scottish Government's commitment to bringing empty homes back into use as affordable housing where possible. We recognise that Scotland has a housing emergency. Our vision is that privately-owned empty homes do not remain empty for 12 months or more without good reason. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership is funded by the Scottish Government and hosted by Shelter Scotland.

We welcome the recognition in the Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan that *“tackling empty homes and returning them back into use as warm, safe and secure housing can make a critical contribution to the delivery of homes across remote, rural and island communities”*. We also note the commitment from the Scottish Government to continue to work with the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership as well as local authorities and owners to *“bring more empty homes in rural and island areas back into use, promoting available funding options, sharing best practice and identify opportunities for stronger collaboration.”* We believe that empty homes are vital resources that can be used to help to address the rural housing emergency, contributing to the long-term resilience of rural communities. This briefing outlines the contribution empty homes work can make in meeting the Plan's objectives.

The Rural Housing Emergency

Bringing empty homes back to use as social and affordable housing can help to address the rural housing emergency, enabling young people to stay or move to rural areas, reversing population decline and sustaining or reviving fragile communities.

- There are 43,000 long-term empty homes in Scotland, with 27,692 empty for more than 12 months.¹
- Remote rural areas have the highest levels of empty and second homes across Scotland and 11.5% of Scotland's long term empty homes are in remote rural areas.²
- The Highland Council has the highest level of homes empty for more than a year across Scotland. In 2022, it reported 3,162 homes empty for over a year. This accounts for

¹ Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, [Statistics](#)

² Calculated from National Records of Scotland (2023) [Small Area Statistics on Households and Dwellings](#)

11.5% of the total number of homes empty for this length of time in Scotland, whilst only 4.53% of Scotland's housing is in the Highland Council.³

- Western Isles has the highest percentage of long-term empty homes in Scotland, with 4.8% of its homes empty for longer than six months. The second highest is Aberdeen (4.7%) while Shetland is the only other local authority where more than 4% of homes are long term empty (4.2%)⁴.

Bringing empty homes back to use in rural areas

A well supported, dedicated empty homes officer is crucial to success in bringing empty homes back into use.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) supports and encourage local authorities to develop and implement a strategic approach to mapping and managing empty homes work, targeting resources to bring more empty homes back into use and supporting local housing priorities, including supporting communities wishing to bring empty properties back to use through the Rural and Islands Housing Fund and bringing properties back into use as affordable, social housing. SEHP supports a network of dedicated empty homes officers (EHOs) through the provision of training and best practice sharing. Between 2010 and March 2023, a total of 9,014 empty properties have been brought back into use through the partnership work between local authorities and the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP).

The recently published Scottish Government audit⁵ of empty homes work highlighted the important role played by the SEHP, as well as the 'critical resource' of dedicated EHOs in bringing empty homes back into use. The audit also highlighted that current EHO resource is limited relative to volume of empty homes and geographic coverage, and that *"it is clear the higher the EHO resource, the better the outcomes of the number of empty homes brought back into use."*

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's innovative kickstarter partnership projects have a specific focus on reducing housing need and providing more affordable homes in rural areas, as well as sharing learning on the projects across Scotland.

- Project spotlight: Partnership between Argyll and Bute Health & Social Care Partnership, and Argyll & Bute Council

³ Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, [Where are Scotland's Long Term Empty Homes?](#)

⁴ Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, [Where are Scotland's Long Term Empty Homes?](#)

⁵ Scottish Government (2023) [Bringing empty homes back into use: audit of privately owned empty homes](#)

This project focuses on areas where a shortage of affordable accommodation to rent or buy, caused in part by large numbers of second homes, has impacted on recruitment of health and social care workers. The project, which is the first of its kind in Scotland, 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 Health and Social Care Partnership key/essential workers through tenancy agreements with owners and registered social landlords.

- Project spotlight: Tighean Innse Gall (TIG), Western Isles

TIG is 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, 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.

- Project spotlight: South of Scotland Community Housing (SOSCH)

SOSCH is 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 rural communities across south-east Scotland, in line with the Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan focus on enabling community-led housing. There has already been evidence of demand, with twenty-nine communities reaching out to SOSCH expressing an active interest in developing community-led housing in the first year of the project, and three beginning their formal engagement with SOSCH. Many other communities in the region are making good progress towards being able to deliver a community-led housing project and are engaging with SOSCH on a regular basis to achieve this goal.

Case study: All Roads Lead to Whithorn⁶

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.

Case study – Open Market Purchase in the Highland Council⁷

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 empty homes officer 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 empty homes officer, 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 the Highland Council's social housing list.

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⁶ Take from Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (2023), [Impact Report 2023](#)

⁷ Taken from Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (2023), [Impact Report 2023](#)