



Unlocking Scotland's empty homes to help local authorities meet the affordable housing target

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership



- The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership was established in 2010. We are funded by the Scottish Government and hosted by Shelter Scotland.
- Our aim is to support the Scottish Government's commitment to bringing empty homes back into use as affordable housing where possible. This is underpinned by our five strategic objectives;
 - Support the Scottish Government in the implementation of its Housing to 2040 strategy and commitment to empty homes aspects of a National Acquisition Plan.
 - Encourage every LA to adopt a strategic approach to bringing empty homes back into use.
 - Promote evidence-based benefits of bringing empty homes back into use to encourage diverse involvement in empty homes work across Scotland.
 - Support the network of dedicated empty homes officers through the provision of training and best practice sharing
 - Run the Scottish Empty Homes Advice Service.

It's not just local authorities that need the affordable housing target to be met.



An annual update on Homelessness Statistics covering 2022-23 released by Scotland's Chief Statistician shows that:

- There were 39,006 applications for homelessness assistance – an increase of 3,247 (9%) compared with 2021-22.
- There were 32,242 households assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness – an increase of 2,903 (10%) compared to 2021-22.
- There were 15,039 households in temporary accommodation at 31 March 2023 – a 6% increase compared with 14,214 at 31 March 2022.

Local authorities are facing increased demand for housing. At the same time, high inflation is limiting the ability of local authorities to meet this demand, particularly through new build properties.

And that's just the headlines....

There's a who lot more underneath it...



We asked local authorities about the challenges they face. They told us.



- Our housing supply is not meeting the current demand.
- Increased numbers of people are requiring support, for example an ageing population increases the demand for particular needs properties and generates more complex medical cases.



- Second homes, holiday homes, and increasing PRS standards are creating shortages in supply of affordable homes
- Private landlords are increasingly nervous as legislation changes which is driving some out of the private rented sector
- Quality homes (including family homes, single-bed homes, and a variety of other options) are required to help address local challenges.



- Local authorities face increasing costs and budget pressures with no subsidy funding to support any proactive work.
- Lack of building trades capacity in some parts of region.



However, we have a housing anomaly;

There are empty houses that could become homes



We have;

- Rising house prices, rents and build costs
- People unable to afford to buy or rent in the places they grew up or work in.
- Increasing numbers of people on housing waiting lists
- Local authorities declaring housing emergencies

We also have;

- 46,217 long term empty homes (homes liable for council tax that have been empty for six months or longer).
- 28,280 homes that have been empty for more than a year
- 47,293 unoccupied exemptions – empty homes exempt from council tax.
- Many of these are empty due to the property being repossessed, the death of a previous owner, the owner being in long term care or detention, or dwellings last occupied by charitable bodies.

The asset on our doorstep



Bringing privately owned empty properties back to use provides opportunities to address the challenges local authorities are facing.

- We can create more homes for less money in less time.
- We can help to revive our town centres.
- We can work towards realising twenty minute neighbourhoods and support place-based planning.
- We can provide housing, training and hope for some of the most vulnerable groups in society
- We can sustain some of our most fragile communities.
- We can reduce population drift.
- We can help restore a sense of pride and a sense of place.
- We can reduce our reliance on cars.
- We can preserve more of our green spaces.
- We can reduce our embodied carbon emissions.

We can do so much if we think strategically about empty homes and make them part of our housing and environmental plans.

It makes economic sense



Empty homes are problems that can also be part of solutions, by making use of what's already there

- Only need to acquire property – established locations, planning permission in exceptional cases only
- Short lead times between acquiring property and commencing work
- Average time from purchase to completion – 6 months where structural renovation/alteration required.
- Average cost – estimated that you can bring 3 empty homes back to use for the cost of 1 new house.
- Quicker delivery of home to person in need of home. Earlier generation of rental income.

And it makes environmental sense



It makes environmental sense



A building that can be net zero to maintain is anything but net zero to build;

Operational and Embodied Carbon Emissions

- Operational - The emissions created by running and heating a house.
- Embodied - The emissions associated with creating the house.

Circular Ecology note that;

- *'Embodied carbon emissions make up a large fraction of the emissions from the construction sector. In fact, it is often 20-50% of the whole life (embodied + operational) carbon emissions of a new building.'*

Green Finance Institute – 'Financing energy efficient buildings: the path to retrofit at scale' found that;

- 'Energy efficiency measures and other building retrofit works are among the most cost-efficient ways to reduce emissions, with many co-benefits including improved living standards, healthier and more resilient communities, and the delivery of new, skilled green jobs in every part of the country.'

So why have we been so slow to make the most of our empty homes?

Busting the myths



‘Empty homes are in areas where there is no real demand for housing’

- Of homes empty for longer than 12 months: Highland 11.79%, City of Edinburgh 9.73%, Aberdeen City 9.25%, Aberdeenshire 7.03%, Fife 6.76%, South Lanarkshire 5.28%; Glasgow 4.93%
- There is also a need to relieve the pressure on housing in our busiest towns and cities. One way to achieve this is by regenerating parts of the country that have been left behind, rather than see our cities extend ever further. So, if there is no demand for housing, let’s look to change that.

‘Empty homes are the wrong type of property’

- Empty homes come in all shapes and sizes, and can also be converted into units that address mismatch between supply and demand
- The Houses into Homes scheme was launched by the Welsh Assembly in April 2012. 746 residential units were created from 360 empty properties brought back into use over its first three years.

‘It costs too much, or it’s just not possible, to retrofit an empty home’

- Some properties may be beyond saving, but not all. And as for costs...

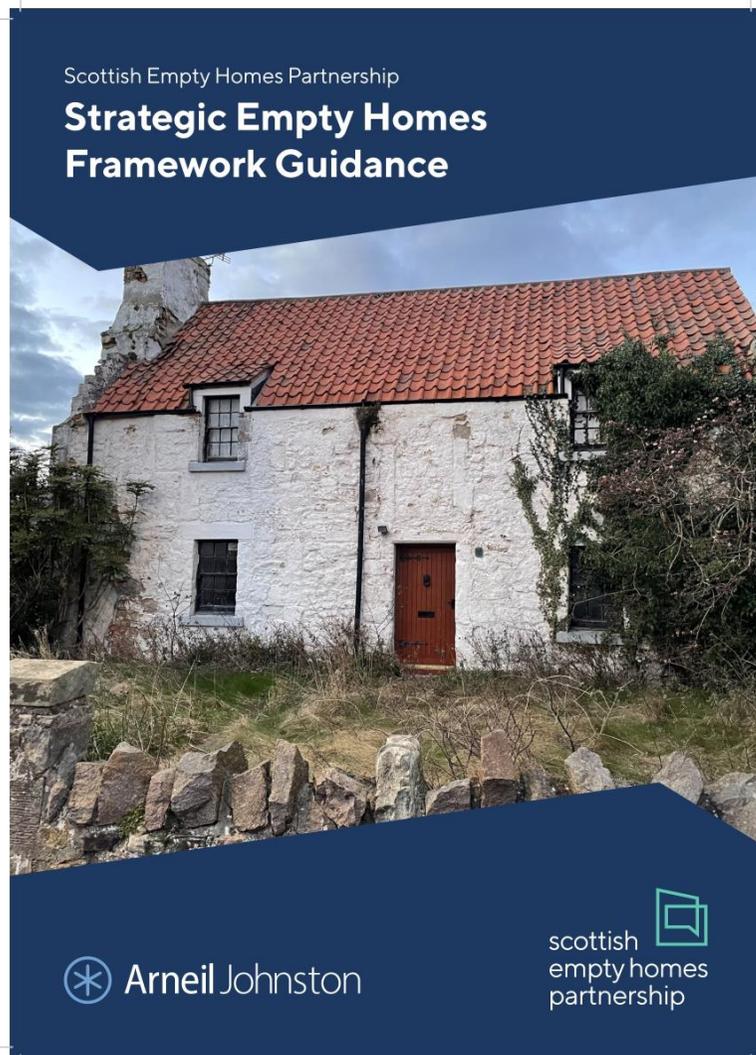
We need to think strategically to realise the potential of empty homes



- There is only so much that can be achieved by an Empty Homes Officer working in isolation, and dealing with homes on a reactive, case by case basis.
- Empty homes work needs to be targeted at areas where it can have the greatest impact.
- There needs to be an evidence based approach that looks at supply and demand and tries to match the two.
- There needs to be buy in across the local authority based on an understanding of the link between resources and delivery and the contribution empty homes work can make.
- Tackling empty homes has to be part of place based development plans and other initiatives, not a stand alone activity.
- There needs to be mechanism for setting and monitoring outcomes from empty homes work, showing what it can deliver and how it will deliver.



Developing the Framework



In 2022 SEHP commissioned Arneil Johnston to work with us to develop advisory guidance for local authorities on producing a Strategic Empty Homes Framework.

The final guidance and template were published on September 15.

They provide a framework that local authorities can use to help to mainstream empty homes work and link it more fully with delivery of all parts of their Local Housing Strategy.

What the framework does



The guidance and template are intended to assist local authorities to develop and improve their approach to empty homes work by achieving a more strategic focus in terms of policy, partnership, intervention and investment.

It sets out 8 stages for local authorities to follow - from setting out the legislative and policy context for empty homes work, through sourcing data and statistical evidence, and on to SMART action planning and evaluation.



What should an evidence base include?

Supply



The figures

Supply & Placemaking

- How many long term empty homes, unoccupied exemptions and second homes are there?
- What percentage of homes are long term empty?
- How many are empty for how long (6-12 months, 2 years, 3 years e.t.c)
- How does the local authority picture compare with the national one?

The locations

Homelessness

- Which areas have the highest volume and percentages?
- Which areas have the lowest?
- Which areas have disproportionately high numbers compared to stock?
- How does it break down between urban and rural, or SIMD deciles?
- What is known about the areas with the highest levels of empty homes?

Bringing homes back to use

Provision

- How many homes have been brought back to use in the last three years?
- What resources are currently allocated to empty homes work?
- What has been the focus/aim of empty homes work?
- What methods are being used (e.g. advice and assistance, loans, buybacks)?
- What partnerships/cross working are in place?

What should an evidence base include?

Demand



Housing Need and Demand

Placemaking

- What are the housing estimates and housing supply targets?
- What does the existing housing supply in your local authority look like?
- What is in your Strategic Housing Investment Plan?
- Is there a reprovisioning programme?
- Do you have an acquisition scheme?

Transforming homelessness

Tackling homelessness

- What are the levels of homelessness in your local authority?
- How quickly are homeless applicants rehoused?
- How long do they spend in temporary accommodation?
- What housing options approach is used?
- Where is there most pressure on demand and services?

Health and Social Care &

specialist provision

- Integration: Housing Contribution Statement
- Specialist housing requirements
- Wheelchair & accessible housing targets
- Are there households whose needs can't be met through existing stock?
- Do you know of any adapted or specialist empty homes in your local authority?

Evidence isn't just data



- Case studies can bring a framework to life by showing what can be achieved.
- They are examples that demonstrate what works.
- A wide range of Case Studies shows a wide range of benefits
- Case studies could include;
 - A home that was returned to use after several years empty thanks to the intervention of an EHO
 - An empty home that was a magnet for anti-social behaviour and was causing mental and physical distress to neighbours
 - A project that has contributed to reviving an area
 - A project that has provided housing for a specific group (for example, homeless adults, victims of domestic violence)
 - An initiative that has enabled a strategic approach to bringing empty homes back to use as social or affordable housing
 - An initiative that has made empty homes energy efficient and helped deliver net zero ambitions.

North Lanarkshire – Open market purchase



- The scheme helps bring properties back into use that have been lying empty or derelict for a considerable period of time.
- Used where there is demand for the type and size of property and it represents value for money.
- Also used to progress common refurbishment works in mixed tenure blocks of flats.
- Has delivered 562 extra council homes for rent since its launch in April 2018.
- Extended in 2022 with some sellers being able to remain in their homes and become council tenants.



Woodside Flats – Glasgow



- Three 1960s tower blocks in Glasgow.
- Following consultation with residents and community, they were refurbished, rather than demolished.
- A fabric first approach was used to radically reduce energy demand and associated carbon emissions.
- The overall cost for the retrofit work was £13.3 million - around £43,000 per flat.
- **This can work towards Housing to 2040 commitments to Affordable warmth and zero emissions homes**

How the partnership can support you



- The Empty Homes Framework Guidance and Template are available on our website at <https://emptyhomespartnership.scot/empty-homes-framework/>
- The template can be downloaded and used as the basis for your own version. We can also provide word versions.
- The partnership can advise on how to complete the template, we can suggest what to include, what to leave out, and how to make sure the template works for your audience.
- We can help you with obtaining and analysing data on empty homes in your local authority.
- We can suggest local, national and international case studies that can back up initiatives that you'd like to pursue, or trigger off ideas for things that might work.

Any questions?



Contact us

Our website: <https://emptyhomespartnership.scot/>

Empty Homes Framework: <https://emptyhomespartnership.scot/empty-homes-framework/>

Email about the Framework: contact SEHP at emptyhomes@shelter.org.uk and put 'Empty Homes Framework' as the subject line in your email

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