



Annual report 2023-2024

Scottish Empty Homes Partnership

scottish
empty homes
partnership



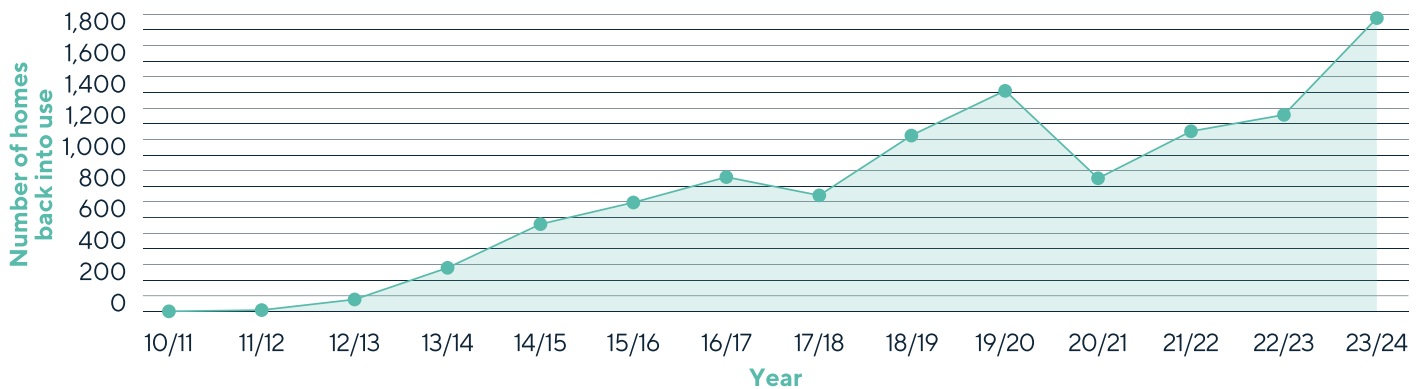
Contents

- 1** Executive summary
- 2** This year's highlights
- 3** Our key objectives
- 4** Long term empty homes in Scotland 2023/24
- 6** Case studies - Bringing empty homes back to use as social housing
- 8** Meeting our strategic objectives - 1
- 9** The difference EHOs can make
- 9** Case study - North Ayrshire Council
- 10** Case study - Moray Council
- 11** Bringing homes back into use
- 12** What happens to empty homes brought back to use
- 12** Case study - Empty homes renovation
- 14** Meeting our strategic objectives - 2
- 15** Why a strategic approach to empty homes work is essential and what it can help to deliver
- 16** Why homes become and remain empty
- 17** Case study - Repossessed property
- 18** Case study - Bringing a property back to use after seventy years empty
- 19** Meeting our strategic objectives - 3
- 19** SEHP Kickstarter Projects
- 20** South of Scotland Community Housing
- 21** Tighean Innse Gall
- 22** Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership
- 23** The Community Impact Initiative C.I.C.
- 24** Options available to officers
- 24** Case study - Council tax discretion in Perth & Kinross
- 25** Empty homes and the council tax levy
- 27** Meeting our strategic objectives - 4
- 29** Best Practice and Knowledge sharing events
- 29** Case study - Using LoCTA to help to bring a home back to use
- 30** SEHP Conference
- 36** Conference feedback
- 37** Meeting our strategic objectives - 5
- 39** The year ahead
- 40** Our recommendations

Executive summary

This impact report by the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) covers the period 2023-24 and the first year of Phase 2 in our plan. The report draws on survey responses received from 27 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 of supporting the Scottish Government's commitment to bringing empty homes back into use as affordable housing where possible. Bringing these homes back into productive use can be a quick and cost-effective way of increasing housing supply and can play an important role in helping to address Scotland's housing emergency.



More than a thousand homes have been brought back to use every year since 2018/19 except for the pandemic year of 2020/21.

The total number of homes brought back to use in 23/24 (1,875) was the highest annual figure to date.

To put the achievements into context, it took the first three years of the partnership to bring 100 homes back into use. It took almost another three years for this to increase to one thousand additional homes brought back through the intervention of empty homes officers.

Fourteen years since the partnership began in 2010, we have surpassed five figures with the total now standing at 10,889 homes.

This shows the excellent progress that has been made, thanks to the hard work and commitment of EHOs and others across the country.

It was great to see the work of the partnership and empty homes officers recognised in the independent audit of empty homes carried out on behalf of the Scottish Government. It noted that 'The most effective means of bringing properties back into use is through an EHO being employed to prioritise empty homes action' and that 'it is clear, that this would not have been achieved without SEHPs support and influencing role.' Although we have made some great achievements, we know that more can still be done.

In the same year that a record number of empty homes were brought back to use, the number of homes remaining empty for a year or longer also increased. This should not be happening at a time when the country is facing a housing emergency.

We are pleased to see a number of local authorities expanding their empty homes service with the appointment of additional officers. We would encourage more local authorities to use the revenue generated through the surcharge on second homes and long term empty homes to employ additional empty homes officers, and to consider grants and loans to help owners bring properties back to use as affordable housing.

There is also more that can be done to tackle the barriers to bringing more homes back to use. We hope that the announcement last year that the Scottish Government will 'progress work to reform and modernise Compulsory Purchase Orders' and 'continue to consider the justification for, and practical operation of, Compulsory Sales Orders' will lead to changes to the law that will provide local authorities with a range of enforcement measures that can be used effectively to force owners to bring properties back to use where there is unmet demand for housing or where the homes are a blight on the surrounding neighbourhood.

We know that empty homes are the asset on our doorstep. We know that empty homes officers are already doing all they can to bring as many of these homes back to use as possible. We hope that additional resources and legislation will help to increase the number of empty homes returned to use and help to tackle the housing emergency over the next year and beyond.

This year's highlights

Contributing to housing supply



1875 homes reported back into use



10,889 homes returned to use since 2010



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

Increasing resources



2 new councils committing to empty homes work



2 councils expanded their empty homes services

Building capacity



11 local authorities developing empty homes strategies



1 new strategic partnership



102 attendees at the empty homes conference



255 attendees at our best practice events

Delivering advice



356 new contacts to the advice service



Dedicated SEHAS page launched on SEHP website

Our key objectives

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. In 2023 we commenced phase 2 of our work with a new aim and updated strategic objectives. These reflect both the progress that has been made towards the establishment of empty homes services in every local authority in Scotland, and the need to encourage local authorities to integrate empty homes work within a wider assessment of housing need, supported by an evidence based framework of data, policies, objectives, action plans and resources.

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 support the Scottish Government's commitment to bringing empty homes back into use as affordable housing where possible by meeting our five key strategic objectives:



Strategic objective 1 -
Support the Scottish Government in the implementation of its Housing to 2040 strategy and commitment to empty homes aspects of a National Acquisition Plan.

Scotland is facing a housing emergency. Empty homes can play a vital role in providing some of the housing the country needs. We will support the Scottish Government to deliver the actions on empty homes set out in the strategy and to promote the role that empty homes have to play in delivering all parts of the Housing to 2040 Route Map.



Strategic objective 3 -
Promote evidence-based benefits of bringing empty homes back into use to encourage diverse involvement in empty homes work across Scotland.

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. We will maintain an evidence base that demonstrates how empty homes can help to deliver the aims and objectives of community groups, registered social landlords, and other private bodies. We will promote joint working between local authorities and third sector organisations to bring empty homes back to use.



Strategic objective 5 -
Run 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. We will provide tailored advice via the dedicated telephone service, develop online advice, and use social media to raise awareness of the help and support we offer, to make sure that no one has to deal with an empty home on their own.



Strategic objective 2 -
Encourage every LA to adopt a strategic approach to bringing empty homes back into use.

We want every local authority to see empty homes work as a key part of housing strategy, not a standalone optional activity. We will support 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.



Strategic objective 4 -
Support the network of dedicated empty homes officers through the provision of training and best practice sharing.

Empty Homes Officers give advice and information on a range of issues to owners and neighbours of empty homes. We will 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.

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.

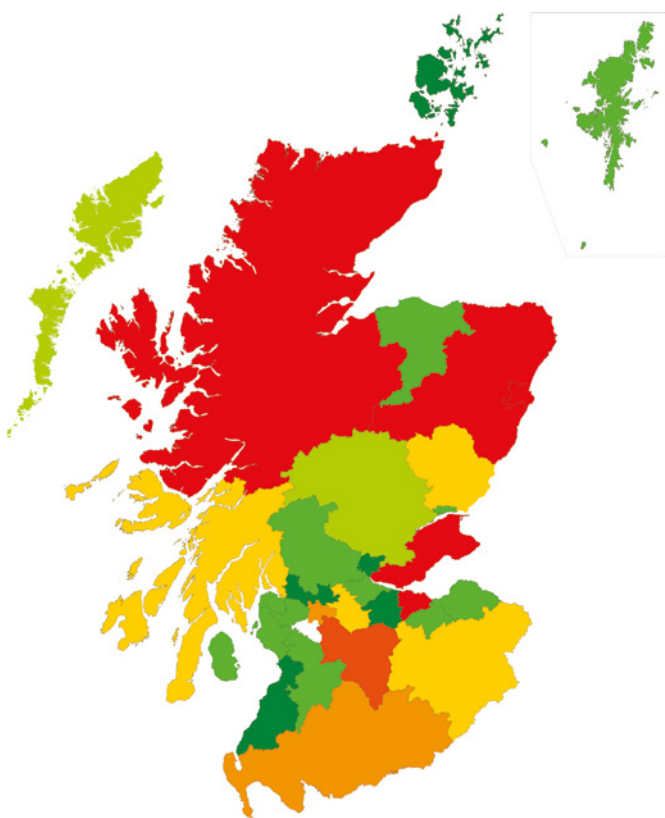
The Impact Report sets out how we delivered against all of our objectives for 2023/24 and also includes our Delivery Priorities for 2024/25 in the Looking Ahead section at the end of this report.

Long term empty homes in Scotland 2023/24

Figures published by the Scottish Government in December showed that there were **46,217 empty homes in Scotland**. Of these, **17,937 had been empty for less than a year**, and **28,280 had been empty for 12 months or longer**.

Based on previous years, it is likely that the vast majority of the 17,937 homes empty for less than a year will have returned to use, either by being sold or rented since the figures were published.

However, it is equally likely that many of the ones that remain unoccupied will not have been brought back to use by the time our next impact report is published. Where homes are brought back to use more than a year after becoming empty, it is likely that the owner will have received support from an empty homes officer, and that this support will have played a vital role in ensuring the home has ceased to be empty.



Total 12 Months+ LTE Homes



The number of homes empty for longer than a year increased by 588 in 2023 from 27,692. This suggests that at least eleven homes a week are passing the one year empty mark. Without the work of EHOs, this figure would undoubtedly have been higher, and many other homes that have been returned to use after several years empty would also have remained unoccupied. The longer a home remains empty, the harder it becomes to bring it back into use.

By the end of June ten local authorities had declared a housing emergency (Angus, Argyll and Bute, Dumfries and Galloway, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Fife, Scottish Borders, South Lanarkshire, West Dunbartonshire and West Lothian). In total these local authorities have more than 12,000 homes that have been empty for more than a year. All of these areas recognise the role that empty homes can play in addressing the housing emergency. West Lothian became the latest local authority to appoint a dedicated empty homes officer at the start of the year. Argyll and Bute and Fife have both recruited additional EHOs in the past twelve months. Edinburgh are in the process of appointing a second EHO and 'increas(ing) the number of empty homes brought into use and allocated to homeless people through the Empty Homes Partnership' is one of the actions listed in its Housing Emergency Action Plan. SEHP has also established kickstarter projects with support of the local authority and others in Scottish Borders and Argyll and Bute.

While these, and other local authorities, have helped to return record numbers of empty homes to use this year, there is much more that can be delivered through greater resources and strategic approaches that seek to match the supply of empty homes with the demand for social and affordable housing.

The partnership strongly encourages all local authorities to use at least some of the revenue generated through the council tax premium on second homes and empty homes towards bringing more empty homes back into use for social or affordable housing. Examples of this include practical support to empty homes owners through loan and grant schemes or the maintenance and expansion of empty homes services. This will help local authorities meet their housing demand.

Local Authority	Total LTE Homes	Total 12 Months+ LTE Homes	% of Scotland's 12 Months+ LTE Homes	% of Scotland's Homes
Aberdeen City	5,594	2,615	9.25%	4.57%
Aberdeenshire	2,704	1,988	7.03%	4.50%
Angus	1,236	986	3.49%	2.14%
Argyll & Bute	1,329	915	3.24%	1.81%
City of Edinburgh	7,200	2,751	9.73%	9.69%
Clackmannanshire	222	102	0.36%	0.93%
Dumfries & Galloway	1,844	1,258	4.45%	2.80%
Dundee	1,067	485	1.71%	2.80%
East Ayrshire	524	369	1.30%	2.20%
East Dunbartonshire	317	220	0.78%	1.77%
East Lothian	498	334	1.18%	1.92%
East Renfrewshire*	124	n/a	n/a	1.50%
Falkirk	817	361	1.28%	2.82%
Fife	2,471	1,911	6.76%	6.72%
Glasgow	2,696	1,395	4.93%	11.92%
Highland	3,390	3,334	11.79%	4.54%
Inverclyde	575	441	1.56%	1.47%
Midlothian	423	423	1.50%	1.62%
Moray	928	539	1.91%	1.73%
Na h-Eileanan Siar	688	581	2.05%	0.55%
North Ayrshire	1,040	554	1.96%	2.58%
North Lanarkshire	1,885	1,090	3.85%	5.90%
Orkney	252	201	0.71%	0.43%
Perth & Kinross	1,275	776	2.74%	2.80%
Renfrewshire	796	394	1.39%	3.35%
Scottish Borders	1,580	999	3.53%	2.20%
Shetland	629	428	1.51%	0.43%
South Ayrshire	816	303	1.07%	2.08%
South Lanarkshire	1,630	1,493	5.28%	5.83%
Stirling	606	465	1.64%	1.58%
West Dunbartonshire	494	260	0.92%	1.69%
West Lothian	567	309	1.09%	3.12%

* - number of LTE homes empty for 12+ months in East Renfrewshire was not included in figures published by Scottish Government

Small area statistics on households and dwellings -

[Find out more](#)

Housing statistics: Empty properties and second homes -

[Find out more](#)

CASE STUDIES

Bringing empty homes back to use as social housing**1. Local authority letting services**

Empty since 2018, this property was brought back into use to meet social housing need through South Ayrshire's Social Letting Service, Your Choice. The Empty Homes Officer played a key role by identifying it as a potential candidate for the Your Choice service and persuading the owner to consider Your Choice as an option.

The owner purchased the property in 2021. It required significant renovation work for it to be brought back into use.

The owner carried out this work themselves and towards the end of the renovation work, unsure of the best way to rent the property out, they responded to a letter sent by South Ayrshire's EHO which suggested considering Your Choice.

The EHO and the Accommodation Assistant from Your Choice collaborated to engage with the owner and to visit the property and assess its suitability for the scheme. The owner registered with the scheme, resulting in the property being let to an applicant experiencing homelessness in June 2023, alleviating the need for temporary accommodation and providing a long term, stable tenancy to a vulnerable person.

This case study is a perfect example of empty homes being a key part of the solution to tackling housing shortages.

The EHO and Your Choice continue to work together to identify further properties that can be brought back into use at affordable rent.

**2. Inherited properties**

The Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service (SEHAS) played a key role in supporting an owner of an empty home in the absence of an EHO. They were vital in facilitating the sale of the property to Homes For Good, a social enterprise private sector lettings agency specialising in providing homes for people on low incomes or benefits.

The owner contacted SEHAS after inheriting a property in need of extensive renovation and refurbishment, including upgrades to insulation and heating systems. Their desire was to reach a point where they could let the property socially, but with limited funds for renovation work this was unrealistic and they had begun to get overwhelmed.

Over the course of a number of phone calls, SEHAS were able to discuss suitable alternatives to letting out the property, and suggested the owner consider selling. Due to the positive relationship the SEHAS adviser had built with the owner, this suggestion was well received and led to SEHAS putting the owner in touch with Homes For Good who, after assessing the property, made an offer to buy.

The owner gladly accepted the offer. As Homes For Good's model allows them to purchase and renovate properties at great pace, the property was soon on the market at an affordable rent and the owner was delighted his home had gone to a good cause.



3. Supporting regeneration

The Glentrool Regeneration project by SOSCH, saw three long term empty homes brought back into use in a rural community in Dumfries and Galloway. The area sits within Galloway Forest Park and is in a UNESCO biosphere reserve, meaning that it is an extremely remote and fragile community.

Three properties that had previously been used for social rent had been left empty for three years and had fallen into various states of disrepair. Before SOSCH stepped in, the properties were due to be advertised for sale, which worried the community who feared that the properties might become second homes, as well as removing their access to affordable housing.

SOSCH worked in partnership with Glentrool and Bargrennan Community Trust to assess local housing and community need. The previously empty homes now belong to the community, with each of the properties now let out to people with local connections who were previously unable to move into the community due to a lack of affordable housing. These new tenants are now contributing to the regeneration and long-term sustainability of the community.

Each property was retrofitted to low energy standards, ensuring lower energy bills and a more durable future for the tenants.

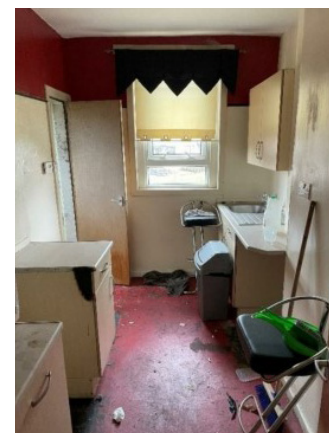


4. Tackling anti-social behaviour

A long-term empty home in North Lanarkshire was purchased by Homes for Good after being identified to them by Glasgow Credit Union following repossession. The home, which had been empty for 12 months, was in a bad state of disrepair and had been a source of anti-social behaviour in the community.

The property was causing concern and distress to the neighbour due to the damage it had caused to their property, including water ingress. The property was fully renovated (including the damage to the downstairs property), re-designed, and furnished by Homes for Good all within 3 months of purchase.

It was then rented out at an affordable, below market rate to a tenant in need of urgent housing. The tenant had recently gone through a relationship break up and needed somewhere immediate to move in to. Renovating and letting the property had a positive effect for the tenant who moved in, for the downstairs neighbour who had been negatively affected by the ongoing damage, and for the community who had been impacted by having an empty home on their street. It was also the beginning of a partnership between Homes for Good and Glasgow Credit Union that continues to identify empty homes to be brought back into use in this way.



MEETING OUR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES - 1

Support the Scottish Government in the implementation of its Housing to 2040 strategy and commitment to empty homes aspects of a National Acquisition Plan

This objective mirrors the overall aim of phase 2 of the partnership and underpins much of the work being taken forward under our second and third strategic objective. This is demonstrated by the following quotes from the independent audit of empty homes work carried out by Indigo House on behalf of the Scottish Government published last year.

‘SEHP is providing a crucial role in data analysis and strategic planning advisory work, which most EHOs do not have the time for as they are focused on critical frontline work with homeowners. Increasingly, SEHP is also providing support to wider organisations to focus on empty homes, and again it is clear SEHP provides an important enabling role beyond the local authority support role.’

‘Bringing empty homes back into use can form part of strategies to meet housing need, particularly in the context that new-build housing alone cannot be carried out at the pace and scale required to meet all housing requirements. Bringing empty homes back into use can be lower cost than new build and can provide positive economic and social impacts. In rural areas empty homes strategies can help revive and sustain fragile communities, particularly where second homes contribute to housing pressure, and in urban areas, city and town centre regeneration can help reverse area decline.’

Our work on data analysis is continuing to improve the quantity and quality of data available on distribution of empty homes across and within local authorities in Scotland. We now publish annual data showing the proportion of Scotland’s homes and long term empty homes in each local authority and, using Small Area data published by National Records of Scotland, have produced a set of reports showing how empty homes are distributed within the local authorities themselves.

Additionally, we are part of the Scottish Government short-term working group set up to review the range of data collected on second homes, empty homes and long term empty homes. Our invitation to be involved in this work followed on from analysis we carried out on annual figures for homes empty for six months or longer from a number of local authorities, that revealed some discrepancies in what was being included in the totals. Further work is now being taken forward to address this.

Figures in this year’s survey demonstrate how our support is helping local authorities to take forward work to bring empty homes back to use to meet the commitments in Housing to 2040, with 18 local authorities reporting that they now have a buy back or acquisition programme, and 11 local authorities developing strategic empty homes strategies or frameworks.

We hope that in the coming year as local authorities look to make fuller use of the National Acquisition Programme that they will recognise the essential role that EHOs can play in this. The contact between an EHO and an owner is the first stage of establishing the barriers to bringing homes back to use and exploring options such as buy backs that they may otherwise not be aware of. Without their involvement the process of identifying homes that could form part of the programme, and getting agreement from the owners to do this, becomes exponentially harder.

Bringing Homes Back to Use: audit of privately owned empty homes is available here -

[Find out more](#)

The difference EHOs can make

27 of Scotland's 32 local authorities have at least one empty homes officer or equivalent.

6 local authorities have more than one, following recruitment of a second EHO to work specifically on empty homes for key health and social care workers in Argyll and Bute in 2023 last year and recruitment of a second EHO in Fife earlier this year. At the time of writing, City of Edinburgh are also in the process of recruiting a second EHO.

The empty homes audit noted that 'The most effective means of bringing properties back into use is through an EHO being employed to prioritise empty homes action' and that 'The role of the local authority Empty Homes Officer (EHO) is a critical resource in supporting owners with information and advice, and to influence owners to bring homes back into use. Critical success factors in the EHO's role are the importance of understanding local housing markets, and taking a bespoke approach, responsive to individual empty homeowners' needs to build trust and persuade.'

The work of the empty homes team in North Ayrshire and the Home Improvement Officer in Moray council highlight the differences EHOs make.

CASE STUDY

North Ayrshire Council

North Ayrshire local authority resumed their empty homes service this year, after it was put on hold during the pandemic. Emma Anderson, the Team Manager, tells us about how the team are now working to reduce the number of long term empty homes.

In North Ayrshire, we have 3 Housing Officers who undertake empty homes as part of their remit. Each Officer has an area that they cover, a model that works really well for us. We specifically work from the council tax levy reports as well as any enquiries from the public. The Housing Officers combine empty homes work with property condition work, allowing us to reduce site visits.

Prior to 2020 we would send owners subject to the levy an empty homes survey which was several pages long but with very little return. When empty homes work resumed, we began using the Shelter Empty Homes Partnership postcard, customising it for our own needs. This has saved us administrative time and has resulted in a much higher response from owners.

We have also developed a series of bespoke reports using Power Bi which allows each Officer to see a breakdown of all their empty homes by town, the length of time empty and also to identify clusters of empty homes and/or "problem" areas.

Having this information at our fingertips has really made a difference. Going forward we will be targeting specific areas where empty homes are prevalent with a view to trying to reduce the number of empty homes across North Ayrshire.



North Ayrshire Council
Comhairle Siorrachd Àir a Tuath



CASE STUDY

Moray Council

Trudi Lawrie, the Home Improvement Officer with responsibility for empty homes work at Moray Council since 2014, shared with us case studies highlighting the complex and varied work required around empty homes and the difference an EHO can make.

1. Anti-social behaviour affecting neighbouring properties

There is a property located in town that was attracting frequent antisocial behaviour, illegal entry and property damage resulting in a number of police and fire service visits. It is on the fire service list of at-risk properties and regularly monitored by them. Building Control have also been involved. Neighbours often complain because they have tried to sell but their house, but the value is now negatively affected. The owner keeps securing the property but is not able to do more without significant support. By overcoming the owners initial reticence and engaging with them and with other affected parties, we are working to achieve a long-term solution to a complex issue.

2. Supporting vulnerable adults

A town centre property is owned by someone with significant hoarding and mental health issues. The property is in poor condition and attracts vermin and antisocial behaviour including illegal entry. It also generates a number of neighbourhood complaints. It has required visits from the police and fire service and previous enforcement action by Environmental Health. Due to his age, health and property condition, the owner now lives in local authority property where he is now accruing debts on both properties (although he does make some payment of arrears). We established a multi-agency support group including housing, council tax, and organised a dedicated Social Worker. The complexities of the case mean finding a resolution has been an ongoing process. Since the creation of the multi-agency group, progress is being made with the owner now expressing an interest in selling this property to the local authority as part of the buy-back initiative, bringing it back into affordable housing supply.

3. Helping a recently bereaved owner

A couple had purchased a rural property with a view to renovate and use as a retirement home. The wife was creating the internal design including new kitchens and bathrooms. Sadly, she died before the project could be completed and her husband could not face completing his wife's work without her. The property sat vacant for over two years creating financial issues until he received empty homes support. Time was spent building trust before support was provided to access discounts, organise trades and other supports for the renovations to be completed. The property was eventually sold to recoup the costs. The owner was then able to take his first holiday in years and start to fully grieve the loss of his wife. He was very appreciative of the support and empathy he received from the officer which allowed him to start rebuilding his life, sending a thank you card expressing his gratitude.



Sadly, Moray council have made the decision to discontinue the post at the end of July 2024, meaning that there will no longer be a dedicated empty homes service in Moray.

We are disappointed that they have made this decision at a time when local authorities across the country are making empty homes work a key strand of their local housing strategy. We believe it will have a negative effect on work to acquire empty homes as part of an acquisition programme and will also take away a vital resource for owners wishing to bring their homes back to use, or neighbours faced with stress from living next door to an empty home.

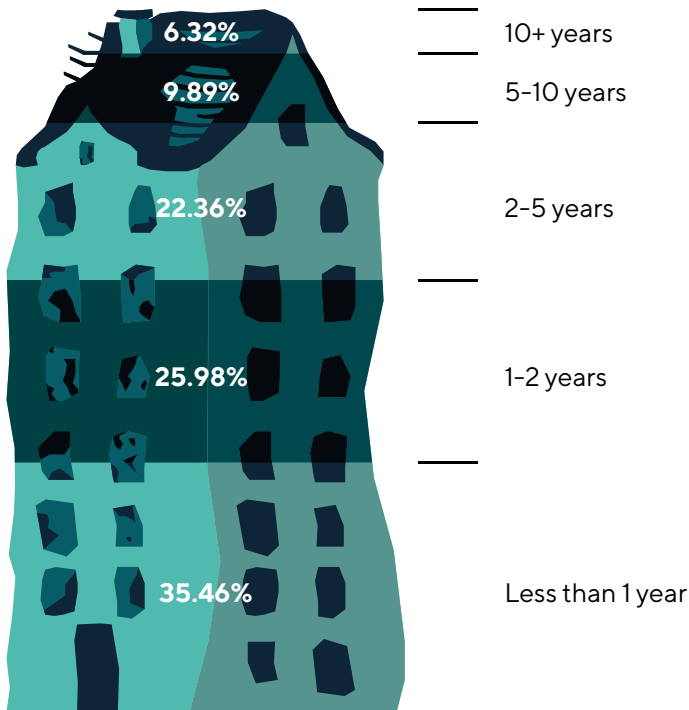
Bringing homes back into use

This year EHOs recorded 1,875 properties brought back into use. This is the highest annual total to date.

This was a 49% increase on the 2022 total of 1,257 and almost 33% higher than the previous highest annual total of 1,412 prior to the pandemic.

Homes brought back to use

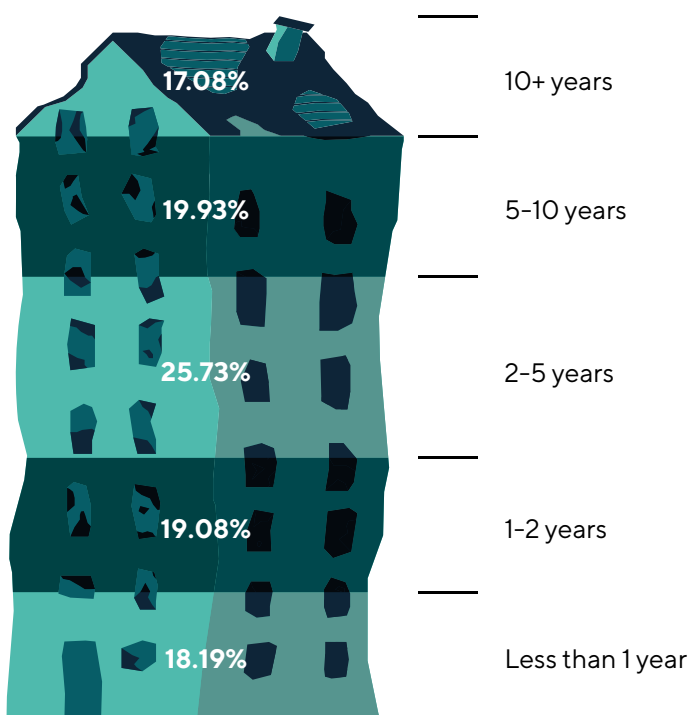
Information on how long the home was empty for was available for 92% (1642) of these properties.



The increased number of homes brought back to use has been driven by a large increase in homes that had been empty for less than a year. However, this has not come at the expense of work on older cases. The number of homes brought back to use that had been empty for five years or more increased by 26% to 282.

Active cases

Of the 4,345 active cases EHOs have at present, information was provided on length of time empty for 70% of properties.



Properties empty for 5 to 10 years and 10 years or longer combined make up just over 37% of current active caseload. Bringing these homes back to use will often take several years and be fraught with difficulties. Finding out who the owner is, where they are now, whether they are alive, or who their next of kin or executor is if they are deceased, can all take time. Where an owner has died, it is often the case that no one has taken out a grant of confirmation on their estate, and relatives may be unwilling or unable to do this where they know that the property is in a state of severe disrepair and will require a lot of expensive renovation work to make it habitable and suitable for selling or renting on the open market. In some instances, the search for surviving relatives itself becomes a barrier to bringing the property back to use as genealogists scour records spanning several continents and several generations and remain unable to find anyone with a full or partial title to the property.

The properties are unlikely to be suitable for compulsory purchase orders, often due to property condition or location, which means that there is little that can be done to bring the home back to use.

The SEHP would welcome any additional enforcement options that can be used to unlock these homes, and other stuck properties that have been empty for several years and allowed to deteriorate to such an extent that they are a blight on the community and a source of extreme stress and anxiety for neighbours.

What happens to empty homes brought back to use

EHOs provided us with information on the outcomes of the cases that they had concluded during the year. EHOs reported 1,159 outcomes. The responses illustrate the wide range of options that can be available to owners of empty homes to bring their property back into use.

Outcome	Number of homes	% of total
Purchased by the council (including buybacks)	179	13.39%
Let through a housing association management scheme	4	0.30%
Let through a private sector leasing scheme	18	1.35%
Let at affordable rent	68	5.09%
Sold through a matchmaker scheme	13	0.97%
Owner occupied	387	28.95%
Let privately	342	25.58%
Sold through estate agent	227	16.98%
Sold at auction	10	0.75%

It is encouraging to note that purchases by the council accounted for 13% of all outcomes.

We welcome the guidance published by the Scottish Government to coincide with the launch of the National Acquisition Programme, which noted that 'engaging with local authority Empty Homes Officers to identify privately owned homes that could be returned to active use' was one way that local authorities may find useful for identifying properties to acquire under the programme. We hope that local authorities will use funding available through the National Acquisition Programme to increase the number of homes purchased in this way over the coming years.

Owner occupation was the most common outcome identified in our survey accounting for 29% of homes brought back to use. This will include properties inherited by the current owner, properties requiring extensive renovation, and those that owners were struggling to sell.

Private lets also accounted for a quarter of all outcomes. We assume that the majority will have been let in line with current private rental rates. This should still be seen as a positive outcome as the rental contributes to easing housing pressures and reducing the negative impact that empty homes can have on communities.

17% of homes were sold through estate agents. Further information on what happened after the purchase is unavailable.

CASE STUDY

Empty homes renovation

We spoke to Nick Hobson about his renovation of a maisonette flat in Dumfries.

'What is the story of your empty home project?'

The project is the renovation of a maisonette flat circa 1850 within the Dumfries Conservation Area, although the flat isn't listed. The flat had been poorly maintained, upgraded and then left empty for over 10 years before we took it on.

Several areas of penetrating damp were present and neither the roof or walls were insulated. We decided the best course of action was to re-slate the roof, strip out all the poorly installed upgrading work, remove wall and ceiling linings, electrics, heating and fixtures/fittings and essentially start again.



'What was the process of bringing your empty home back into use?'

We purchased the flat in February 2023. Both planning and building warrant submissions were obtained by late spring 2023 after which the process of stripping out the building commenced. Internal repairs and reinstatement of partitions followed thereafter along with reinsulating the rooms in the roof and lower floor external walls. A new staircase was installed late summer and work on re-slatting the roof commenced late autumn through to the winter months, which was challenging!

Rewiring and replumbing will be completed by April 2024.

We are aiming to have the works fully completed by end of summer 2024.

'Did you get any help from the Empty Homes team at Dumfries and Galloway Council?'

Dumfries and Galloway Council were approached prior to purchasing the property regarding any assistance or funding they could provide. They confirmed the property had been empty for over 10 years therefore it would qualify for 0% VAT. They also suggested we apply for their Empty Homes Grant funding. An application was submitted, and we successfully obtained 50% funding toward certain elements of the build.



'What do you think makes this Empty Homes project special?'

This property belongs to my daughter who is studying in Dumfries and has invested all her savings into the property purchase. Financial support from ourselves and the grant funding have enabled us to provide her with warm, dry and healthy property to start her life away from home and provide us, as architects, an opportunity to use environmentally friendly materials on an older property; something that will become a necessity in the coming years as we move towards net zero. We have tried to reuse and upcycle as many fixtures as possible and anything that we couldn't use has been taken to the local recycling centre. The maisonette has three bedrooms so the intention will be to offer the other rooms to student lodgers to provide low cost, good quality, healthy accommodation at an affordable rental level.

In undertaking the work we have peeled back layers of history and discovered old shoes, cigarette cards and handcrafted wood toys, including one of a World War II Spitfire. On the downside the amount of historic soot we've removed has been incredible! Local people have stopped and interacted with us with emotion and relief that this little building is being rescued, including someone who remembered visiting it as the home of their best pal over 50 years earlier. We hope that by renovating we may act as a catalyst for other refurbishment work in the area.



'And if you had to sum it up in a sentence?'

It's been hard (and very dirty) work but equally an emotional, rewarding and positive experience.

MEETING OUR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES - 2

Encourage every LA to adopt a strategic approach to bringing empty homes back into use

Our Strategic Empty Homes Framework, developed in collaboration with housing specialists Arneil Johnston, is central to the work we have taken forward to deliver this objective.

The framework provides a practical 8 step guide to support local authorities looking to adopt a strategic approach to empty homes work that places it within the context of their wider housing strategy.



The final version of the Framework guidance and template were published in September 2023 and launched at the COSLA annual conference in the same month. We have also given presentations and promoted the framework at events organised by Scottish Housing Network, Association of Public Service Excellence, ALACHO, Glasgow City Council, Scotland's Town Partnership, Holyrood Events, and Homeless Network Scotland.

We've had international interest from an organisation in Greece who are looking to bring empty homes back into use to house refugees. They were looking at our work as a best practice example and at how the Framework could be adapted as the basis for their work going forward.

Closer to home, delivery of a Strategic Empty Homes Framework is the central part of a one year Kickstarter project we have recently commenced with Highland Council and the recently appointed EHO in West Lothian Council is using the template and guidance for an Empty Homes Strategy there.

From our annual survey results and local authority websites



9 EHOs said their local authorities had an empty homes strategy or strategic empty homes framework...



...**11 local authorities** advised that they are in the process of developing one...



...and **18 local authorities** have an empty homes acquisition or buy-back scheme

Why a strategic approach to empty homes work is essential and what it can help to deliver



Mel Booth, Senior Housing Strategy Officer at Aberdeen City Council (ACC) talks about the importance of thinking strategically about empty homes work.

Adopting a strategic approach to empty homes work is essential in ensuring that empty homes professionals can progress beyond reactionary responses to empty properties causing issues in the community. Instead, they can take proactive measures to ensure that the level of empty homes in the city reduces and the root causes are identified. In Aberdeen, the Empty Homes team has implemented several strategic processes to complement our day-to-day operational work. The team has cultivated strong ongoing relationships with other ACC services which helps to ensure that each service contributes to the strategic goals of the council in a mutually beneficial manner. This is exemplified best by the Empty Homes Strategic Working Group which is attended by representatives of several ACC services and provides a platform for the Empty Homes team to link its strategic work with that of other services.

A recent example would be linking with the Heritage and Place programme, an area-based funding programme that aims to contribute to the development of vibrant and sustainable places in Scotland. ACC were awarded grant funding for a development phase in the city centre, and the Empty Homes team were able to link in with the project team and provide them with data regarding empty homes that could be acquired or developed as part of this city centre regeneration. The project team were able to attend the Empty Homes Strategic Working Group and discuss methods of pursuing these properties with ACC's Empty Homes, Building Standards, Legal and Private Sector Housing teams amongst others. This example shows how a collaborative approach to empty homes work can help to contribute to strategic goals of the local authority, in this case its goals surrounding city centre regeneration.

The Empty Homes team also utilises its working relationship with Council Tax to proactively identify empty properties before they have been reported to the service through complaints or enquiries. Council Tax provides the team with a list of properties who are paying the additional 100% levy, and the team reaches out to the owners of these properties to proactively offer assistance. This work is mutually beneficial for both services and is essential to ensuring that empty properties are being identified before they are causing issues in the community.

A strategic framework is also currently in development for the Empty Homes service which, while not yet completed, has been essential in encouraging the team to define an overarching vision for the service, alongside strategic actions and targets which will help the service to achieve this vision. The vision was written by incorporating elements from national and local strategies related to empty homes to allow the service to contribute to all of these while achieving its own goals, for example Housing to 2040 and ACC's Local Housing Strategy.

Overall, the strategic work undertaken by Aberdeen's Empty Homes team has been essential in delivering a service which contributes to the strategic goals of other services, as well as Aberdeen City Council in general. The service will continue to work proactively to reduce the number of empty properties in Aberdeen and foster strategic working relationships which help to achieve this.

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.

Why homes become empty	Number of Homes	% of total
Bought with intention to renovate (no outcome)	573	29.55%
Owner moved out without selling or tenancy ended and not re-let	568	29.29%
Owner deceased	428	22.07%
Other	158	8.15%
Owner moved into hospital or care home	95	4.90%
Former second home	86	4.44%
Repossessed	31	1.60%

The range of reasons for homes becoming empty are broadly similar to what they have been in previous years. The only significant change was in the percentage of homes becoming empty where owners had brought with the intention of renovating. This was cited as the reason for 29.55% of homes becoming empty this year, up from 22.08% in last year's survey and 17.4% in 2022.

This suggests an increasing cycle of empty homes, where formerly empty properties are purchased only to become empty again as new owners fail to complete work required on the property. Often this may be because they underestimate the time and cost of the work involved. They may also have not factored in liability for an empty homes council tax premium from the day they brought the property. This means that income intended to be used to renovate the home is instead swallowed up by higher council tax payments.

The extent of this issue is also demonstrated by the reasons for homes remaining empty.

Why homes remain empty	Number of homes	% of total
Difficulty locating/engaging with owners	611	24.39%
Repairs ongoing	594	23.71%
Property inherited: no action taken by owner	273	10.90%
Other	238	9.50%
Repairs stalled due to financial reasons	222	8.86%
Unwilling to sell or rent	139	5.55%
Property awaiting grant of confirmation	120	4.79%
Owners unsure of end use, needs advice on repairs or options	95	3.79%
Difficulty establishing ownership	72	2.87%
Legal dispute	63	2.51%
Waiting for right time to sell	49	1.96%
Unsuccessful marketing (rent or sale)	29	1.16%

Ongoing repairs and repairs stalled for financial reasons combined accounted for 32.57% of the reasons in all cases. We are pleased that this has been recognised and addressed in a recent amendment to Council Tax Regulations. Where an owner has purchased an empty property, and can produce evidence to establish that it is undergoing repairs or renovations that contribute to the improvement of the property, the council tax premium/surcharge cannot be applied for at least six months after the date property was purchased.

This will hopefully help to reduce the number of properties that are purchased by new owners only to become long term empty because of financial problems.

Of other reasons for homes remaining empty, difficulty locating or engaging with owners as well as difficulty establishing ownership was cited in 27.26% of cases.

This highlights the need for broader powers to be available to address the longstanding problems of owners choosing to walk away from an empty property, refusing to engage with the local authority, and leaving neighbours powerless to do anything to end the problems that the empty home can cause them. In some of the worst cases we have seen, these can include affecting their physical and mental health as they deal with a variety of environmental issues, anti-social behaviour, decline in the value of their own house and a feeling of being trapped in a home they will never be able to sell.

The introduction of legislation to provide for Compulsory Sales Orders or Compulsory Rental Orders can be vital tools to force empty properties to market. This will be particularly useful where properties do not meet the criteria required to be suitable for Compulsory Purchase Orders and where owners are making no attempt to address the deterioration of their home and the problems it is causing to the immediate community.

CASE STUDY

Reposessed property

Repossession accounts for a comparatively small proportion of properties becoming empty. In most instances, reposessed properties are quickly returned to the market and sold. However, we are aware of instances where lenders take no action, or cease attempts to sell the property. As reposessed are exempt from council tax, there may be little incentive for the lender to return the property to use, even where there is a potential buyer. This is illustrated by a property on the Isle of Lewis.

The property had been empty since the owner left the property at the end of August in 2015. The property was last offered for sale on the open market 6 years ago. It has been registered as being reposessed by the bank in February 2020. At the time of repossession, several thousands of pounds of council tax debts were outstanding on the property.

In early 2022, the empty homes officer sought to contact the appointed lawyer for the bank who took forward the repossession. After writing and phoning them, they eventually made contact 12 months later. The EHO eventually gained access to the property after several promises to have the locks changed, having offered to arrange this himself due to his experience in the trade.

After conducting a detailed survey of the property and sending this to the lawyers, company along with all photos showing any evidence of damage for their client to see, a formal offer was made to the lawyers for the purchase of the property on behalf of a Registered Society run primarily for the benefit of the community at large. Initial responses from the lawyer neither accepted or rejected the offer, and communication from the lawyer ceased in March this year. Since then, the EHO has offered their assistance in helping to sell the property for them through a local estate agent or at auction if preferred but has again received no reply.



The failure to engage with the EHO serves neither the interest of the former owner or the community as a whole. In areas where there is a shortage of affordable housing, the lack of an effective sanction for lenders who take no action in respect of reposessed properties mean that homes can stand empty even when there are people or organisations willing to bring them back to use.

CASE STUDY

Bringing a property back to use after seventy years empty

A traditional croft house in Cromore, Isle of Lewis, built in 1914, had been empty since just after World War 2. It was brought back into use by Karis and David in what Murdo MacLeod, EHO in the Western Isles, describes as “a true example of what can be achieved if you have a dream”.

Karis and David initially purchased the croft on which the property sat, and later began discussing the possibility of bringing the home back into use. After having the property surveyed by a structural engineer, who told them it would be safe to work on the existing structure rather than demolishing and starting again, they successfully applied to the Croft House Grant Scheme and were awarded the maximum £38,000. This enabled them to begin the significant renovation project.

2 extensions that were attached to the property were demolished, making room for a more modern version, built to a high standard and with some of the natural stone walls being kept as a decorative feature. Karis wanted to use traditional materials as much as possible, so the outside walls had a lime mortar coating added. This allows the stonework to breath and helps maintain the property for the next generation. Internally the old property was insulated to the highest standard and an eco-heating system and eco-windows were fitted throughout. By restoring the original building and retrofitting it to this environmentally friendly standard, the project’s carbon footprint has been very low in comparison to the alternative option of knocking it down and starting again.

With the support of the EHO, they were able to have their VAT on goods and services zero rated by HMRC after completion, representing a 20% reduction in these costs. Additionally, the EHO has worked to establish a network of local partnerships with a variety of merchants during the project, who themselves offered further discounts, some as high as 25%.

Since this project began, further homes in the surrounding area are now having work done to be bring them back into use, which Murdo feels can be largely attributed to Karis and David’s work. This project exemplifies that with sufficient skills and support, any empty property can be turned back into a home.

Before:**After:**

“The thing that everybody says is that they just can’t wait to see a light back on in that house. People are excited and commenting on the changes that they are seeing day to day. If you have a vision and a passion for this kind of project then see it through, it’s really rewarding to see these buildings brought back into use.”

– **Karis Beattie,**
Empty home owner

“Karis and David have fulfilled their dream and created a home”

– **Murdo MacLeod,**
Empty Homes Officer,
Western Isles

MEETING OUR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES - 3

Promote evidence-based benefits of bringing empty homes back into use to encourage diverse involvement in empty homes work across Scotland

This objective builds on our phase 1 objective to 'encourage registered social landlords, community groups and other private bodies to engage in empty homes work'.

We recognised that there were a range of organisations that were struggling to acquire suitable housing to meet the demand that they get for housing and may not have considered empty homes as part of the solution to meet their housing needs. As a key part of delivering this objective we sought to establish strategic & innovative kickstarter projects that would enable these organisations to incorporate empty homes into their work.

The aim for each project and the objective overall was to test established thinking and assumptions on what is preventing homes from being brought back into use and what will work to unlock them.

For our phase 2 objective, we will draw on what we learn from these, and other projects, to build up our knowledge of what works, and any common challenges and obstacles that arise, as we look to encourage more organisations to invest in empty homes work.

SEHP kickstarter projects

Our first third-sector kickstarter project was with Homes For Good (HfG). The project, which commenced in 2021, focused on reducing housing need through bringing empty homes back to use as social or affordable housing.

The project created a number of hands-on options for empty homes owners to take action and bring homes back to life, including assistance to sell, purchase by HfG, and a pilot Rent Ready Programme, where HfG recoups the costs of getting homes ready to be let through future rental income.

The two year project ended in 2023 but HfG has committed to mainstreaming this role and focus into core activities within the organisation. The success of the project was also highlighted by nominations in this year's SEHP awards for two of the properties it brought back into use. Barry Sweeney, who led on the project in 2023, was also nominated for the Special Recognition Award.

In 2022 and 2023 three further third sector Kickstarter projects were established in Scottish Borders, the Western Isles and Argyll and Bute. All three of the projects have involved close working with empty homes officers and colleagues in other teams and departments.

In Scottish Borders, South of Scotland Community Housing (SOSCH) have worked with community organisations and Scottish Borders Council to develop and deliver projects that will address the specific housing needs of individual communities.

In the Western Isles, Tighean Innse Gall (TIG) have worked closely with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's (Western Isles Council) EHO to identify suitable properties for purchasing and refurbishing in the Outer Hebrides to help to revitalise rural communities across the island chain.

In Argyll and Bute, SEHP and Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership have provided joint funding for an EHO with a specific remit to work to bring empty homes back into use to help to tackle the shortage of affordable housing for health and social care workers across the region.

We announced our newest third sector Kickstarter project at our annual conference in Glasgow this year. Working with The Community Impact Initiative C.I.C. (The Cii), the project will be the forerunner to a multi-year program that will regenerate empty homes in Dundee to provide housing for people in need, and support over 180 local people to gain the skills and qualifications needed to move towards employment.

South of Scotland Community Housing

Harry Whitmore, Community-led Housing Coordinator for South of Scotland Community Housing (SOSCH) talks about their work with communities in Scottish Borders to bring empty homes back to use.

SOSCH commenced its Kickstarter project with SEHP in November 2022.

The project aims to promote community-led housing solutions as a mechanism to bring empty homes and buildings back into use as affordable housing, building upon SOSCH successfully promoting this approach in Southwest Scotland.

Whilst there had been significant recent activity around delivered community-led housing projects in Southwest Scotland, particularly relative to empty or long term vacant buildings, the community-led housing sector in Southeast Scotland remained in its infancy. Analysis by SOSCH during governance and business review in 2020 suggested that this was the result of a lack of enabler support in the Southeast. However, the organisation already had a strong track-record of delivery and an understanding of the key partnerships, both community and stakeholder, required to further develop the sector.

The Kickstarter project provided match funding to enable the recruitment of SOSCH's first Community-led Housing Coordinator in Southeast Scotland. The focus of this role is to support community organisations to identify localised housing need and to develop solutions within their communities, with a particular focus on repurposing long-term empty homes and buildings via the process of community asset ownership. The longer-term objective will be to create a pipeline of community-led housing projects in Southeast Scotland that are meeting an evidenced demand.

Prior to the Kickstarter project commencing, SOSCH worked to build key stakeholder partnerships in the Southeast, particularly with Scottish Borders Council (SBC) and Registered Social Landlords. SOSCH's pre-existing relationship with South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) also played a critical part in relationship development.

Over the course of the project, the CLH Coordinator has worked to (i) further develop and diversify stakeholder partnerships critical to the development of and strategic support for CLH projects, and (ii) raise profile and awareness of community-led housing across communities in Southeast Scotland.

The project has been guided by a Steering Group, comprising SBC members (including their Empty Homes Officer). SOSCH has, over this period, been integrated into SBC housing policy, reflected by inclusion as a key delivery partner in the Local Housing Strategy for the region. Concurrently, SOSCH has built relationships with local authority's communities' team and have participated in Area Partnership Meetings. Held in the five localities of the Scottish Borders, these are attended by community councils and representatives of other community anchors.

In addition, SOSCH has also worked to develop key strategic relationships within South Lanarkshire Council. Over the first year of the Kickstarter project, the CLH Coordinator received direct enquiries from approximately thirty communities in Southeast Scotland.

In order to promote knowledge exchange around community-led housing, SOSCH collaborated with key partners in the region, particularly Borders Community Action. This included the organisation of a peer learning trip to Dumfries and Galloway with a number of Borders communities in March 2023. This allowed participating communities to visit completed community-led housing projects and to understand their local impacts.

As the Kickstarter has moved into its second year, SOSCH have undertaken five Housing Need and Demand Assessments (HNDA) reports on behalf of community organisations in Westruther, Stow, WATIF (Woolfords Auchengray and Tarbrax, South Lanarkshire), Newcastleton, and Mid-Berwickshire. The latter covers a number of individual communities over a broad geographic area, some of which have already engaged with SOSCH around community-led housing potential.

Following on from the HNDA work, the objective will be to utilise the evidence provided to move towards project development within the individual communities supported. This is already progressing with Stow Community Trust.

Moving forward, the project will continue to raise the profile and awareness of community-led housing. Early-stage engagement has been undertaken with a range of additional groups, and each will progress at its own pace. To date, the project has served to put in place the infrastructure and relationships required that will provide a strong platform from which future community-led housing projects that address local need and reuse empty buildings can be progressed.



[Read more about SOSCH](#)

Tighean Innse Gall

David McPhail, development assistant with Tighean Innse Gall (TIG) reflects on the opportunities and challenges encountered in a 2 year project to bring empty homes back to use in the Outer Hebrides.

The TIG Empty Homes Project, started in July 2022. It covers the whole of the Outer Hebrides and was initiated with the following objectives;

- Undertake 20 feasibility studies on empty properties to determine the viability for refurbishment of the properties to bring them back into use as homes.
- Develop different funding/tenure routes, including low cost home ownership and affordable rent options to be used for letting and/or selling of the properties on completion.
- Take forward 12 properties for refurbishment via the project funding routes.

Work Done to Date

Over the past 2 years, TIG have worked alongside the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CNES) EHO to identify properties throughout the Western Isles that would be suitable for development via the project. Initial difficulties were encountered with property owners pulling out at feasibility study stages when it became apparent for many properties that TIG could not offer purchase prices in line with full market costs and property owners expectations. This was due to disparities between renovation costs and market values.

These difficulties led to a reasonable amount of abortive work with a high number of properties dropping out of the project. As a result of these difficulties encountered, an altered approach to negotiations was employed and streamlining of the feasibility study and financial assessment procedure was undertaken to decrease the study times.

A total of 42 properties have been considered throughout the project lifetime with 21 of these being brought to survey stage and 16 full scale feasibility studies being undertaken. Of the properties take to feasibility stage, 6 have been identified as viable to take forward and are currently at various stages of negotiation or acquisition. A further 4 properties are under review and being considered to take forward. In addition, 6 of the properties identified but not taken forward have now been sold or rented by the owner.

Despite not meeting the project aims within the 2-year period, TIG will continue to work to bring back into use the properties identified so far and the project advisory group will continue to meet while these are being taken forward.



Opportunities Opened Up

The project led to many unexpected opportunities alongside the main outcome of bringing homes back into use.

- Streamlining the initial feasibility study to 8 weeks, with decisions on viability made within this time.
- Ability to quickly identify future properties where purchase and refurbishment costs fall within the financial margins.
- Opportunities to begin working with community owned estates and other organisations on joint projects to bring empty homes back into use.
- Use of the Rural & Islands Housing Fund, to continue the project into the future and deliver the original intention of re-developing 12 houses.
- Exploring ways to mitigate the impact of high lender interest rates on borrowing costs for refurbishment through discussions with HIE.
- Discussions with Scottish Government to use Empty Homes Keywork Grant for some of the properties.

Through the lessons learned, experience gained, and the opportunities, TIG are in a good position to continue this work into the future and bring empty properties back into use.



[Read more about TIG](#)

Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership

Empty homes are being used to tackle the shortage of affordable accommodation for health and social care workers in Argyll and Bute.

The Health and Social Care Partnership Empty Homes Project commenced in September 2023 when Isla Binnie was appointed as EHO. Working to identify key stakeholders within HSCP, she spoke to the relevant locality managers to identify where housing was needed and what type of housing was required. By investing her time in these discussions, she created a database of employee needs to ensure requirements were met when sourcing housing and continues to be used. A variety of housing solutions were, and continue to be, needed to reflect the diversity of the workers' circumstances; some relocate on a permanent basis, whilst others move to the area temporarily to deliver essential health services.

Strategic Housing Funding has been approved for refurbishment of one property in Oban, two on the Isle of Coll and one on the Isle of Tiree, which is included in the remodel of a care home. These are areas of high demand for housing which has impacted on recruitment for HSCP, thereby negatively impacting the capacity of existing staff. The EHO is currently liaising with HSCP managers to identify the best way to refurbish the properties to meet identified need.

In addition, commercial buildings and how they may be renovated into worker accommodation is being explored. An unused NHS Dental Surgery on the Isle of Islay has been identified as a potential project with provisional plans being drawn up by HSCP. Islay, like most islands, has a large number of self-catering accommodation and second homes which has an adverse effect on HSCP staff coming to the island and looking for housing.

The biggest challenge to date has been trying to build strong connections with HSCP, a vast organisation with many different departments and the lack of suitable housing impacting other parts of their delivery. HSCP set up specific working groups in recognition of these challenges which the EHO attends, providing feedback on the project, raising any issues and action points for HSCP to address.

Going forward, the EHO will continue to reach out to long term empty owners in areas of high demand to promote the project.



Read more about the project -

Argyll and Bute Council

NHS Highland

The Community Impact Initiative C.I.C.

Catrin Evans talks about the Kickstarter project launched this year by the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) and The Community Impact Initiative C.I.C.

At the beginning of 2024, The Community Impact Initiative C.I.C. (Cii) received Kickstarter funding from the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership for our new project, Strong Foundations Scotland. The funding will allow us to deliver phase one of the project, during which we will lay all of the groundwork needed to bring our innovative empty homes regeneration projects from Wales to Scotland.

We are an established not-for-profit organisation with an excellent track record of delivering community-focused empty home regeneration projects. Our project tutors use each renovation to help local people experiencing social isolation and long-term unemployment to learn new skills, improve their wellbeing, achieve qualifications, and find a path to employment, or a future to look forward to. Since 2017, we have supported over 350 people and have brought ten long-term empty properties back into use.

Having decided to expand our reach into other parts of the UK, we liaised with the team at SEHP to discuss the idea of a Dundee-based project. Alongside the Cii team's personal connection to Dundee, research brought to light several striking similarities between the Scottish city and the communities we support in South Wales.

As a result of this initial discussion, we applied to SEHP for Kickstarter funding to support the appointment of a full-time, Dundee-based development officer. This was the biggest leap yet towards our goal of starting a project in Scotland and a huge opportunity for us.

The project started on the 1st of May 2024 and progress has already been made in developing relationships with local organisations and the wider community.



Over the next year, the development officer will:

- Work to develop local partnerships
- Engage with and learn from the local community
- Use this learning and engagement to build a project framework

In year two of this project, the development officer will:

- Continue to develop community partnerships
- Secure major funding to deliver a multi-year empty homes regeneration project
- Create a detailed project plan and timeline
- Recruit the staff necessary to deliver the multi-year project
- Identify and purchase the first project property

A report will be published at the end of each year so that we can share our learning with other organisations working to regenerate communities across the UK.

It is our aim that by spring 2026, we will be ready to break ground on our first Strong Foundations Scotland empty homes regeneration project in Dundee. This work wouldn't be possible without the support of the SEHP and we're grateful to have been given the opportunity to develop this project thoroughly, in a way that provides the most benefit to the local community.

[Read more about Cii](#)

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'

Q 22 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	On a scale from 1-10, how commonly Empty Homes Officer's used these options (on average)
Providing advice and information to owner.	8.65
Access to VAT discounts, merchants & services discounts, other discounts	6.17
Council tax discretion (including providing support to obtain discretion)	6.00
Linked to Council schemes (Buy back, PSL, Rent Deposit Guarantee Schemes)	4.18
Providing grant funding	3.75
Enforcement (eg environmental health, statutory nuisance, building standards regulations)	2.89
Worked/partnered with RSL, Third Sector or community group	2.85
Worked/partnered with the private or commercial sector	2.33
Linking to matchmaker scheme	2.13
Providing loan funding	2.00

CASE STUDY

Council tax discretion in Perth & Kinross

173 High Street is located in a prominent city centre location, within the conservation area of Perth & Kinross and was empty for around 24 years prior to redevelopment.

The empty properties were part of a large commercial portfolio, being a mix of commercial (offices) and residential. Subsequently there were several changes of ownership making establishing contact with the owners a challenge. The property also attracted issues relating to anti-social behaviour, criminal activity and general disturbance.

Eventually, contact was made with the owners and the property sold, the new owner who took over received managers discretion from their council tax, VAT reduction letters and feasibility funding from the Vacant Property Development Team.

This project presents a strong case study for disused commercial building adaption, and mixed-use development to supporting increased city centre affordable living options. The project brought 7 properties back into use at affordable rents. The properties are a mixture of 1 and 2 bedroom flats. The flats have been let to tenants from a range of backgrounds, some with lived experience of homelessness, others living independently for the first time, and others who were seeking accommodation to support local employment. Significant demand exists, particularly for 1 bed accommodation in the city centre so this development makes a significant contribution to supply, at comparatively low cost.



“Managers discretion is a great tool to motivate and encourage homeowners to do something with their vacant properties. In the instance of this project, it allowed for costs to be reduced enabling development to go ahead more smoothly.”

– **Thomas Waterworth**,
Vacant Property Development Assistant,
Perth & Kinross

Empty homes and the council tax levy

The council tax levy, or premium, is something that local authorities can apply to properties that have been empty for twelve months or more, provided that the property is not being actively marketed for sale or let.

The levy is intended to be a tool to help local authorities to make the best use of existing housing stock, including by 'bringing long-term empty homes back into use as safe, secure and warm housing'.

The premium was extended in April this year to include second homes, to assist local authorities in 'influencing ownership patterns to encourage second homeowners to use their accommodation differently, for the benefit of local communities such as from personal use to a private rental tenancy, which could help increase supply in the private rented sector'.

The levy remains an important tool to motivate owners to bring properties back to use. However, we know that there are many owners for whom the premium on empty homes will make no difference whatsoever. This is because they can easily afford to pay it and are not motivated to bring their home back to use. Similarly, the recent introduction of a premium that can be charged on second homes will also not lead to every second home owner deciding to sell or rent their property so that it returns to full time residential use.

At the same time, it is important that people who would love to bring an inherited property back to use, but can't afford the repairs and/or have a home in an area where no one is buying because of systemic empties, are not unfairly penalised or prevented from bringing their home back to use as a result of the premium.

If the premium is to have the desired effect of working to increase the availability of housing across the country, we would like to see local authorities investing revenue raised through it into providing support for owners to bring empty homes back into use as social or affordable housing.

This would mean that owners who still choose to leave their homes empty, notwithstanding the higher premiums, would at least be indirectly contributing towards bringing homes back to use and addressing the housing emergency.

As noted previously, a recent amendment to the regulations means that where an owner has purchased an empty property, and can produce evidence to establish that it is undergoing repairs or renovations that contribute to the improvement of the property; the council tax premium cannot be applied for at least six months after the date the person purchased the property. It also provided local authorities with discretion to extend this period.

The minimum six months grace period will help EHOs in areas where there is no policy to use discretion. It may also increase the appeal of buying an empty home, if owners know that they have the extra time to refurbish the home without having to worry about facing double council tax.

Further guidance issued in May gave a non-exhaustive list of repairs and renovations that contribute to the improvement of the property. These include; upgrades e.g. new kitchen and bathrooms; energy efficiency works e.g. new windows and heating systems; modernisation works e.g. new wiring and plumbing systems; general repairs e.g. roof restoration and new render; Non-structural remedial action e.g. subsidence and rising damp.

The guidance also gave examples of where local authorities may find it beneficial to use their discretion in determining whether a premium should apply, including where:

A property that is taking a long time to sell/let in a stagnant market despite being priced appropriately;

An Empty Homes Officer has assessed the owner is taking positive steps to re-occupy their property and a time-limited council tax increase "holiday" would encourage the property to be brought back into use sooner.

We welcome the issuing of this guidance and hope that local authorities who do not currently offer discretion, will recognise the importance of flexibility going forward.

The regulations that established the premium, give local authorities discretion to disapply it in a range of circumstances.

Our survey asked respondents:

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

Of 27 responses, 17 said yes and 10 said no.

'Discretion can help to incentivise returning unoccupied properties to residential use. Where owners funds are restricted discretion may help to quicken the process of returning a property to residential use.'

'This helps to encourage owners/ executors to get properties back into use, working together to help achieve the end result. With the EHO's working with the empty home owners and council tax staff this saves the owners/executors awaiting a response from the general council tax mailbox therefore speeds up the process and allows the EHO to deal with any other issues in respect of this empty property.'

'This is of assistance as it encourages action as well as removing the financial penalty/drag. Also helps engage owners with the service and allows management and awareness from an empty homes perspective and, where appropriate, can steer end use towards our priorities.'

'When successful this this will often free up finances which the owner will then use for renovations or preparing the property for sale/ let. It is also a useful tool to engage owners as the surcharge is often an extra strain and they welcome my assistance and will keep me informed of their progress.'

Comments from empty homes officers in local authorities that don't use discretion included;

'Some properties that really need the assistance just don't get help due to policy'

'Owners are unable to repair their properties as a result of the council tax levy.'

'It could be used as a bargaining tool with owners to bring their property back into use if it were in place'

'It means we cannot be flexible with owners who may be struggling financially, resulting in a delay in bringing property back into use.'

MEETING OUR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES - 4

Support the network of dedicated empty homes officers through the provision of training and best practice sharing

Supporting empty homes officers throughout Scotland, we provided in depth training sessions for 18 empty homes officers.

This included 6 officers across 5 local authorities recruited in the last financial year. These training sessions had a particular emphasis on developing networking and peer support, covering topics ranging from enforcement to case management. The networking model has been especially helpful for Empty Homes Officers as they do not typically have local peers and perform specialist work.

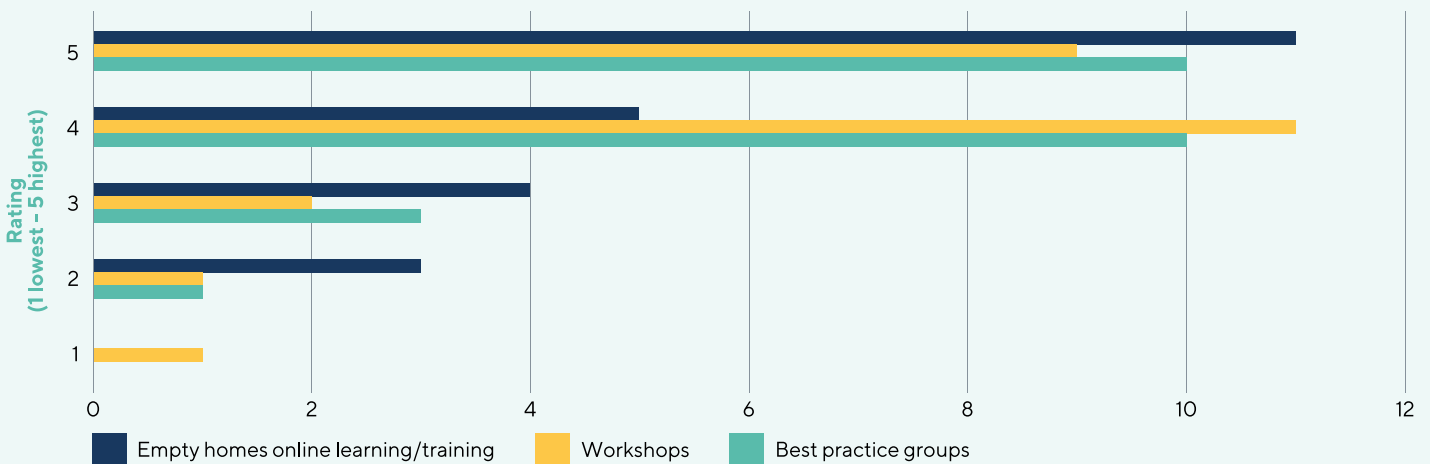
“I appreciate the support and advice of SEHP. In particular, the online sessions are very useful for sharing knowledge and for inspiring me with examples of best practice across other local authorities. I have been able to take some of the ideas forward to improve our own service already and am working on implementing some others in the longer term. The sessions are always interesting and well run.”

- Gillian Flack,
Housing and Regeneration Development Officer,
Dumfries and Galloway Council

The best practice sessions are a forum for Empty Homes Officers to network with peers and share current issues and solutions. External speakers, such as such as the Rural & Island Housing Fund and senior council tax managers, have been invited to share their expertise. We have also hosted workshops focussing on key issues raised by the officers with presentations from organisations offering solutions.

Our annual survey responses show positive average feedback across all these areas with our best practice sessions receiving 4.21 out of 5, workshops rated 4.08 and learning offer given 4.

Rating of usefulness



The network allows us to be responsive to EHOs needs and provide additional referral pathways that they might not have the capacity to develop. Based on feedback we developed a new energy advice service in partnership with Home Energy Scotland. The officers can incentivise and support empty homeowners by referring them for advice on energy bills and improvements to home energy efficiency. This expands our offer of specialist external advice support available to EHOs. Our existing referral partnerships includes Brodies, who provide legal advice, and Millar & Bryce, who help identify heirs & executors.

Using our expertise, we directly influenced the expansion of an existing empty homes service. We presented to representatives of Edinburgh City Council, making the case that empty homes work should be mainstreamed and officers better resourced. This resulted in an amendment to the Strategic Housing Investment Plan 2024-2029 and led to recruitment of a second Empty Homes Officer. There has long been a need for this as the current sole officer had a high caseload. Our presentation also recommended the use of Compulsory Purchase Orders, which the council's Homelessness and Fair Work Committee agreed to explore.

Addendum by the SNP Group

Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee

5 December 2023

Item 7.6 – Strategic Housing Investment Plan 2024-2029

Adds at recommendations:

"1.1.8

Notes the excellent work and success rate of the Empty Homes Officer detailed in Appendix 4.

Calls for a report within three cycles exploring the benefits and costs of increasing the size of the Empty Homes Team eg. in Glasgow there are 4 Empty Homes Officers as opposed to 1 in Edinburgh."

Best Practice and Knowledge sharing events

Workshop on Empty Homes Financing Options

As the Network expressed an interest in empty homes financing, the partnership hosted an Empty Homes Finance Workshop. This featured examples from local authorities, including the Perth & Kinross Loan Scheme and Dumfries & Galloway Grant Scheme. Presentations from external companies empty homes financing offers also showcased other models. Lendology presented their Local Authority Partner Financing scheme and Ecology detailed their retrofit mortgage product.

Workshop on the LoCTA Hub Tracing Tool

Using industry research and empty homes officer feedback, the partnership identified the LoCTA Hub, an effective tracing tool that would aid the network in their daily work. This digital platform enables local authority officers to trace empty homes owners and also to access information from other local authorities in one convenient portal, giving easy access to various key tracing functions on one platform. The event received positive interest and feedback from our network and has proven to be impactful by now being integrated into many officers' case management.

CASE STUDY

Using LoCTA to help to bring a home back to use

Allana McLuskey, More Homes Officer at Renfrewshire Council shares her experience of using LoCTA in her work.

I became aware of a 1 bedroom flat that was empty via our council tax records. The property was one of four in a block where Renfrewshire Council owned the others. Further investigations revealed that it had been empty for over 10 years with council tax debt accruing yearly.

The previous Empty Home Officer had tried to engage with the owner but with no success as they had a name but no contact details or current address. Following the session on the LoCTA hub, I used this tool to try and locate the owner. This showed that there were no known records of them, indicating that they had left the country. However, through carrying out a title check, I found that the property had been purchased within the last year and obtained the new owner's name. I was able to get their contact details using one of LoCTA's search function.

When I contacted the new owner, she advised that she had bought the property blind and regretted it as she was not from the area. Through this conversation I was able to discuss the council's buy back scheme. This led to the council purchasing the property which the new owner was thrilled about.

The local authority now have additional stock in a high demand area and have full ownership of the block. This means we can proceed with external works required without any objections, reducing risk of serious disrepair issues as had previously been the case.



[Watch the Empty Homes Finance Workshop](#)

[Watch the LoCTA Hub Webinar](#)

SEHP Conference

The theme of this year's conference was "Learning from the past, visions for the future". It was held at The Studio in Glasgow. Auction House Scotland, our headline sponsor, also sponsored our 13th annual Empty Homes Awards. These awards recognise outstanding work by individuals and organisations to help bring empty homes back into use.



The next section highlights the inspiring work of our winners and nominees.

Best use of empty homes to meet social/affordable housing need

For a strong example of using existing stock to meet housing need in your area

Winner: Grampian Housing Association, Ballater Old School



This property was a Ballater C listed school building dating back to 1877 in desperate need of extensive repairs. Ballater is an area with severe housing need with a lack of properties to rent, a high number of second homes, and a long waiting list for council housing. Grampian Housing Association carried out a sustainable redevelopment of this property and adopted a partnership approach with Aberdeenshire Council and Scottish Government to fund the repairs. Care was taken to utilise high quality materials and retain the original style of the historically significant building. Grampian also trialled, for the first time, a tool called Switchee which measures the building's health and allows for optimising energy use. As a result of this project, 24 sustainable social-rented homes were delivered to help address local housing need: 12 houses were developed from the historical building, alongside 11 new build flats and one bungalow. This project implemented a local letting plan to make sure it served people within the local community and has had a positive impact on the economy and community overall.

Other shortlisted nominees -

Perth & Kinross council vacant property development team (with YMCA)



This grade C church and neighbouring tenement flats were previously owned by Tayside YMCA before falling vacant for 14 years due to unsafe conditions and a lack of funds to fix them. This project created jobs for young people in Perth and involved them in every step of the development and construction. As a result, 6 flats were brought back to use as affordable "first step" housing for young people who have left care and for those in need of emergency accommodation. Due to be completed in the spring, the church will serve as a Y centre and community hub to help disadvantaged youth. This project is an outstanding example of cross sector collaboration and community regeneration.

SOSCH Glentrool Regeneration project (with Dumfries & Galloway Council)



The Glentrool Regeneration project saw a community led acquisition and retrofit of three empty properties previously used as social homes and an empty school in a fragile rural community. There is a lack of housing supply, largely due to the second homes market, and limited community space following the closure of their primary school. SOSCH led on the design with a focus on sustainability and worked with Dumfries and Galloway Council to develop a localised allocation plan. Consequently these three homes are now held in perpetuity by the community and provide affordable housing to people with local connections who were previously unable to move to the area. The school now serves as a multi-functional community space, an important step in helping to regenerate the community.

Special recognition award

For an outstanding individual contribution to empty homes work

Winner: Dawn Meston, Highland Council's Empty Homes Officer



At just 9 months in post, Dawn produced many achievements through her work. This role had previously been vacant for a long time and Dawn not only reviewed every inherited case, but doubled her active caseload. She also broadened the scope of empty homes work to cover a larger geographical expanse, offering support to urban and rural owners for the first time Highland history. Dawn approached her work holistically and supported various community groups working to boost the local economy and help people overcome barriers to working and living in the area. She has worked tirelessly to advocate for empty homes work within the council, initiating difficult conversations around council budget and grants available to empty homeowners whenever possible. She also prioritised cases where council tax arrears could be recovered, making a positive impact on the council's budget. Additionally, Dawn began developing an idea for a matchmaker selling scheme between empty home owners, private landlords, and developers. Dawn helped make hundreds of empty homeowners aware of discounts and brought almost three times the target number of homes back to use. Through her dedicated and ambitious approach to empty homes work, Dawn has made an excellent and inspiring impact on the Highlands community.

Other shortlisted nominees -

John Loudon, Auction House Scotland



John Loudon works for Auction House Scotland and has many years of experience working with empty homes. John helps owners through the selling process and works very closely with each client to make the process as easy as possible. He makes himself available to clients, even in his personal time, to assist with any issues big or small. He helps owners achieve the best price possible, which in turn brings empty homes back to use. John also keeps in touch with clients long term to offer his continued support.

Barry Sweeney, Homes For Good



Barry has been a leader at Homes for Good since 2014 and has directly been involved in identifying, buying, renovating, and furnishing over 340 properties. Barry helped develop hands-on options for empty homes owners such as assistance to sell, purchase by Homes for Good, and a pilot rent ready program. In the past 12 months, he has helped bring 24 homes back into use, 15 of which had been long term empty. Barry also helped create a highly effective tool to help owners understand and manage the process and has committed to sharing this more widely. Barry also played an integral role in Home's for Goods achievement at this past year's International Social Housing festival in Barcelona. There, they were awarded the UN-World Habitat Gold Award for their work in developing a portfolio of homes for people on low income.

Best housing renovation by a member of the public

For an outstanding, inventive renovation by a member of the public to bring a long term empty property back to use

Winner: Robert Mark Tai Sen Choy, Torostory, Isle of Lewis



After first discovering this historical Department of Fisheries cottage in 2004 on the Isle of Lewis, Robert purchased the property in 2021. This isolated croft had been empty for over 15 years, was in a ruinous state, and was completely uninhabitable. The owners had been planning to tear down this croft and build a new one in its place. Instead, Robert was determined to save the croft and negotiated a sale with the owners. Robert funded the project himself as he was twice denied a home improvement grant. At age 63, Robert carried out majority of the extensive renovations by himself, which required stripping the property back to the stone walls. He even collected most of his materials with his van from around town. In addition to financial challenges, Robert faced other obstacles including a storm that blew off the newly installed porch roof, flooding the property. It took 8 months, help from his local MP, and media attention to get his supplier to turn the power back on. Robert persevered and in 2022 completed his first ever property renovation. This project serves as an inspiring example of what can be achieved from an empty home with dedication and determination.

Other shortlisted nominees -

Lisa Harkins



Lisa and her husband purchased this property which had been empty for three years and had been intentionally flooded following a repossession. This empty property was an eyesore in the community and was the first home visible when you entered the new estate. This property required a full renovation and they had to start from the shell of the home. Lisa's husband is a builder, and the couple conducted these extensive repairs themselves. They faced structural challenges with uneven walls as well as dangerous wiring that needed replacing. The couple had a focus on ensuring the interior will stand the test of time and utilised many trades to achieve a high quality result in just 12 weeks. This property is now their dream forever home!

Karis Beattie and David Skene



This property had been empty since just after the end of World War Two and is located in a village that has suffered from depopulation as a result of the wars. Karis and David purchased this croft and decided to save it, rather than demolish and rebuild. With the support of EHO Murdo Macleod at Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, they utilised a crofting grant and VAT discount to fund the extensive repairs needed. Karis and David also focused on performing an ecofriendly retrofit to lower the carbon footprint and included features such as an eco-heating system and restored original material where possible. This property is now the home of their dreams! This project has also led to other empty homes work in the area and to high interest in the Western Isles. Since this project, 7 people have moved to the village, which helps to combat the community's depopulation. A film about the property can be found through the link below.

[Watch the video](#)

Best housing renovation by the housing sector

For an outstanding example of bringing an empty property back into use

Winner: Easy Hire LTD, Chalmers Street



Easy Hire LTD purchased this Dunfermline property at auction and only learned after the sale that it was boarded up and in need of extensive repairs. This property had been empty since 2010, was the target of vandalism, and was in a general state of disrepair. Located very close to the town centre, this property served as an eyesore. Easy Hire carried out the renovation with a strong focus on restoring as much of the original features and materials as possible to ensure an ecofriendly retrofit. They faced challenges such as excessive debris, unsafe wiring, faulty wood elements, and even pigeons who had taken up residence. There were also doors missing, a staircase and roof both in need of refurbishment, and emergency lighting and fire sensors that needed to be replaced. Following the extensive repairs, two flats have been brought back to use and they are currently working on developing the ground floor into a commercial space. This renovation serves as an important step toward achieving community regeneration in this area and has had a big impact on the townscape.

Other shortlisted nominees -

Homes for Good, Yoker project



This property was referred to Homes for Good by the Glasgow City Council's empty homes team. This home had been empty for two years following ceiling collapses that the couple were not able to repair. Homes for Good engaged with the owners, purchased the property, and carried out the extensive repairs and refurbishments needed. They faced challenges such as water ingress and various insurance claims. Homes for Good were able to conduct a successful retrofit with a focus on energy efficiency. This property is now an affordable and sustainable home to a young family who were at risk of homelessness.

Cairn Lettings, Havelock Street Glasgow



This property had been empty since 2013 due to much-needed repairs that the owners were unable to tackle due to ill-health. One of Glasgow City Council's EHOs persistently engaged with the owners to offer support and inform them of the council tax premium they were paying, which they were previously unaware of. Despite initial reluctance, the owner eventually reached out to Cairn Letting. Cairn Letting worked closely with the EHO and carried out extensive refurbishments/repairs in just 17 weeks. This project highlights the importance of establishing partnerships across the sector and relationships with owners themselves.

Best environmental retrofit

For an excellent contribution to a sustainable future

Winner: Scottish Borders council, Barnes house



This property had been empty for at least 25 years and was in a ruinous state. It was not even safe for Scottish Border's EHO Rachel Whale to enter the property when they first visited due to the severe degradation, weather damage, and rot. It was purchased by a local couple and with the EHO's support they were able to access grant funding, VAT reductions, and council tax discretion to help fund the renovation. Facing the additional challenge of making an older period property energy efficient while still maintaining its historical significance, they installed renewable technology such as solar panels, associated battery storage units, and an air source heat pump. With the help of Rachel, they were able to save this home and achieve an inspiring EPC A rating for both energy efficiency and environmental impact. This project has brought a now sustainable and future-proofed home back into use in the community and contributed to Scottish Borders council's goal for net-zero emissions by 2045.

Other shortlisted nominees -

LAR Housing Trust, St. Kentigerns Church



St. Kentigerns Church had previously been empty for several years and was originally designed by John More Peddie in the 19th century. This property gained a notorious reputation following a police raid that uncovered a cannabis farm. The church had fallen into disrepair and became a local eyesore and site of anti-social behaviour. LAR led this project with a focus on sustainability and worked to retain original materials where possible. As a result, the church was converted to four homes and a block with ten flats was built directly next to it. This project showcases a marriage between carbon capture and sustainable construction, with a network of heat pumps in each of the dwellings with new individual property heating controls.

Jedburgh - Scottish Borders Council



This period C property, dating back to the 1700s, was once a dental office and had been empty for at least ten years. A young couple purchased this property after struggling to find a home on the market. With the support of the EHO, they were able to access Scottish Borders council's empty homes fund. The couple took the time to carefully research conservation techniques which they then utilised during the renovation. These materials and techniques included lime pointing the exterior, lime plastering the interior, and using hemp insulation. They were able to turn this empty property into their dream home for them and their young children. This project has inspired the couple to take up further empty homes work in the future.

Conference feedback

After the conference, a survey was distributed to all delegates at the event, and via email for those who left early. There were 33 responses in total and delegates rated each aspect of our event positively. Comments and feedback have also been reviewed and taken on board, so that the delegate experience is improved for future conferences.

Awards



Networking



Sponsor exhibition



Venue



Catering



Booking process



Communication before the event



Knowledge/best practice sharing



Conference brochure



The average across all ratings was 4.44/5, compared to 4.15/5 in 2023.

“Thank you for delivering a brilliant event - happy to be part of future events.”

“Videos sharing the extensive renovation works are really thought provoking!”

“There is always an interesting variety of EH topics highlighted at conference. The sharing of videos etc of the hard work carried out in transforming empty properties into homes again is great to see and often inspiring.”

“Really interesting to hear what everyone is doing, challenges we are all facing and the funding/grants and initiatives that are available. Very educational on empty homes. Great to network with people too.”

“I found the whole day beneficial as a new EHO. I have made new contacts and found discussions and presentations interesting.”

MEETING OUR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES - 5

Run the Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service

The Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service (SEHAS) provides support to anyone with a query related to an empty home, whether it be an empty home owner, a neighbour or a potential investor. This was a year of transition for us due to staffing changes, largely explaining the reduction in the number of contacts compared with previous years.

Both advisers left in the latter half of 2023 and were replaced in early 2024. In the interim period, a reduced advice service was run with the wider team covering the service. The decision to close the phone line was made to ensure there was capacity across the wider SEHP team to provide timely advice to empty home owners. Advice continued to be delivered via email with the time target increased to within 5 working days. Consequently, there was a large reduction in contacts between October–December 2023.

From January onwards the number of contacts quickly returned to pre–October levels, demonstrating the role the service plays for owners and neighbours. Although it was challenging, we were able to fully re-open the advice service by the end of January.

From January until the end of March our focus was narrow, with support provided by the wider team and a review of available digital resources left by previous advice service team members. Meetings with the wider EHO network were productive and informative, with the relationships established at this early stage proving important in dealing with subsequent advice enquiries.

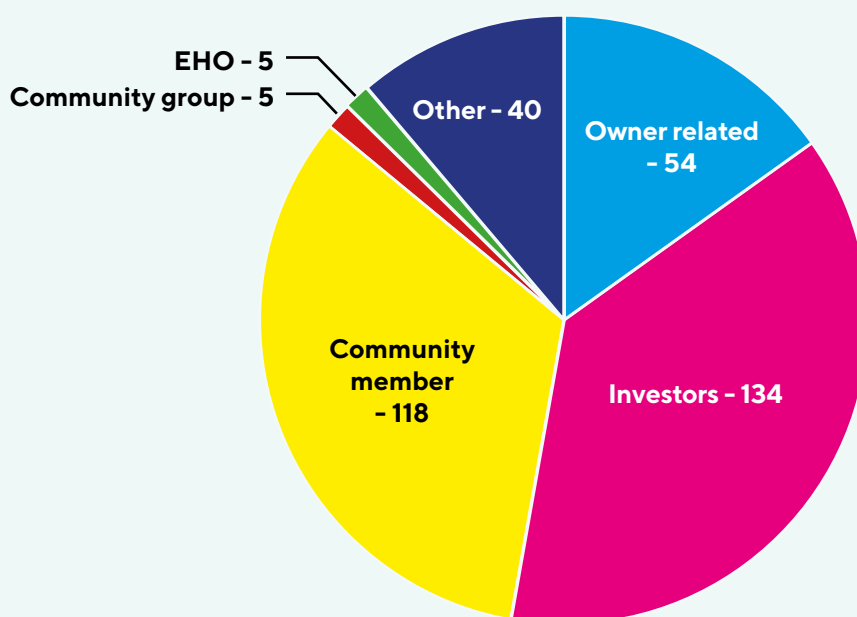
This year we received 356 enquiries, this was 19.3% fewer than the previous year and nearly 100 contacts short of our target of 450. Owner related contacts therefore dropped from 70 to 54.

Number of owner related contacts 2019–2024



Owner related contacts still accounted for 15.6% of the total contacts, just 0.4% lower than the previous year, representing no significant change, but lower than our stretch target of 25%, which is set with the understanding that contacts with owners are where we can have the most impact in bringing empty homes back into use.

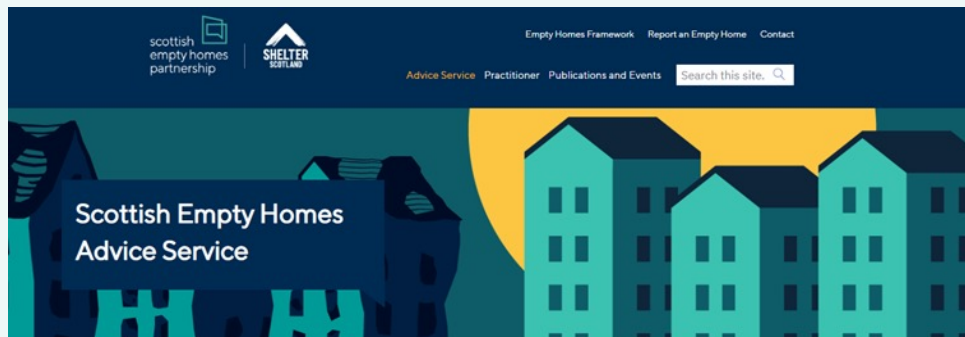
Contact Breakdown



Promotion of the Advice Service via SEHP website

Our review of the website revealed there was no separate Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service identity. There is now a dedicated SEHAS tab with clear sections for owners, neighbours and investors, tying in with our digital marketing.

Our neighbour guides are live on our website and have been a useful casework tool with all standard advice in one place to direct people to. This allows us to invest time in more complex cases. We've promoted these more widely to external organisations such as Under One Roof and Community Councils Scotland's Improvement Service. This gives organisations tools to have conversations with people in the community impacted by empty homes as well as raising awareness of our service.



Social Media

This social media post in Q4 of 2023-2024 about a home brought back into use in the Western Isles had over 1000 impressions on Twitter, representing one of the more popular posts of the quarter.

This evidences the importance and value of human stories when trying to engage the public in empty homes work. The new advisers have begun a process of collecting more case study examples to showcase these stories and the variety of empty homes work taking place across Scotland.



Looking Forward

Now that the new advice team is settled in post, our work will widen in scope in 2024-2025 to include some larger objectives to support the wider strategy of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership:

These include:

- A review of the current SEHP matchmaker service and how it relates to existing Local Authority matchmaker schemes. The review will look at how effective our current service is in supporting wider SEHP objectives and whether time spent on managing it could be better spent elsewhere to support these objectives. Consideration will be given as to whether SEHAS can effectively manage a national matchmaker scheme based on the successful schemes in Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire.
- To increase and improve our online advice offering, particularly for neighbours and investors, with a small number of owner related resources also being reviewed. Additional online resources will free up time for the advice team and enable more efficient use of influencing, persuasion and problem solving for more complex cases, particularly those of empty home owners.
- Launching a feedback survey to better understand and evidence the role SEHAS plays in supporting users with their empty homes issues, with particular emphasis on assessing how impactful SEHAS is at supporting owners.

The year ahead

2023/24 marked the first year of Phase 2 of the partnership. Our conference in February this year was an opportunity to recognise and celebrate what has been achieved collectively by all those in the partnership, local authorities, the third sector and more since the partnership began in 2010.

Over the past year, as well as continuing to support the network of empty homes officers across Scotland, the Partnership has supported several groundbreaking projects with third sector organisations and produced our strategic empty homes framework. Our work was recognised by Indigo House in their audit of empty homes work and by the Scottish Government when they announced that they would continue to fund the partnership this year.

The funding will allow us to continue to support the Scottish Government in its aims to bring empty homes back into use as affordable housing for those that need it.

We will do this by maintaining our focus on delivering the expected outcomes for phase 2 of the partnership and the delivery priorities set out in our contract for this year.

These are set out below.

Expected outcomes

1. Strategy

A strategic approach to bringing empty homes back into use is adopted across the country, enabling better targeting of resources and tracking of progress to bring more empty homes back into use.

2. Capacity

Local authorities, and other organisations with a focus on housing delivery, are able to evidence the benefits of employing dedicated empty homes officers.

3. Skills

Empty homes officers undertake continuous professional development and new officers receive consistent training to ensure they are fully equipped to undertake the role, leading to improved delivery.

4. Advice

More empty homes are delivered back into use through clear, consistent advice and support to empty homeowners and anyone else impacted by empty homes.

Delivery priorities for 24/25

- Support the Scottish Government in the implementation of its Housing to 2040 Strategy by delivering the actions set out in the SEHP Delivery Plan. These actions will contribute to bringing more than 1,000 privately owned homes back into use during 2024-25.
- Support local authorities to adopt a strategic focus within their empty homes services by co-producing data driven tools including best practice examples of an Empty Homes Framework and commencing work to develop an accompanying maturity matrix.
- Promote evidence based benefits of bringing empty homes back into use to encourage diverse involvement across Scotland by sharing the learning from different approaches and projects undertaken to tackle empty homes.
- Support the empty homes officer network to help them be more proactive in the identification of training and development needs and the tools needed to deliver this sustainably for the future.
- Evolve the Empty Homes Advice Service model by increasing the availability and access to online materials and information, considering the case for bringing the marketing in-house and tailoring operation of the helpline facility to maximise effectiveness and efficiency by increasing owner contacts.

Our recommendations

We know that there is only so much that the partnership and EHOs can deliver with the resources currently allocated to empty homes work. As more local authorities adopt a strategic approach to bringing homes back to use, the cost-effective role empty homes can play in addressing the housing emergency become clearer. Our recommendations this year are all aimed at ensuring that any barriers preventing local authorities from maximising the use of empty homes as an asset on our doorstep, are removed or reduced.



Local authorities apply flexibility in their application of the council tax premium and allocate some of the revenue generated through the premium on second homes and empty homes to bring homes back into use as social or affordable housing.



Local authorities recognise the essential role that EHOs can play in delivery of the National Acquisition Programme, through being the first point of contact with owners, establishing the barriers to bringing homes back to use and exploring options such as buy backs that they may otherwise not be aware of.



Scottish Government should consider the introduction of legislation for Compulsory Sales Orders and Compulsory Rental Orders as vital tools to force empty properties to market where they do not meet the criteria required to be suitable for Compulsory Purchase Orders.



Scottish Government should consider additional enforcement options where the last known owner died several years ago, and there are no surviving relatives that can be traced, or that are willing to bring the property back to use.

