



SCOTTISH EMPTY HOMES PARTNERSHIP ANNUAL REPORT 2024-25



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since I joined the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) we've seen all local authorities increase tax on second homes, work being undertaken on Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) reforms and the declaration of a national housing emergency. There's been a change to the definition of a long-term empty home to being those that have been empty for more than 12 months. We welcome this, which more accurately reflects that the longer a property is left empty, the more work is needed to bring it back. With the increased cost of building materials and the challenges of finding workers, renovations and repairs are taking longer.

We know that local authorities and communities across Scotland are seeing an increased demand for housing to meet the needs of a variety of households. Bringing empty homes into use is an energy- and cost- effective way of doing this, as reflected in the continued increase we've seen year on year since 2020/21. This year we celebrate our highest ever figure – 2,066 private residential properties that were in various states of need and/or disrepair are now a place to call home for many households and families.

Working with Empty Home Officers (EHOs) and council legal staff, we also carried out workshops on Compulsory Sales Orders (CSOs), shaping our report and recommendation to government. Where EHOs have taken all the actions they can but the property remains empty – continuing to cause stress and problems – CPOs and CSOs could be the tools of last resort needed. We look forward to seeing the recommendations put forward for CPO reform and the consultation on CSOs.

We're excited to share with you some case studies that showcase the persistence of EHOs



Tahmina Nizam
National Manager, SEHP

– it's through their graft that we've seen many more houses becoming homes once again. I've been struck by the sensitivity and empathy EHOs have shown when working with people who find themselves in tough situations. These cases highlight the wide array of work EHOs undertake, which we know can be challenging to manage. That's why it's great to see that the number of local authorities who have developed or are developing an empty homes strategy has more than doubled from last year. This will help officers to streamline their work and increase their impact. SEHP is looking forward to supporting LAs to achieve more in the coming years with most of the multi-year £3.3m investment from government being used to support projects across Scotland.

If there's one thing that you take away from this Impact Report, I hope it's that beyond the numbers, there are many people affected by an empty home: neighbours, owners, the wider community and the council, to name a few. Together, we at the SEHP and in the wider housing sector can ensure that this under-utilised housing is turned into full-time homes! ■




THIS YEAR'S HIGHLIGHTS

 **2,066**
Homes reported as back in use

 **12,955**
Homes returned to use since 2010

 **19** councils reported having an empty homes acquisition or buyback scheme

 **25** local authorities published, or developing, empty homes strategies

 City of Edinburgh Council expands its empty homes service

 Argyll and Bute Kickstarter Project wins UK Empty Homes Innovation Award

 **405** new contacts to the Advice Service

 **14th** annual Empty Homes Conference held in Glasgow

OUR KEY OBJECTIVES

Objective 1

Support the Scottish Government in the implementation of its 'Housing to 2040' strategy by delivering the actions set out in the SEHP Delivery Plan

Our aim was to contribute to bringing more than 1,000 privately owned homes back into use during 2024-25.

Across 28 local authorities (LAs) 2,066 homes have been brought back into use. A majority of these LAs (19) have buyback or acquisition schemes, contributing small numbers to their social housing stock. These schemes are a crucial requirement to respond to the national housing emergency and make a continued contribution to the implementation of the 'Housing to 2040' strategy. We are keen to see this grow in the coming years.'

This year we saw a change in the Scottish Government's definition of long-term empty homes to being those that have been empty for 12 months or more, reflecting that homes remaining empty longer can become harder to bring back into use. The improved recording more accurately reflects the number of empty properties in Scotland.

→ See pages 08 to 13 for more about this objective.

Objective 2

Encourage every local authority to vadopt a strategic approach to bringing empty homes back into use

Our Strategic Empty Homes Framework, provides a practical eight-step guide to support local authorities looking to adopt a strategic approach that places empty homes work within the context of their wider housing strategy. This year 25 LAs reported that their empty homes framework had been published or was in development. This shows increasing recognition of the essential role that bringing empty homes back into use can play in addressing the housing emergency and increasing housing supply.

The value of the framework and the approach to tackling long-term empty homes throughout Scotland were also recognised last year when we were asked to present a session about our work at the Reclaiming Vacant Properties conference, held in St Louis, Missouri. Following on from this, a number of organisations in the USA are now also looking at adopting the Framework as part of their work.

→ See pages 18 to 19 for more about this objective.

Objective 3

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

Since 2021 we have partnered with third sector organisations and LAs on a range of strategic and innovative projects to test established thinking and assumptions on what is preventing homes from being brought back into use and supporting

delivery of other local and national priorities. 2024 saw the conclusion of our Kickstarter projects with South of Scotland Community Housing (SOSCH) and Tigheann Innse Gall (TIG). The overall aim of the SOSCH project was to support community-led housing. Over the course of the project, SOSCH progressed specific project work discussion with seventeen communities, eight of whom engaged with SOSCH's Housing Need and Demand Assessment (HNDA) work, with four commissioning individual HNDAs, and four working collaboratively on a multi-group mid-Berwickshire HNDA.

The project with TIG involved working closely with the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CNES) EHO to bring properties in the Western Isles that had been empty for several years back to use. Fifteen properties were no longer empty homes by the time the project concluded.

Our current Kickstarter project with Argyll and Bute Council and Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership, which focuses on providing affordable homes for health and social care workers, has received UK-wide recognition, winning the Innovation award at the UKwide Empty Homes Network conference earlier this year.

→ See pages 20 to 21 for more about this project.

Objective 4

Support the network of dedicated Empty Homes Officers through the provision of training and best practice sharing

EHOs give advice and information on a range of issues to owners and neighbours of empty homes. SEHP provide support through tailored training, workshops and best practice meetings, ensuring that knowledge and expertise is shared in a supportive and friendly environment.

In 2024/25 we have continued to deliver training for new EHOs and also delivered two

best practice sessions, building on knowledge and sharing experience of the EHO network. Some of these new officers attended our 14th annual conference. Held in Glasgow and bringing together over 100 attendees across the housing sector to explore what we mean by 'Strategic Planning for a Strong Community'

→ See pages 35 to 37 for more about our conference.

Objective 5

Run the Empty Homes Advice Service

The Empty Homes Advice Service (EHAS) exists to provide advice and support primarily to members of the public affected by issues relating to empty homes.

In the four council areas without a dedicated EHO or other empty homes professional, the EHAS is the primary source of advice and guidance, and we take an active role in dealing with cases in these areas. In areas with dedicated EHOs or other empty homes professionals, the EHAS works closely with them and fields and filters initial enquiries before referring to them for additional investigation. We also act as a separate source of information where an enquirer might want an independent opinion.

We received a total of 405 enquiries in 2024/25, up from 356 the previous year. Most of these enquiries come from owners of empty homes, neighbours of empty homes, or people looking to buy empty homes (investors). ■

→ See pages 26 to 30 for more about the EHAS.



WORKING WITH OVERSEAS OWNERS

Community Councillor Andrew Scobie contacted us about an empty property in Comrie last year. He first suspected the property was empty when he noticed there was a rapidly mounting heap of unopened mail piling up on the doorstep of the property. He kept his eye on the property for a few weeks and noticed the mail was still there. Since he first noticed the empty home, the condition of the house had significantly deteriorated. A collapsed ceiling was visible through the living room window facing the street.

Andrew reported the home to the Empty Homes Advice Service who referred it to Thomas Waterworth, the EHO for Perth & Kinross. Thomas contacted the owners, who were living abroad, and supported them through the journey of selling their home. The home has now been purchased and is on its way to being back into use.

'The case... highlights the importance of proactive engagement and cross-border collaboration. Despite the challenges of working with overseas owners and a long-neglected property, we were able to establish a constructive dialogue that led to a positive outcome. It's rewarding to see the property now on a path to being brought back into use, contributing once again to the local community.' Thomas Waterford, EHO. ■



Signs of an empty home

Mail was being left on the doorstep of this property in Perth & Kinross



RESTORATION OF A LANDMARK BUILDING

This long-term empty tenement in the Scottish Borders was transformed into new homes that meet social and affordable housing needs in the area. The C-listed three-story tenement building with nine flats had been empty for almost twenty years before it's renovation. Originally used as mill worker's housing, the building required comprehensive repairs, with issues ranging from structural damage to fire damage and wood rot. The project aimed to preserve the building's historical and architectural integrity, including repairing the fine detailing on the exterior stonework. Extensive internal and external renovations have been undertaken, including roof repairs, structural timber replacement, and the installation of new windows and fixtures. The building holds a special place in the local community and many residents have shared memories of living in, growing up in, and even being born in the building, highlighting the strong emotional ties the community has to this landmark.

The demand for affordable housing in the Borders is significant and the restoration of this building will provide much-needed housing within the town, with a mix of one and two-bedroom flats. Five of these have been supported by the Scottish

Borders Council Empty Homes Grant Scheme and will be rented at an affordable rent for a period of five years. The restoration of this stunning building is a testament to the positive impact that dedicated efforts can have on revitalising long-term empty properties. This project not only preserves a

piece of Borders architectural heritage but also provides sustainable and affordable housing solutions for the community. The project is expected to be completed within the coming months and the owner has expressed a keen interest in giving back to the community by supporting applications from key housing pressure groups, including key workers, the Ukrainian resettlement scheme, and those experiencing homelessness. ■



Returned to life

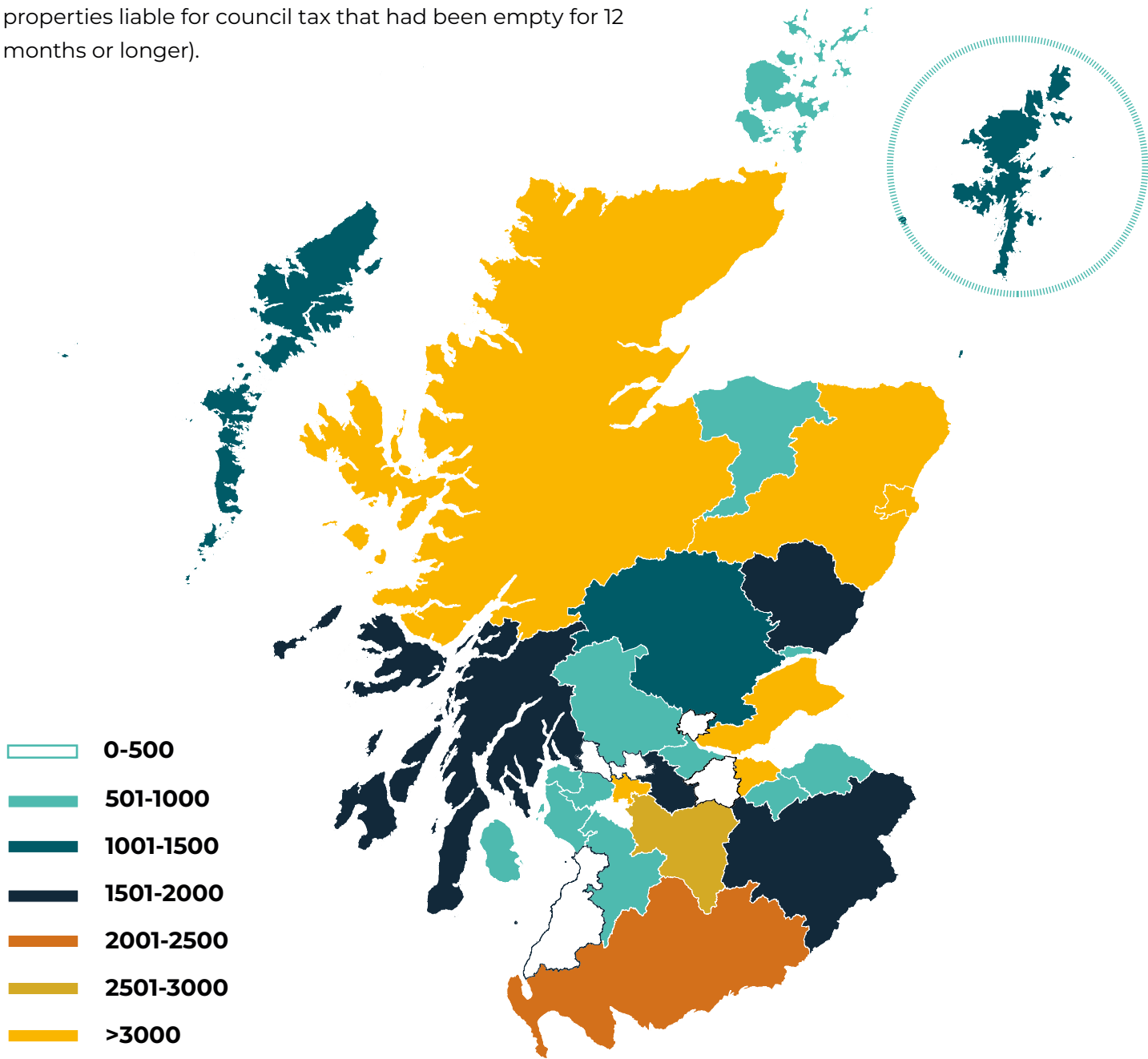
This C-listed tenement building required extensive internal renovations



EMPTY HOMES IN SCOTLAND – FACTS AND FIGURES

Long-term empty homes

Figures published by the Scottish Government in December 2024 showed that there were 43,538 empty homes in Scotland. Of these, 31,596 were classed as long-term empty (residential properties liable for council tax that had been empty for 12 months or longer).



LOCAL AUTHORITY	TOTAL EMPTY HOMES	TOTAL LTE HOMES	% OF SCOTLAND'S LTE HOMES	% OF SCOTLAND'S HOMES
Aberdeen City	5,793	2,807	8.88%	4.57%
Aberdeenshire	2,926	2,218	7.02%	4.51%
Angus	1,301	1,091	3.45%	2.16%
Argyll and Bute	1,888	1,236	3.91%	1.81%
Clackmannanshire	162	100	0.32%	0.93%
Dumfries & Galloway	1,767	1,368	4.33%	2.82%
Dundee City	1,014	557	1.76%	2.82%
East Ayrshire	514	349	1.10%	2.20%
East Dunbartonshire	260	189	0.60%	1.78%
East Lothian	607	421	1.33%	1.89%
East Renfrewshire	62	-	0.00%	1.49%
Edinburgh, City of	3,093	2,545	8.05%	9.63%
Falkirk	545	373	1.18%	2.84%
Fife	2,617	2,095	6.63%	6.74%
Glasgow City	2,501	1,526	4.83%	11.96%
Highland	3,740	3,660	11.58%	4.52%
Inverclyde	595	468	1.48%	1.47%
Midlothian	386	332	1.05%	1.59%
Moray	700	603	1.91%	1.73%
Na h-Eileanan Siar	722	658	2.08%	0.56%
North Ayrshire	878	590	1.87%	2.59%
North Lanarkshire	2,634	2,121	6.71%	5.92%
Orkney Islands	344	230	0.73%	0.43%
Perth & Kinross	1,508	934	2.96%	2.79%
Renfrewshire	797	521	1.65%	3.35%
Scottish Borders	1,545	1,080	3.42%	2.21%
Shetland Islands	476	436	1.38%	0.43%
South Ayrshire	846	326	1.03%	2.09%
South Lanarkshire	1,795	1,680	5.32%	5.81%
Stirling	576	470	1.49%	1.58%
West Dunbartonshire	319	260	0.82%	1.70%
West Lothian	627	352	1.11%	3.09%

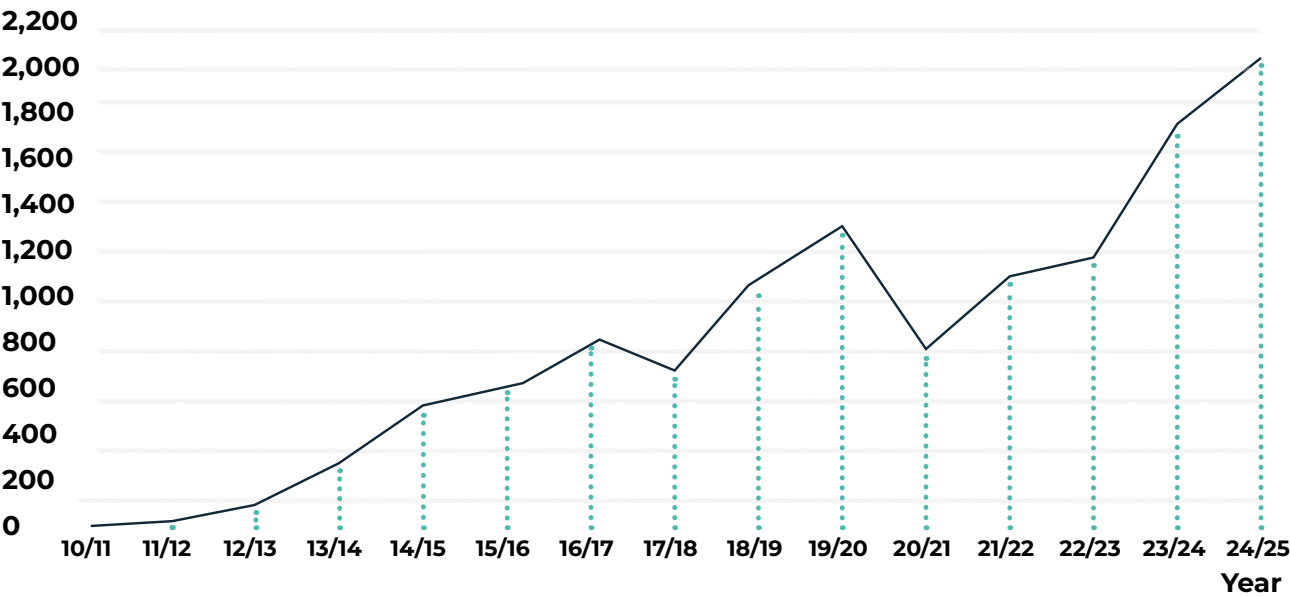
Number of LTE homes empty for 12+ months in East Renfrewshire was not included in figures published by Scottish Government



Homes brought back to use

Against this backdrop, EHOs across Scotland recorded 2,066 properties brought back into use in 2024/25. This was a 10% increase on the 2022 total of 1,875 and **is the highest annual total to date**. It brings the total number of homes returned to use since the partnership began to 12,955.

Number of homes



Information on how long the homes had been empty was available for 92% (1,904) of the properties brought back to use this year.

6-12 months	1-2 years	2-5 years	5-10 years	10 years+
29.57%	29.15%	24.89%	10.29	6.09%

Length of time empty for homes returned to use in 24/25

This year saw a decrease in the number of homes brought back to use that had been empty for less than a year (from 617 to 563) and an increase in the number of homes brought back to use in all other categories. The largest increases were in homes empty for 1-2 years (from 452 to 555) and 2-5 years (from 389 to 474).

The number of homes brought back to use that had been empty for five years or more increased from 282 to 312, driven largely by an increase in homes

empty for 5-10 years (from 172 to 196).

We know that the longer a home remains empty the harder it becomes, and the more work is required, to return it to use. That more than 70% of homes returned to use had been empty for longer than a year, and almost 60% of these homes had been empty for longer than two years, demonstrates again the difference that an empty homes service can make in preventing properties remaining empty. ■



Empty Homes Officer caseload

The breakdown of EHOs' active caseloads shows how their focus is increasingly on tackling some of the most complex and long-standing empty homes. Of the 4,683 active cases EHOs have at present, information was provided on length of time empty for 78% of properties.

Less than 1 year	1-2 years	2-5 years	5-10 years	10 years+
14.82%	21.92%	24.93%	21.65%	21.65%

Less than 15% of the EHOs' active cases had been empty for less than a year. This is the lowest percentage share since we started collecting this information.

Many of the homes empty for two years or longer that were returned to use this year will have been active cases last year. Some of these will have been active for even longer as EHOs work both to identify owners of empty

homes and to support owners to take the first steps to return a property back to use where it has been empty for several years. Patience and persistence are two of the key qualities EHOs bring to their work, as they continue to look for ways to turn empty properties into occupied housing, no matter how many years it has been since they were last occupied. ■

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 2024/25. EHOs reported 1,465 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	No. of homes	% of total
Owner occupied	789	53.86%
Let privately	396	27.03%
Other	124	8.46%
Let at affordable rent	44	3.00%
Let through a matchmaker scheme	5	0.34%
Let through a housing management scheme	2	0.14%

The figures show that the vast majority of empty homes are returned to use as residential properties, with 'Owner occupied' and 'Let privately' being the two main outcomes. Within the category of 'Other', only 34 homes were noted as having outcomes of 'second home,' 'holiday home' or 'Airbnb'. This low figure shows how the work of EHOs is overwhelmingly contributing to tackling

the housing emergency by increasing the number of occupied residential properties and providing homes for people to live in. In our annual survey, 19 EHOs reported that their local authorities had active buyback and acquisitions programmes, and almost 100 homes empty for six months or longer had been brought back to use through these in 2024/25. ■



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	No. of homes	% of total
Owner deceased	598	30.90%
Other	343	17.73%
Rental tenancy ended	326	16.85%
Owner moved without or prior to selling	266	13.75%
Bought with intention to renovate (no outcome)	183	9.46%
Owner moved into long-term care, detention, etc.	145	7.49%
Former second home	51	2.64%
Reposessed	23	1.19%

The range of reasons for homes becoming empty is broadly similar to what it has been in previous years. The only significant change was a dramatic fall in the percentage of homes becoming empty where owners had bought with the intention of renovating. While this reason was cited in almost 30% of cases last year and 22% the year before, it was noted in fewer than 10% of cases this year.

This is the only one of the reasons for homes becoming empty that is linked to new buyers of a property, rather than long-standing owners. As it is noted elsewhere in this section that the number of homes coming back to use through owner occupation is increasing, it is possible that the reason for the fall in the number of homes acquired for renovation is because buyers are instead looking for long-term empty properties that do not require substantial work before they can be occupied.

In amongst other reasons; ‘repairs required’ was noted in 169 cases and ‘building issues’

were noted in a further 70 cases. This highlights how the condition of properties is often a reason for them becoming empty and indicates the challenges and costs that may be entailed in attempts to bring them back to use.

Ongoing repairs, together with repairs stalled for financial reasons, were cited as reasons for 29.31% of homes remaining empty. This is down slightly from last year when the figure stood at 32.57% and may be due in part to the amendment to council tax regulations introduced in 2024 which prevents the council tax surcharge being applied for a minimum of six months 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.

While the death of an owner is the most common reason for a home becoming empty, awaiting grant of confirmation following the death of an owner is only the eighth most



Why homes remain empty	No. of homes	% of total
Repairs ongoing	503	21.64%
Difficulty engaging with owner	358	15.40%
Other	270	11.62%
Currently advertised for rent/sell	183	7.87%
Repairs stalled due to financial reasons	176	7.57%
Difficulty locating owner	153	6.58%
Unwilling to sell or rent	132	5.68%
Property awaiting grant of confirmation	128	5.51%
Property inherited; no action taken	107	4.60%
Owner unsure of end use, needs advice, etc	71	3.06%
Waiting for right time to sell	61	2.62%
Legal dispute	53	2.28%
Difficulty establishing ownership	48	2.07%
Owner in long-term care, detention, etc,	43	1.85%
Repossession pending	38	1.64%

common reason (excluding ‘Other’) for a home remaining empty. The number of cases where an owner has taken no action after inheriting a property has fallen dramatically this year (from 279 cases last year). This suggests that more owners are actively considering what to do with an inherited property than has previously been the case.

However, against this, it should be noted that many cases where an owner will not engage or cannot be located will also be homes where the original owner has died. Additionally, within the category of ‘Other’, 70 cases were noted as remaining empty because of owner death, and 47 were noted

as remaining empty because of personal/family reasons. The latter may include owners reluctant to sell or rent a property that a parent or close relative has lived in. ■



SUCCESSFUL USE OF A CHARGING ORDER

A property in North Lanarkshire had been registered empty since 2017, when a family member was evicted, after a court-appointed solicitor had been instructed to act on behalf of the owner - who was living in a care home - to sell the property to cover her care home fees. The owner passed away before the property could be sold and the solicitor's involvement ended.

The owner had been estranged from her four sons for years. The evicted son claimed to have a Will which was never produced. The other sons had no interest in the property, or in becoming an Executor for her estate.

The property became a target for vandals and was a major cause of anti-social behaviour. Vermin were reported in the garden and had to be treated by Pollution Control. Windows and the back door were smashed by vandals to gain entry. The local authority Building Standards team boarded up the property due to the considerable number of complaints to Elected Members and the local EHO.

The EHO, Alyson McGlone, contacted the Social Work, Finance, and Legal Services teams to discuss calling up the Charging Order (a legal mechanism that allows a creditor to secure a debt against a debtor's property) attached to the Property Title in 2021. The local authority solicitor worked to prepare a case for court. This was very time consuming as getting statements from the family to confirm they had no interest proved difficult.

The previously evicted sibling contested the case and there were continuations twice to



A target for vandals

Empty homes can quickly become a location for anti-social behaviour

allow him to prepare a case. On the third calling the Sheriff granted a Decree allowing North Lanarkshire to sell the property to recover the cost of the Charging Order.

The property was auctioned in August 2024, with a new owner taking possession in September 2024.

This is the first successful case where a Charging Order has been called up to bring an empty home back into use. It is expected this multi-service practice will continue to be used to bring particularly difficult cases back into use going forward. ■

LONG-TERM EHO SUPPORT

In 2020, a house fire occurred in a property in West Lothian comprising four residences, resulting in the death of the elderly woman who owned and lived in one of the flats. Her adult son, who also lived at the address, was not present. Emergency services attended, and the fire brigade disconnected utilities and made the property safe. However, no remedial work was carried out, and over the past four years, the property has evidently declined. The damage and neglect have caused increasing concern among neighbouring residents, who continue to report the flat as being a nuisance and an eyesore.

Following the fire, the property remained in legal limbo, with ownership unresolved. The son, who has experienced social and health difficulties, has been living with a friend in a temporary arrangement. It was only in December 2024 that ownership of the property was formally transferred to him.

Efforts to engage with him were initially met with silence. Council officers made numerous attempts to make contact via letters, phone calls, and emails, all of which went unanswered. Eventually, perhaps prompted by growing concern over the financial implications of the long term empty council tax levy, the owner agreed to meet with the EHO.

The meeting proved to be constructive and empathetic. During the discussion, the owner said he would like to live in the property eventually. However, there are major obstacles to making it habitable again. With no insurance payout available at present and delays due to complications

surrounding the estate, there are currently no funds to support renovation.

Despite this, the owner remains adamant that he does not wish to sell the property. He hopes that once his mother's estate is eventually settled he may be able to access sufficient resources to carry out the necessary works.

One of the few points of progress has been around the council tax levy. This was a source of anxiety for the owner, but he is now up to date with payments and has no arrears. While dialogue with the owner has been established, and his intentions are clear, the property's condition is causing continuing distress to the neighbouring residents.

The EHO continues to keep an eye on the case and provide guidance or support where possible, but there appears to be no imminent resolution to this case, and it is expected that this will remain an ongoing case for some time to come. This highlights the emotional complexity of some cases, particularly those relating to bereavement and estates. ■



THE CHANGING NATURE OF EMPTY HOMES WORK IN EDINBURGH

Karen Allan from City of Edinburgh Council writes about the expansion of their Empty Homes Service.

The City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) has had a dedicated Empty Homes Service since 2016, with a dedicated EHO (initially jointly funded by the SEHP) since 2019. Edinburgh has more than 3,000 empty homes and with just one EHO, the work was largely reactive, responding to complaints regarding long-term empty homes and investigating to establish the cause, with the aim of getting them back into use.

Given current pressures due to the housing emergency, a decision was taken by CEC to recruit an additional fixed-term (18 months) EHO to allow for expansion of the service, mainly with a greater focus on proactive work. The rationale for this decision was that it would allow EHOs to target homes which could be brought back in to use, either as temporary accommodation (through private sector leasing), social housing (through buy-back) or general residential use. At this time, CEC was approached by the Scottish Government with an offer of matched grant funding which would allow the recruitment of another additional EHO (for two years), meaning that

there would be three full-time EHOs available to develop a strategic approach and practical application to deliver the desired outcome.

Initial scoping included the following:

- Development of an Empty Homes Strategic Framework/Policy
- Targeted early intervention with empty-home owners based on council tax status
- Communications strategy to promote the service and increase public (website and social media, etc.)
- Enhancing internal awareness (including amongst a wide range of staff across different service areas, as well as elected members)
- Development of a recording system allowing for improved data capture, analysis and case management
- Working with the SEHP on introducing a matchmaker scheme
- Linking empty homes work with wider strategic priorities, with a focus on capturing gaps and unmet need



- Consideration of a grant/loan scheme for empty-home owners
- Benchmarking with other local authorities
- Progressing Compulsory
- Purchase Order work

Development of empty homes work offers exciting opportunities to increase access to housing, especially with a focus on supporting unmet need and identifying priorities for accessing properties in terms of type, size, location and so on. Progress in the areas identified will be reviewed at the end of year one, with a focus on outcomes and analysis of how effective the early-intervention proactive approach has been. ■



Graffiti artists

This property became a place for unwanted art work



The next door neighbour

Empty homes can sit next door to well maintained housing



USING THE STRATEGIC EMPTY HOMES FRAMEWORK

Our *Strategic Empty Homes Framework*, developed in collaboration with housing specialists *Arneil Johnston*, provides a practical eight-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.

In our survey this year, 11 LAs, including Fife, Dundee and Falkirk, reported that their empty homes framework had been published and a further 14, including City of Edinburgh, Aberdeen City and Dumfries and Galloway, said that their LA was in the process of developing a framework. Publication or implementation of the framework is an integral part of the contracts we will be entering into with LAs to support increased numbers of EHOs across the country in the coming year.

And it's not just Scotland that is interested in both the framework and the data driven work that underpins it. In October last year our Empty Homes Policy and Projects Manager was invited to speak at the Reclaiming Vacant Properties Conference in St Louis, Missouri. The conference is a biannual event that focuses on how addressing vacant, abandoned

and deteriorating properties can help to strengthen neighbourhoods and advance community revitalisation across the USA.

His presentation to the conference covered the Strategic Empty Homes Framework, the data analysis work that underpins it, and examples of initiatives across Scotland that are helping to bring homes back to use as social or affordable housing. Following on from the presentation, several US Land Banks (public entities with unique powers to put vacant, abandoned and deteriorated properties back to productive use according to community goals) took copies of the Framework and began actively considering what they can take from the Scottish approach to empty homes work.

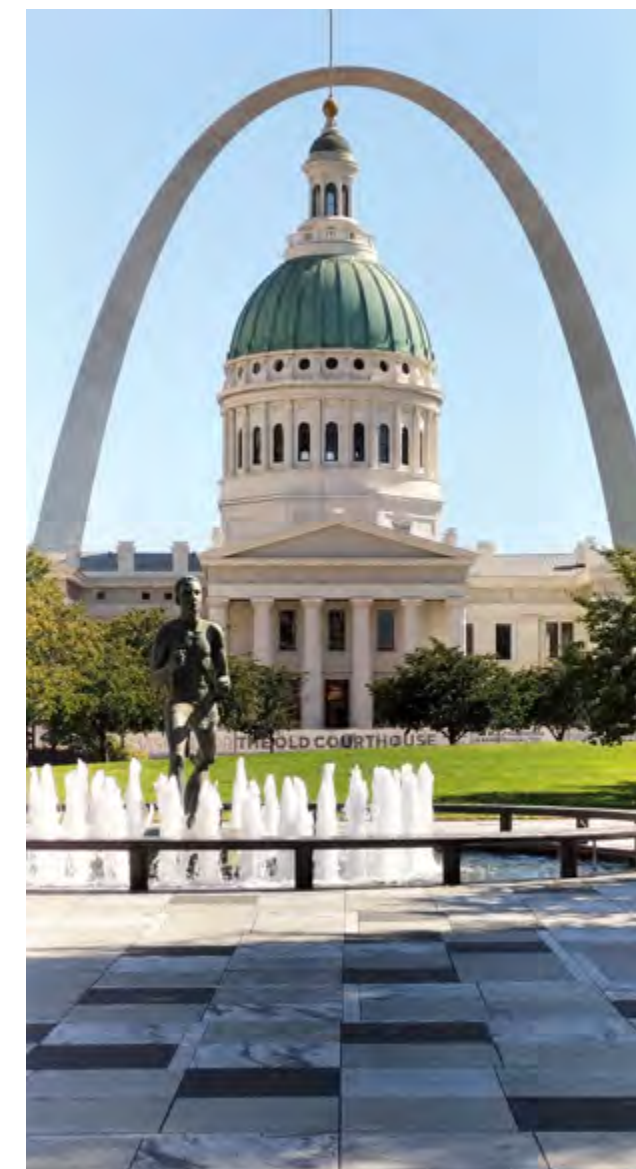
'I was fortunate to attend a presentation regarding Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's "Strategic Empty Homes Framework,"



being implemented throughout Scotland, at the Reclaiming Vacant Properties Conference.... The proactive/preventative approach to empty homes work versus the reactionary method many Housing and Building Code departments currently utilize is inspirational. Since returning from the conference, our Housing & Neighborhood Development Department with the City of Knoxville has discussed elements of this framework, including how a position such as an "Empty Homes Officer" could assist in our goals of utilizing abandoned, vacant, and deteriorated properties for affordable housing opportunities. The City of Knoxville's interdepartmental "Abandoned, Blighted, and Vacant Properties Committee" will include the "Strategic Empty Homes Framework" and recent Impact Reports in its current endeavor of researching how other municipalities and organizations with common goals target their efforts more effectively in community revitalization and housing development.' *Jillian Love, Economic & Community Development Project Manager, City of Knoxville, Tennessee*

'The post-industrial communities in Allegheny County located in southwestern Pennsylvania continue to experience the same fate as many other places where industry has left – lost jobs, lost population, and empty spaces. The Tri-COG Land Bank

is a nonprofit organization uniquely charged to address this challenge. Like the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, we can't do this work alone. We have learned from this model as we too embrace a data-driven approach that also works with a community of partners to identify these lost spaces and rehome them with new responsible owners and uses.' *An Lewis, Executive Director, Tri-COG Land Bank, Pennsylvania.* ■



St Louis, Missouri

Interest in the SEHP Framework has spread to other countries



ARGYLL AND BUTE KICKSTARTER PROJECT

Now in its second year, the empty homes kickstarter project established by Argyll and Bute Council with funding from SEHP and Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) continues to make a significant impact across the area.

The success of the project, which focuses on securing affordable housing for HSCP staff to support the retention and recruitment of essential workforce, was recognised at the UK-wide Empty Homes Network (EHN) Conference this year where it won the Innovation Award and was highly commended in the Working in Partnership category. Isla Binnie, the EHO who leads on the project, was highly commended in the Practitioner of the Year and Rising Star categories at the EHN Conference, and was also commended for the Outstanding Contribution award at the SEHP conference in February this year.

The project hasn't been without its challenges, but Isla has embraced these and used her diverse skills to overcome them, implementing a range of operational processes and procedures, and sourcing a variety of affordable housing to meet a wide range of staff needs. As well as practical housing solutions, a number of strategic processes have been implemented to help deliver the project:

To enable a co-ordinated approach, Accommodation Working Groups have been established in high demand areas, to address localised issues with key

stakeholders'. The Islay Accommodation Group received highly commended for 'Meeting the Challenge' at the EHN Awards.

In addition, building close working relationship with accommodation providers and housing associations has been instrumental in sourcing accommodation. This has proved to be invaluable, particularly on the islands, which rely on agency workers coming to work within the communities to deliver services.

Isla has made meaningful connections with a number of existing private sector landlords and has assisted new landlords. This has resulted in continued support for the project, with landlords proactively contacting the service when they have a vacant property, to secure a further HSCP tenant.

As Scotland's first project of its kind, the accolades the project, and Isla, have won highlight the project's national impact and its vital role in addressing the housing emergency while supporting essential workers relocating to Argyll and Bute.

People are at the heart of any project, and the success of this project can be measured by the numerous **client testimonies** which reinforce the difference it is making.



Island of Coll Two long-term empty properties. Thanks to securing HSCP and council funding, these properties underwent a major programme of works. One property is now complete and the other is due for completion shortly. These will accommodate the local GP and other HSCP workers



"Isla made contact early on and having her assistance to find, screen and visit possible tenancies was massively supportive. This reduced the unknowns I was dealing with and was especially helpful given that I was in New Zealand. Also, Isla liaising with my future landlady helped enable me to secure a tenancy in a timely manner which meant I didn't have to scabble around trying to find somewhere when



Lorn A four-bedroom RSL property had been empty since 2018. Council funding was approved to renovate the property into an HMO, to accommodate up to four workers. This effective partnership was highly commended in the EHN 'Working in Partnership' category.

Islay A former NHS Dental Surgery had been closed for several years. It was identified as suitable for a change of use to form a two-bedroom property due to its close proximity to the hospital and care home. With funding and planning approved, the conversion is a cost-effective use of a redundant property and will assist with relocation of permanent workers.

I arrived. This felt like a streamlined and supportive process for my relocation from NZ to Campbeltown."

"We didn't realise the project Isla works with existed, this is a great way to help people relocating to Campbeltown for much needed jobs within the NHS. Isla has been great at communication between myself and our new tenant, hopefully we'll be able to work with Isla again in the near future."



WORKING WITH OUTSIDE AGENCIES TO FIND AN OWNER

In January 2023 the Environmental Health team at Dundee City Council began investigating a leak affecting a flat. During their enquiries, it became evident that the flat above had been empty for a prolonged period. With no immediate means of contacting the absent owner, the team enlisted the support of the council's EHO Michelle Morrison to take the case forward. The property had been vacant for over ten years, posing a difficult challenge to the local authority and the EHO.

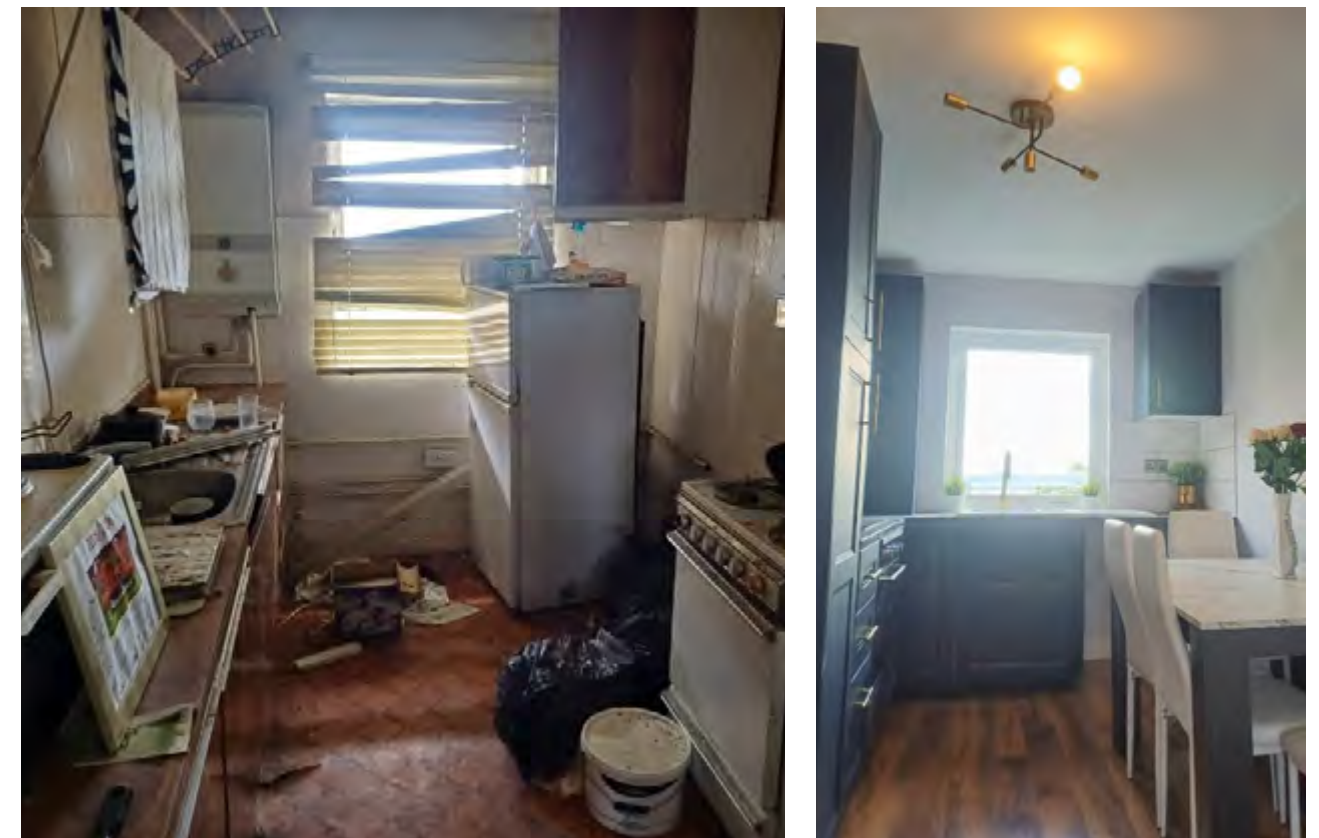
The property in question was a flat in Dundee, left unoccupied under unusual circumstances. Originally, a friend of the owner had been living there, but upon vacating, he lost the only set of keys. The owner, living far from Dundee, found themselves unsure of how to deal with the situation from a distance. With no easy way to re-enter the property and emotional ties clouding the decision-making process, the flat remained empty for the next decade.

When the EHO was officially assigned to the case in October 2023, there was little information available on the owner. Traditional attempts to trace them had failed, so the EHO reached out to Fraser & Fraser, a firm of probate genealogists specialising in locating potential beneficiaries. This partnership proved vital in eventually

tracking down the property owner, a process that took several months due to the time the flat had been unoccupied and the lack of contact details.

Once contact was made, the EHO was able to have a meaningful conversation with the owner. The owner, who was struggling with making a decision about the property and the condition of the flat, welcomed the opportunity given by Michelle to discuss options. She introduced them to the council's Empty Homes Initiative, offering both practical guidance and a sounding board for the various options available. They put a plan in place, and the owner was also connected with the downstairs neighbour, who was organising essential roof repairs, further facilitating progress on the home's restoration. This shows the impact of the EHO relationship with owners – they are able to provide connection and support when owners feel overwhelmed and emotionally tied to properties.

The primary obstacle throughout this case was a familiar one: making initial contact with the property owner. However, through persistence, resourcefulness, and collaboration with external specialists, this barrier was eventually overcome. Once engaged, the owner's attitude began to shift. They expressed relief at finally receiving



Before and after

The completely updated kitchen now provides space for eating as well as new units and appliances

support, noting that it gave them the encouragement they needed to act. In their own words, they had felt “overwhelmed with the situation” and were grateful for the help offered by the local authority via the EHO. After considering their options, the owner decided that selling the property was the most viable way forward for them. With guidance from the EHO, they explored several solutions, including contacting auction houses and local property developers. Finally, the property was sold in April 2024 to Your Property Matters Scotland Ltd, an experienced renovation and letting company. Due to the many years of vacancy the property was not habitable at the point of sale and required extensive repairs

including utility reconnection, renovation decoration work and the installation of new windows. The new owners moved quickly, completing the necessary works within six months. The property was fully restored and had found a new purpose by the end of 2024, being let to a postgraduate student, thus bringing the property back to life.

This case highlights the importance of EHOs using both practical and compassionate methods in tackling long-term empty homes. The impact of the support they can offer is invaluable to empty homes owners. The end use of the property shows how empty properties can meet local housing need effectively. ■



WORKING WITH REGISTERED SOCIAL LANDLORDS



Before

The living room before part of it was sectioned off to add space to the kitchen

This Glasgow property had been vacant since November 2021. The previous owner had moved into a retirement complex managed by the Yorkhill Housing Association, as they were no longer able to manage the tenement stairs. Subsequently, they passed away in the retirement accommodation, leaving the flat vacant. Following their death, the property was acquired voluntarily from the executor of the estate by the housing association, with financial support from Glasgow's Affordable Housing Supply Programme. This funding, allocated through the city's Neighbourhoods, Regeneration and Sustainability (NRS) service, was used to enable Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) to acquire and renovate private

sector properties for affordable housing.

While the acquisition was straightforward, the condition of the property presented significant challenges. The flat was not suitable for letting in its existing state due to problems arising from the time it had been vacant. It required major renovation to meet both the Scottish Housing Quality Standard (SHQS) and the needs of prospective tenants. Care was taken to preserve the character of the original space while enhancing the functionality of the property.

One of the most difficult issues was the layout and size of the kitchen. Despite this being a spacious two-bedroom flat, the kitchen was undersized, awkwardly shaped, and failed to



After

The new partition wall still allows for plenty of living space

meet the SHQS. To address this, the kitchen was extended by one metre into the lounge. This required removing the existing partition wall and constructing a new one, resulting in a more functional and efficient kitchen space. The reconfigured layout allowed for a fridge to be positioned conveniently behind the door and created room near the kitchen window for a small dining table, significantly improving the usability of the space.

The bathroom, which had been adapted for the previous owner and was in poor condition, was replaced with a modern suite. Other rooms in the flat were also renovated to a high standard.

The property's windows were replaced with energy-efficient double glazing that complied with modern building regulations. The gas central heating system was upgraded with a new Worcester condensing boiler and Stelrad Elite radiators to ensure optimal energy efficiency. To further enhance the property's energy performance, Yorkhill Housing Association secured funding to install a bonded bead insulation system behind all external and common close walls. This brought the property's energy efficiency rating to the highest possible level for a flat of its type.

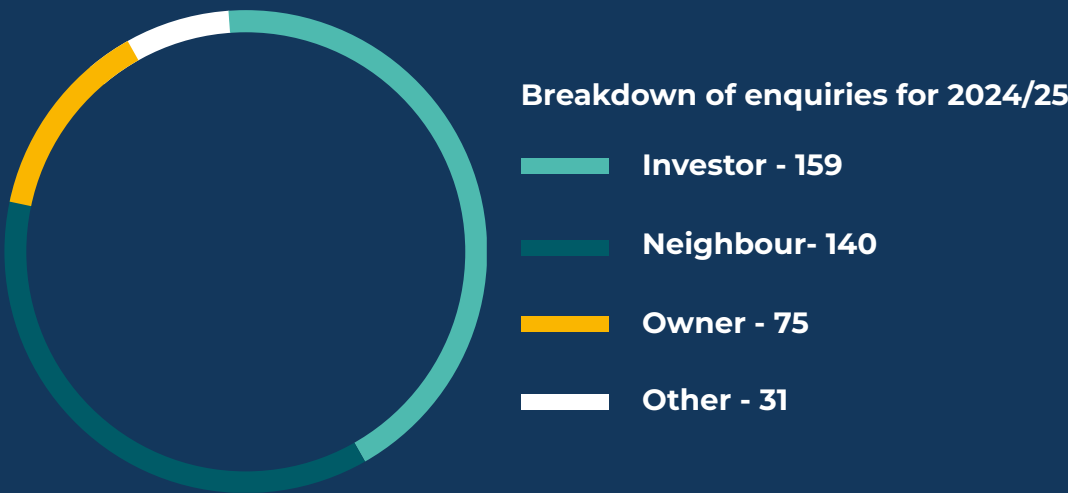
Following the comprehensive refurbishment, the property was allocated via a Section 5 referral to a single parent and their young child who had been made homeless. The tenant had been fleeing a difficult situation involving domestic violence and antisocial behaviour. The flat not only offered them a fresh start, but also met their need for a safe, stable home within commuting distance of work. The tenant was overjoyed with the offer of the property as the large double bedrooms afforded ample space for their belongings. The newly extended kitchen was much appreciated as this allowed them space to have meals in the kitchen with a view out of the large kitchen window.

This property is a great example of how effective use of local authority funding and collaborative working with supportive RSLs can enable effective renovations of empty homes, providing necessary, comfortable and energy efficient housing for families. It shows how empty homes work can fit into wider housing and homelessness strategy and the impact of bringing vacant properties back into use. By providing a secure tenancy to a homeless family, it helped reduce the number of homeless families waiting for a property. ■



THE EMPTY HOMES ADVICE SERVICE

The Empty Homes Advice Service (EHAS) provides support to anyone with a query related to an empty home. Here we review what the Advice Service has achieved over the past 12 months, and our plans for the year ahead.



This year, we received 405 enquiries in total, up from 356 the previous year, but still 45 short of our target of 450. The vast majority of these enquiries are from owners, neighbours or investors.

Owner enquiries are where EHAS can have the greatest impact in bringing empty homes back into use. Owners are the decision-makers, and their engagement is the first and most critical step in addressing the issue of an empty home. We received 75 owner enquiries, up from

54 last year. This represents 18.5% of our contacts, compared to 15.6% in 2023/24 and 16% in 2022/23. Whilst still short of our target of 25%, it represents an improvement on the previous two years. This may result, at least in part, from a more well-established social media strategy focusing on increasing owner engagement, outlined in more detail below.

Neighbour enquiries, typically reports of empty homes from members of the public, are a key part of empty homes work. These made up 35% of our total contacts, up from



Owner enquiries by year



33% in 2023/24 and 25% in the two years before that. This, perhaps, represents a greater general awareness of the support available and teams involved in tackling empty homes.

While EHOs often identify empty homes through council tax records, these aren't always up to date, as owners don't always report a vacancy. This means EHOs also rely on reports from members of the public to be notified of empty properties, so that they can begin to investigate.

A recent example of the importance of this kind of community engagement was the EHAS receiving reports of two different empty homes from two separate people. These reports led to an investigation being opened by the local EHO, which uncovered a series of empty homes owned by one person, which may be part of a large-scale benefit fraud. In this instance, not only have these neighbour reports led to these homes getting closer to being brought back into use, they will also have helped to disrupt serious criminal activity. As well as passing on reports to EHOs,

EHAS provides impartial support to neighbours who often feel frustrated by a perceived lack of council action. Our **Neighbour Toolkit**, along with tailored advice, helps manage expectations and clarify what powers councils do — and don't — have when tackling empty homes.

Investor enquiries made up 39% of all contacts. These came from individuals and companies interested in buying empty homes, including first-time buyers, buy-to-let investors, and developers.

A frequent request from this group is for access to a list of empty homes across Scotland. No such list exists, so we provide advice on how to search for properties through more traditional means and outline key considerations like **VAT relief** and **council tax rules** for empty homes.

This consistent demand is a key reason behind the development of our new **National Matchmaker Scheme**, covered in more detail on page 31.

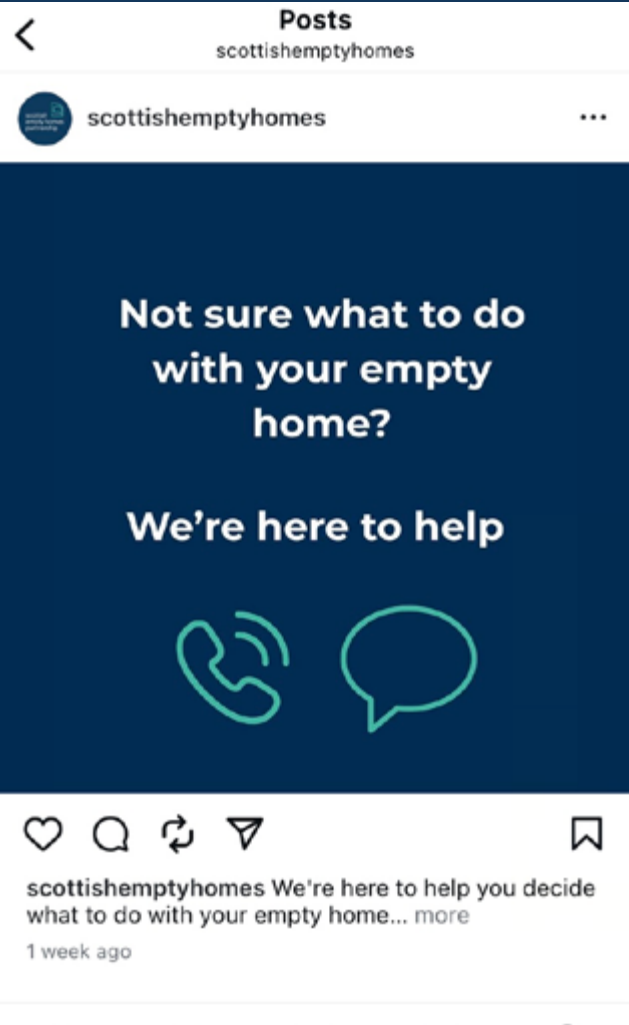
Social media impact

This year saw a more strategic and consistent use of social media by EHAS. We increased the number of posts focused specifically on owners and trialled paid advertising for the first time. We emphasised how tackling empty homes contributes to addressing the housing emergency.

Over the year as a whole, 10% of our contacts came through social media — double the proportion from the previous year. This began to show itself in our contacts

in the second half of the year, where we had a four-fold increase in enquiries from people who had found us via social media compared with the first half of the year. The number of owners that found us via social media also increased four-fold compared with the whole of the previous year.

We see significant potential for further growth in this area and will continue refining our approach in 2025/26.



Social media
The Advice Service now use Instagram to reach out to owners and renovators

Examples of EHAS Case Work

VAT

We were contacted by an owner for advice on VAT relief on the renovation of his empty property. It had previously been one of a group of buildings owned by a single farm, before being sold to the owner individually. This meant it changed from being technically a commercial property to being a residential one, and as such the EHO was not able to provide the supporting letter usually supplied in more straightforward cases, where residential properties have been empty for the required period. EHAS

reviewed VAT Notice 708 and established that the property did still qualify for relief under a different bullet point regarding the conversion of non-residential premises to residential use. We supported the owner in obtaining alternative evidence via Registers of Scotland and from the previous owner, and successfully achieved VAT relief, representing over £10,000 of savings. This money was then used to complete the final pieces of the renovation project and meant the property was brought back into use more quickly.



Council tax

An owner contacted EHAS after being denied a council tax discount for their empty property, which he felt was wrong. On looking into the case, we agreed that the owner was entitled to a discount, and the local authority council tax team were using an outdated version of council tax regulations as the basis for their decision to deny the owner's application. We wrote to the council's tax department on the owner's behalf, highlighting the up-to-date regulations and outlining the facts of the case which made the owner eligible for a discount on their council tax bill. The council reviewed the information provided and asked the owner to re-apply for a discount, and on this occasion, the discount was applied. The discount was also backdated, resulting in savings of over £1,000, which could then be put towards completing the remaining renovations, leading to the home being brought back into use more quickly.

Quote from owner:

"The EHAS have gone above and beyond in supporting me through what could have been a very stressful and confusing process."

We shared this case with the SEHP's Partnerships Officer and Policy Manager who, in turn, presented a segment on the updated council tax regulations in a quarterly best practice meeting. The feedback during this segment highlighted that there were a small number of other councils who had not updated their approach to awarding discounts since the Council Tax (Variation for Unoccupied Dwellings) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2023.

This example highlights the importance of the EHAS both as an impartial advocate for empty home owners and as a tool to influence wider empty homes work. Looking ahead

User feedback survey

In 2024/25 we introduced a user feedback survey to assess the quality of our service and identify areas for improvement. We sent the survey to 120 service users and received 25 responses, a typical return rate for surveys of this kind. Survey distribution was automated mid-year through our Customer Relationship Manager tool (CRM), but had been manual before that, which limited reach.

Key findings:

- 4.37 out of 5 was the average score for overall service experience
- 87% said the advice was clear and easy to understand
- However, 38% said our advice guides (e.g. Neighbour Toolkit, VAT guidance) were not easy to understand

This last finding is a clear prompt for action, and we have already begun reviewing and updating our written resources to ensure they are as accessible as possible. Looking ahead



At the Conference

The SEHP Advice team meet EHOs and other housing professionals

Looking ahead

In 2025/26 we will continue to refine our approach to social media with the aim of engaging more owners, and will begin working more closely with the new SEHP Senior Communications Executive to develop a wider communications plan for the EHAS (potentially looking at developing relationships with other organisations and professionals such as probate solicitors) to try to reach our target of 450 contacts a year, with 25% of those being from owners.

The launch of our new SEHP website will enable us to make updates and improvements to our existing online advice content far more easily, improving the user

journey and making it more accessible. The increased ease with which we will be able to make updates means we will integrate regular reviews of content into our work.

We will make slight changes to the way we record case outcomes to better reflect the impact of EHAS casework, which is not always well represented within our current outcome format.

Another significant piece of work is launching the new National Matchmaker Scheme. We believe the new scheme will be successful in identifying properties to be brought back into use, and more information can be found on the following pages. ■

SEHP NATIONAL MATCHMAKER SCHEME

In 2025, the SEHP will launch a National Matchmaker Scheme. This follows a review, with help and feedback from EHOs, which concluded that extending this service across Scotland offers a good opportunity for relatively modest resource investment. The new scheme will replace the existing SEHP Matchmaker Service, which currently acts only as a referral system to 15 local schemes. It will operate alongside some continuing local schemes and replace others which may choose to close.

Hosted on the new SEHP website, the National Matchmaker will function as a dedicated property portal, modelled on mainstream property platforms but tailored specifically for owners of empty homes. Crucially, it will be simple for owners to list their property themselves, and they will retain control throughout the process.

Privacy is a key feature: listings will show only partial addresses and essential details, with owners notified directly when a potential buyer registers interest. It is then up to the owner whether they choose to engage. Buyers will register with basic information, including their buyer type (e.g. first-time buyer, buy-to-let investor, developer), enabling owners to make informed decisions.

Where properties are listed in local authority areas with buy-back or open market purchase schemes, listings will be shared with the relevant EHO to assess suitability for council acquisition, supporting our aim of increasing social housing stock where possible.

Where there aren't such schemes, EHOs will be notified anyway, so that they can provide any necessary support an owner needs.

Why this matters

We are contacted daily by people across

Scotland keen to buy and renovate empty homes, ranging from families and first-time buyers to professional investors. Our 2023 and 2024 surveys show that at least 13 and 19 homes, respectively, were brought back into use via local Matchmaker Schemes alone, indicating a clear demand for a national platform as well as the potential for success. Expanding this offer nationally increases opportunities for similar success stories, particularly for properties that may struggle to find a buyer through conventional channels.

One such example involved a property in poor condition due to previous hoarding, whose owner—facing personal challenges—found the idea of going through the traditional selling process overwhelming. With support from the EHO the owner listed the property on the local Matchmaker Scheme. They were matched with a buyer who, importantly, was willing take on the substantial clearance and renovation work. The EHO remained engaged with both parties through the sale, and the owner achieved a price they were happy with. The buyer swiftly refurbished and sold the home, achieving their goals while returning an empty home to active use. The EHO commended the buyer's professionalism throughout.

More than a sales platform

The National Matchmaker Scheme will also serve as a valuable engagement tool, drawing in owners who may not be ready to sell but who are open to advice and support. This increased visibility will help us build more relationships with owners and promote the range of help available to bring empty homes back into use. ■



DISCRETIONARY APPLICATION OF EMPTY PROPERTY COUNCIL TAX LEVY

These cases examine two contrasting approaches taken by Scottish councils when applying the empty property council tax levy, highlighting how different but equally legitimate approaches to applying the same legislation can lead to significantly different outcomes for property owners.

Council A - Flexible Approach

In December 2022, a property owner experienced a major flood following burst pipes in freezing weather. The flood left the property uninhabitable, with no water, electricity, heating, or upstairs ceilings. The owner, living on limited means with two elderly cats, stayed with her partner rather than accept hotel accommodation from the insurance company.

The EHO adopted a holistic approach, recognizing that the situation was having an extremely detrimental effect on the homeowner and was not of her own making. Key considerations included the owner's

desperation to return home, her inability to afford repairs independently, and the legislative intent to incentivise bringing empty homes back into use. The officer concluded that the owner was already motivated to return home and that applying the levy would not achieve its intended purpose.

The additional levy was not applied. The officer maintained regular contact with the owner, and insurance-funded repairs have now been instructed and are nearing completion. Among over 200 cases handled, this was the only one of its kind encountered.

Council B - Strict Interpretation

In 2010, a property suffered extensive damage when someone in an upper flat poured fat down a drain, causing a subsequent burst pipe. The owner entered into a lengthy dispute with their insurance company that would span over a decade.

In 2018, the council began charging the empty property council tax premium. When the owner contested this through appeals, the council maintained that resolution of the insurance dispute was the owner's responsibility, the situation needed to be resolved independently, and the levy would continue to be applied. This position was maintained through multiple appeals, including when the insurance company withdrew from the case in 2022, leaving the property unrepaired and the owner without funds.

The continued application of the levy has had several reported impacts: the owner argues that it has actually slowed the property's return to use by diverting resources away from repair work. The property remains empty in 2025 which, the owner suggests, demonstrates the levy has not had its intended purpose. The owner also tells us that the situation has contributed to work-related stress, requiring them to take sick leave.

Conclusion

These cases demonstrate that while local authorities have legitimate discretion in applying empty property levies, the approach taken can significantly impact individual property owners as well as not be guaranteed to incentivise a property to be brought back to use quickly. Council A's case illustrates how application of discretionary powers can support property owners through difficult circumstances while maintaining focus on the legislation's core aims. Council B may argue that the continued application of the levy has gotten the property closer to being brought back into use than if they had removed it. ■



SEHP SUPPORT FOR EHOS



SEHP support in action

A meeting with two members of the Empty Homes team from Edinburgh Council

The work of the SEHP's Partnership Officer serves to amplify the great work being undertaken by EHOs across the country and provide opportunities for them to network and learn from each other.

Best practice sessions give EHOs an opportunity to find out what work is being conducted across the country. As most officers operate alone or with small teams, learning from peers is a great chance to gain knowledge from shared experience. Online sessions with the whole network are a good way to include officers from all around the country as well to pass on important information and updates from SEHP. We also want to introduce smaller group sessions for more detailed information and discussion, in addition to sessions with the whole network. We continue to use Knowledge Hub as an online platform for questions from the network and updates from SEHP. We have undertaken a revitalisation of

merchant discounts to provide additional support to those renovating empty homes to get them back into use, re-establishing discounts at major providers including Dulux, Rears Laminates and Travis Perkins. EHOs have provided feedback that this scheme is particularly useful in areas where there are no grants or loans available to empty home owners as a means of supporting renovations. The cost of renovations in rural and island areas has been highlighted as a major burden, so this is an area we continue to look into to try and strengthen our offering nationwide. In the upcoming year we plan to have more regular best practice sessions scheduled in, with one in every quarter, as well as more time for workshops with external partners. We plan to have a mix of in-person and online sessions to maximise the benefit for EHOs. We also plan to bring in new merchant discounts to add to the available help with the cost of renovations for empty home owners. ■

SEHP CONFERENCE 2025



Getting involved

Attendees at the Conference put questions to the speakers

The theme for our 2025 conference was Strategic Planning for a Strong Community, with a focus on town centre regeneration and how communities can ensure empty homes play a key part in their housing strategy.

The conference included a panel discussion on Scotland's empty homes across the country, that was chaired by Gordon MacRae from Shelter Scotland with a panel consisting of Councillor Lynne Short (Dundee), Councillor Ruari Kelly (Glasgow) and Councillor Gerry McGarvey (Stirling) who spoke about housing and empty homes work in their local area.

Other speakers at the conference included Paul McLennan MSP, Minister for Housing

(at time of conference), Davie Campbell, the Managing Director of Rural Community Housing, Malcolm Fraser, an Edinburgh architect, and Mhairi Donaghy from Scottish Futures Trust.



Conference feedback

Following the conclusion of the conference, a survey was distributed to all delegates via QR codes. Thirty-two responses were received and delegates generally rated each aspect of the day positively. Useful suggestions and constructive critiques were also collected, which will help us shape future partnership events.

The following table shows the average rating out of 5 for each aspect of the conference.

Fair representation of urban and rural areas	4.32
Awards presentation	4.25
Knowledge/ best practice sharing	4.29
Networking opportunities	4.28
Sponsor exhibition	4.07
Venue	4.24
Catering	4.43
Booking process	4.68
Communications before the event	4.64
Conference brochure	4.27

The average across all ratings was 4.35/5, compared to 4.44/5 in 2024.

Positive feedback from the day:

“Very well organised and the venue was excellent.”

“Always interested in the variety of speakers and how they come together with the theme of the conference”

“Was a really good day with excellent speakers”

Helpful suggestions for future events:

“Felt it was pitched slightly too strategic. Would have been good to hear more

around the work of EHOs who have the experience on the ground.”

“How about getting tenants’ perspective on the impact it has made to them moving into a new property that they now can call home.”

“How can we promote and change the lack of communication from empty homeowners. How can we give more of an incentive for them to bring their properties back into occupation.”

Positive feedback

Conference attendees gave positive and constructive feedback about the day





AUCTION HOUSE SCOTLAND 14TH SCOTTISH EMPTY HOMES AWARDS



Moira Simpson of Aberdeenshire Council collects the award for meeting social/affordable housing need

The annual Empty Homes Awards allow us to acknowledge and appreciate the effort, hard work, and vision that goes into empty homes work across Scotland. Many thanks to all those who submitted nominations and congratulations to all those who have been commended!



Best Housing Renovation – Professional or Organisation Winner: Easy Hire Solutions



Katerina Pietrzak from Easy Hire Solutions

Last year's award winners, Easy Hire Solutions, submitted another empty home project this year, this time a property in Kincardine that had been on the Buildings at Risk Register for a number of years. Easy Hire Solutions director Sebastian Pietrzak had a vision of making this derelict eighteenth-century building in the Kincardine conservation area into a home.

At one time a public convenience, the property had been vacant for about 25 years. The property is C-listed and it took two years and multiple applications for Sebastian to get planning permission and a building warrant from Fife Council; one of the conditions was that the windows had to be replaced by new ones with wooden frames rather than UPVC. A subfloor had to be created in the shell of the building, with help from architects and structural engineers. The property is now a stunning four-bedroom home with a private garden.

Best Housing Renovation – Public Winner: Phil McKenna

This former Lloyd's TSB bank, in a prominent position in the Coupar Angus conservation area, had closed in February 2021. To redevelop the bank into a flat, extensive work was required and Phil McKenna was assisted by a grant from Perth & Kinross council's Vacant Property Feasibility Fund and an Adapt Your Property grant. Challenges included the building's layout, which had been designed for business use, and removing the old banking fixtures and fittings.

In November 2024 the project was complete, with the former bank having been redeveloped as a flat, and its rent set at the Local Housing Allowance rate. Shortly after being advertised, a tenant moved in, highlighting the demand for housing in the area. In addition to providing an affordable home, the redevelopment of the property has contributed to the council's efforts to enhance the economic viability of the town

centre in Coupar Angus. This project is a good example of how commercial buildings can be adapted to support increased town-centre affordable living options within a rural setting.



Phil McKenna renovated a former bank to create an affordable home



Best Use of Empty Homes to Meet Social/Affordable Housing Need Winner: Aberdeenshire Council

This transformation of a 1908 school annexe in Fraserburgh demonstrates innovative circular economy principles in addressing housing need. Vacated in August 2020, the architecturally significant building presented complex challenges of working within existing structural constraints and with unknown conditions once stripped back. As the building was owned by Aberdeenshire Council, the renovation was led by them and overseen by the Affordable Housing Team (which includes the EHO, Moira Simpson) and other services.

The biggest challenge was altering the internal layout while keeping the architectural character of the building. A full strip-out, back to the bare structure, was required, including complete removal of suspended timber floors at ground level and also the ground-bearing concrete floors. A new insulated concrete slab was laid on the ground floor, but concrete from the broken-up floors was retained and used for infill. Modern efficiencies were incorporated, including air tightness, insulation, low-carbon heating systems, photovoltaic panels and windows that were in compliance with the conservation area requirements.

The renovation created 16 homes for social rent, suitable for small families and single households. Eight of the properties are suitable for particular needs, and four properties went to homeless households. Renamed Bill Gibb Court, honouring Fraserburgh's famous fashion designer who studied in this building, the development achieved 50-75% embodied carbon savings compared to new construction. This renovation exemplifies housing-led regeneration, creating place resilience while meeting strategic affordable housing objectives and supporting community wellbeing.



Fraserburgh Academy Annexe now provides 16 homes for social rent.

Best environmentally friendly retrofit Winners: Benjamin and Stephanie Williams

The transformation of this seventeenth-century property demonstrates exceptional dedication to conservation and sustainability. Located off the high street in a busy Borders town, Sapphire House was empty for over 10 years, having previously serving as a dentist's office. The owners undertook extensive renovation themselves, facing significant challenges from the outset. Serious structural issues were uncovered during the initial work, requiring foundation and wall repairs before renovation could begin. These unforeseen complications strained finances, leading the owners to seek support from their EHO and secure crucial funding through the SBC Empty Homes Grant Scheme.

Their commitment to historical integrity was exemplary: the couple researched and applied traditional conservation techniques including lime pointing the exterior, lime plastering the interior, and using hemp insulation. This thoughtful approach balanced preserving the property's original character with meeting modern building standards and improving energy efficiency ratings. Remarkably, the



History preserved Traditional materials including lime plaster were used in this retrofit

couple had two children during the project and now pursue new careers utilising skills learned during the renovation. This project stands as a testament to dedication, craftsmanship and the successful marriage of historical preservation with environmental sustainability.

Outstanding Contribution to Empty Homes Work Winner. South of Scotland Community Housing (SOSCH)

SOSCH has established itself as a leading community-led housing enabler, demonstrating exceptional strategic vision in prioritising empty homes as viable alternatives to new supply. SOSCH partners with community organisations to transform long-term empty and derelict



Morgan Eller and Meabh Weldon receiving the award for SOSCH in the Outstanding Contribution category

buildings into affordable housing solutions.

Their portfolio includes the former bank in Wigtown, the Old Police Station in Langholm, the former Grapes Hotel in Whithorn and community-led regeneration in Glentworth. Each project exemplifies their strategic partnership approach to delivery and funding. Their determined strategic approach ensures community organisations consistently consider empty homes renovation as a preferable option to new construction, addressing local housing needs while preserving community heritage. ■



THE YEAR AHEAD

Almost all local authorities across Scotland employ staff part time or full time to work on empty homes, as they recognise the impact this work can have to the wider housing system and market. This commitment continues to be further supported and invested in by Scottish Government. For 2025/26 the Government committed £2 million for SEHP, local authority and other sector partners to continue to bring more empty homes back into use. The funding can be broken down into three key strands of work and our hopes for 2025 and beyond.

Funding for additional Empty Homes Officer capacity

From the overall funding, £750,000 is available to support some councils to increase their current capacity. In some areas, empty homes work is part of a wider role or carried out by a part-time staff member. These services have reported that their limited time has made it challenging to have the impact that they would like. We've been able to take a targeted approach to authorities, offering match funding to increase their empty homes capacity over a two-year period. Although

we anticipate that there will continue to be a degree of reactive work responding to owners and neighbours who reach out to their council, we hope to see councils becoming able to take a more proactive approach. As part of this work, these authorities will publish a strategic empty homes framework, giving them the structure needed to do this. The partnership will continue to induct new EHOs and provide wider support to this network of new officers.



Funding for the national and local initiatives

Another £700,000 is available to increase the number of empty homes returned and to deliver outputs that can be scaled up or utilised by other local authorities. Some of these projects, like the promotional activity we will undertake, are national. This work aims to build more public awareness of empty homes and launch our National Matchmaker Scheme, which will contribute to bringing even more properties back into use.

The other national project will be a pilot on Compulsory Purchase. We've spoken with local authorities to discuss their barriers to carrying out CPOs for those tricky, but much needed, properties. We have already undertaken some work with EHOs to identify the homes that might be suitable for CPOs. We will work with an external expert on this and they will help EHOs and their legal teams explore whether this will be a viable option for these cases. While we know this can be a complex and lengthy process, there are some properties that will continue to remain empty if no enforcement measures are taken.

The local initiatives are still being discussed and shaped. These will be undertaken with a range of partner organisations, ranging from councils, community-led housing and charities, as we all have a role to play in bringing empty homes back. These projects will showcase models that we hope can be replicated or adapted by others. We will work closely with project partners and interested parties to identify key learning and, where appropriate, tools that will help with them on this journey.

Funding for the SEHP

In order to support the work above, the SEHP team will be growing, with a coordinator

leading on each of the strands above. They will work with partners and wider sector stakeholders to ensure that there is iterative learning through the lifetime of the projects, supporting project partners to evidence their impact and advocate for continued investment in this work.

Our next conference will be in October 2026, so we will not have one for 2025/26. We will continue to facilitate best practice sessions and workshops throughout the year.

We have been invited to take part in a two-year funding pilot called Fairer Funding. As a result, our delivery priorities for 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2027 are:

- To effectively allocate funding to LAs for additional EHO capacity and to sector partners for local and national initiatives. To provide ongoing support to these projects and the wider sector through publications and events.
- Increase uptake of the Empty Homes Strategic Framework, so that the majority of local authorities have integrated action plans, which proactively target empty homes and accelerate the pace and scale homes are returned to use.
- Produce guidance and tools to assist local authorities in evolving their empty home services and systems at pace, which consolidate learning from different approaches and interventions used to tackle empty homes, including co-producing new tools to aid data analysis.
- Facilitate the effective induction and training of local authority EHOs, including the new 2025 cohort.
- Evolve the Empty Homes Advice Service model by increasing the availability of and access to online materials and information, refreshing the website platform and developing a new National Matchmaker Scheme to help maximise the effectiveness and efficiency of the Advice Service.

Beyond the SEHP, we've seen the appointment of a dedicated Cabinet Secretary for Housing, a recognition of the crucial role having a home plays. We look forward to working with the new Cabinet Secretary and other partners over the coming years as the work and projects develop. ■

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Tahmina Nizam
National Manager, SEHP



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