

## Scottish Empty Homes Partnership

### QUARTERLY ACTIVITY REPORT – APRIL 2011

#### Introduction

This is the third of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's Quarterly Activity Reports for submission to the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership Advisory Group.

The report will seek to give the group updates on the significant areas of work of the partnership including engagement with councils, publicity for the project, activity in the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network, and other outputs of the project. Headings below are drawn from the second work plan for the project (see appendix A). The next quarterly report will draw on both the headings from the January to June 2011 Workplan and the headings from the June-December 2011 Work Plan (see Appendix B) as it will fall in between these two time periods.

#### Highlights

- Empty Homes Council Tax Proposal included in the Homes Fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Strategy Paper
- 18 councils signed up to the [reportemptyhomes.com](http://reportemptyhomes.com) website.
- Second Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network Seminar Event Held
- Involvement with the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership in some form by all 32 Scottish Local Authorities.
- Private Sector Empty Homes referred to in the bidding criteria for the Housing Innovation & Investment Fund
- Guide to developing an Action Plan published.

### **Sustain effective Advisory Group Process**

The Advisory group has held three meetings with a fourth meeting scheduled for the 27<sup>th</sup> of April. Members of the advisory group have contributed contacts, ideas and suggestions to the Empty Homes Coordinator.

Several advisory group members have provided case studies and examples of empty homes work for dissemination to the network via guides and promotional posters. Several members of the advisory group also attended our second network Seminar in March.

### **Encouragement of Practical Projects**

Since the launch of the Practical Projects Advice Service at the 25<sup>th</sup> November 2010 Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network Seminar, the Empty Home Coordinator has been promoting the service to councils.

Five practical projects have been identified and agreed to be pursued between the council officer at the respective council and the Empty Homes Coordinator. These projects are at a very early stage of development and practical engagement from council officers varies. Demands on council staff time mean the speed of progress has been relatively slow and recent staff changes within councils may also hamper some of these efforts.

In the next quarter the Empty Homes Coordinator will continue to pursue the work plans agreed with the participating councils as well as encourage other councils to take up practical projects.

See Appendix C for a list of the participating councils and a brief description of the practical projects.

### **Continued development of library of best practice/guides**

The library of best practice and guides is added to on a weekly basis. To date there are 335 documents grouped in to themes for ease of access (for a list of themes see the January 2011 Quarterly Report).

Also included in the library are the videos of the presentations given at the November & March Network Seminars.

The most frequently viewed items in the library are the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership Guides as well as examples of current practice submitted by member councils.

The Scottish Empty Homes Action Plan Guide was published at the end of January 2011. The following guides produced by the partnership are currently available in the library:

- Scottish Empty Homes Partnership Data Collection Guide
- Scottish Empty Homes Partnership Action Plan Guide
- Template for Scottish Councils – Advice and Information for Empty Home Owners
- Briefing on vacant dwelling amendment to the Housing (Scotland) Act 2010
- Quick Reference Guide – Empty Home Owner Survey
- Quick Reference Guide – Local Housing Strategy
- Quick Reference Guide – Prioritisation Template
- Quick Reference Sheet – Information Gathering

A Scottish Empty Homes Partnership Guide to Finance for Private Sector Empty Homes Projects is currently in final draft stages and should be published at the end of May this year.

### **Support Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network**

The Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network currently has over 70 members. In the last month 33 members have visited the site at least once.

Members of the network also receive a monthly network electronic update highlighting key developments and opportunities regarding private sector empty homes work in Scotland.

25 members of the network attended the second Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network Seminar on the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2011. The event covered the role of Incentives and Enforcement in working with empty home owners. Speakers included Catherine Johnson from East Lothian Council speaking about their BTS/Empty Homes Grants; Steve Grimshaw from Kent County Council talking about the 'No Use Empty' Scheme; Chris Skinner from nplaw enthusing about the potential for use of compulsory purchase on private sector empty homes; Jackie McGuire from Brodies explaining the legalities of CPO; and Brian Parr from Glasgow City Council giving an officer's view on the use of CPO on empty homes. The day also included a facilitated discussion. A summary of this discussion can be found on the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network website.

Feedback from the seminar was positive with nearly 92% of those attending reporting that the seminar would change the way they dealt with the topics discussed on the day. Specific comments highlighted that the day had changed their opinions on compulsory purchase, stating that they now believe it may be a less complicated option than previously thought.

A full summary of the feedback from the day can be found at Appendix E.

### **Survey of local authorities**

Several electronic surveys are currently underway to assess the progress of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership as well as take a 'snapshot in time' of current activity and thinking on private sector empty homes in Scotland.

The first survey which has gone out to all members of the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network asks questions about the members' engagement with the partnership, our guides, events, and website. In addition this survey asks members to rank the importance of potential areas of focus for the partnership in terms of advocating change in current policy/legislation regarding private sector empty homes work.

The second survey has been distributed to a single lead officer for empty homes work within each of the 32 local authorities. This is a longer survey and replicates some of the questions asked in the Scottish Government's Private Rented Sector Review 2009 survey to councils on private sector empty homes work. This survey also covers the areas of current practice within councils that we said we would measure in our baseline report. The purpose of this survey is to collect information on current practice and views of council officers so that we can measure the impact the partnership has made over time. We intend to replicate this survey at the end of Year Two of the project.

The third survey has been distributed by the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations to its members. The survey asks about the current development practices of housing associations when it comes to conversion and refurbishment of empty properties. The survey also asks for views on barriers and opportunities for housing associations to become involved in private sector empty homes work.

All of these surveys are intended to inform the first Annual Report of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership.

There is an item about the Year One Survey elsewhere on the agenda of the 27<sup>th</sup> April Advisory Group Meeting, an attachment to this includes the questions asked in the surveys to members of the advisory group.

### **Annual Report**

The first annual report of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership is due to be published in June 2011. We have requested responses to all of the above surveys by the 3rd of May and will use the information gathered to inform our report on the progress of the partnership to date.

The annual report will focus on the key areas we committed to measure in our Baseline Report published in August 2010.

The annual report will analyse this information as well as experiences to date of the Partnership to make recommendations about any needed policy or legislative changes.

### **Promotion of project to key partners**

Initial meetings between the Empty Homes Coordinator and council staff have continued along with further follow up meetings. There has now been involvement in the project in some form (a meeting, membership of the Network, and/or sign up to [reportemptyhomes.com](http://reportemptyhomes.com)) by all 32 Scottish Local Authorities.

This involvement has resulted in:

- Higher awareness of the aims of the project and the assistance available to councils through the Empty Homes Coordinator.
- Information has been gathered on current practice in Scottish councils and assessments made of where assistance and information can be of help.
- Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network now has 74 members.
- 18 councils signed up to the [reportemptyhomes.com](http://reportemptyhomes.com) website.
- At least 3 councils have written to all private sector empty home owners on their database to highlight the issue of empty homes and offer assistance.
- Empty Homes Coordinator is actively encouraging a number of councils to submit empty homes bids to the Housing Innovation and Investment Fund.
- 5 practical projects identified and agreed with councils.

Meetings with other key partners have also taken place with:

- Forth Valley Housing Association
- National Trust for Scotland, Little Houses
- Historic Scotland
- Knowes Housing Association
- Shelter Cymru
- Scottish Government Housing Investment Team
- Scottish Government Council Tax Proposals
- Shop Jacket
- Scottish Government Vacant and Derelict Land Fund
- Southwark Habitat for Humanity

These meetings have resulted in identification of potential partners for local authorities pursuing empty homes work; a specific mention of private sector empty homes in the Innovation and Investment Fund bid criteria; a speaking slot agreed for the November Scottish Empty Homes Conference.

In addition there are now 14 members of the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network who are not council officers or Shelter staff. Of these, 4 are representatives of housing associations. This is up from 1 representative from a housing association in the previous quarter and includes a representative of the SFHA.

Presentations and papers have been given to several groups in order to promote the project to key partners:

- West Dunbartonshire Regeneration, Investment and Affordable Housing Group – 17/01/2011
- Edinburgh Affordable Housing Partnership – 16/02/2011
- Rural Housing Service Annual Conference (workshop) – 25/02/2011
- East Region Housing Management Forum – 24/03/2011
- Dundee Strategic Housing Group – 20/04/2011

These presentations have resulted in useful contacts for the project, including new members of the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network. They have also raised awareness of the partnership and resulted in a practical project being established with Argyll & Bute Council.

In addition to meetings and presentations Shelter Scotland also responded to the Scottish Government's Regeneration discussion paper – Building a Sustainable Future, highlighting the role of bringing private sector empty homes back into use as part of a wider approach to regeneration. This response is available on the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network website as well as Shelter Scotland's policy library.

The January to June 2011 work plan included an action to 'scope possible empty homes conference'. It has now been agreed that a Scottish Empty Homes Conference will be one of three flagship events held by Shelter Scotland this year. This conference is currently intended to take place in November 2011. A further paper outlining current proposals for the conference appears elsewhere on the 27<sup>th</sup> April Advisory Group agenda.

### **Pursue additional funding for empty homes work in Scotland**

A funding proposal was submitted to the Scottish Government and circulated to the Advisory Group earlier this year. The proposal suggested that around £1m of the £50m earmarked for the Innovation and Investment Fund should be put towards projects aimed at bringing private sector empty homes back into use.

On March 22<sup>nd</sup> the Scottish Government released its bid fund criteria for the 3 streams that make up the £50m Innovation and Investment Fund. The criteria for the £10m Innovation Fund includes specific reference to private sector empty homes as one of the types of projects that will be considered.

The Innovation Fund is focussed on attracting bids which can generate higher leverage from government funding to increase the supply of affordable housing, particularly through the introduction of new forms of funding and financial and delivery models. Housing can encompass the provision of social rented housing, housing at intermediate rents (including Mid Market Rent) and shared equity.

“As stated in *‘Homes Fit for the 21st Century’* the fund also provides an opportunity to explore the extent to which the Scottish Government can support housing supply and wider economic growth, through the introduction of mortgage indemnity guarantee schemes and new approaches to assist bring empty properties back into the overall supply of affordable homes. Bids to support such schemes will therefore also be considered.”

- From Innovation and Investment Fund 2011-12, £10m Innovation Fund Bid Criteria Document. See whole document at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/investment/innovationfund/innovation/documentation>

While this isn't an earmarked amount within the overall budget, the specific mention here and further on in the document to bringing empty property back into use must be seen as a success.

Since the announcement of the fund the Empty Homes Coordinator has been working to encourage empty homes applications to the fund from councils. The partnership is now supporting several councils to develop bids and are hopeful that there will be a number of applications from Scottish councils made to the fund for private sector empty homes work.

In addition with our focus on the Innovation and Investment Fund Shelter Scotland's public affairs team has also been liaising with Scottish political parties in the run up to the Scottish elections. Empty homes has featured in the list of 'asks' of the parties and has generated much interest at meetings held between Shelter and the various parties. Thus we are reasonably confident that there will be support for the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership whichever political party/parties forms the next Scottish Government.

**At time of circulation information on quarterly media mentions was not available, we intend to table this info at the 27th April meeting.**

**Empty Homes Coordinator  
Work plan January 2011 – June 2011**

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Progress/Comments</b>
Sustain effective Advisory Group Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advisory group to be used to provide direction and focus to project.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meetings to be held quarterly</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meeting held on 13<sup>th</sup> January</li> <li>Meeting scheduled for 27<sup>th</sup> April</li> </ul>
Encouragement of Practical Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Specific offer to councils (and other groups?) linked to identification of local practical projects</li> <li>Supporting councils to bring properties back into use.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aim to identify 3-5 practical projects</li> <li>Ongoing support.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5 Practical projects identified at varying stages of progression</li> <li>Empty Home Coordinator keeping in regular contact and providing advice, support and encouragement.</li> </ul>
Continued development of library of best practice/guides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue to update best practice library on the officers network site</li> <li>Development of 2 further Guides for councils on topics to be determined by the discussions with the network members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Publication of Action Plan guide by end January 2011.</li> <li>Publication of Funding Guide by May 2011.</li> <li>Ongoing publication of information sheets as necessary.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Action Plan Guide published end of January 2011.</li> <li>At final drafting stages of Finance Guide.</li> <li>2 new quick reference guides published February 2011.</li> <li>Library of best practice updated on a weekly basis.</li> </ul>
Support Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initiate and participate in email/electronic forum discussions</li> <li>Encourage involvement of key officers and expansion of the network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2<sup>nd</sup> network event to take place in March 2011.</li> <li>Ongoing support to network.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Network seminar on Incentives &amp; Enforcement held 30<sup>th</sup> March 2011 with 25 attendees.</li> <li>Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network now has</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organise Network Seminars on key topics.</li> <li>• Engage with officers one on one to encourage further activity.</li> </ul>		<p>73 members</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow up one to one phone and face to face meetings held at appropriate intervals with councils as required.</li> </ul>
Survey of local authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual survey template designed to reflect project requirements as laid out in the baseline report</li> <li>• Survey conducted.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey template complete by April 2011</li> <li>• Survey to be distributed and returned by end May 2011.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey to Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network distributed first week in April.</li> <li>• Survey to Empty Homes Council Lead Officers distributed first week in April</li> <li>• Survey to Housing Associations distributed first week in April.</li> </ul>
Annual Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Annual project report based on survey responses.</li> <li>• Annual project report to include recommendations for policy/legislative changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Report complete by June 2011.</li> </ul>	
Promotion of project to key partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take advantage of opportunities to promote the project in trade press/presentations, etc.</li> <li>• Increase membership of officer network from non-council organisations.</li> <li>• Scope possible Empty Homes Conference.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing.</li> <li>• Paper to April 2011 Advisory Group meeting on the potential of a Scottish Empty Homes Conference.</li> <li>• Ongoing work to take advantage of opportunities for mainstream media coverage to raise</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This quarter saw concentration on presentations to housing associations as well as other bodies.</li> <li>• Empty Homes Conference confirmed.</li> <li>• 14 non-council members of the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pursue opportunities to promote empty homes work to the wider public.</li> </ul>	<p>awareness of empty homes in Scotland.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continued press coverage including Metro piece, 6/04 and various local press releases for new signups to reportemptyhomes.com - see Appendix E of quarterly report for more.</li> </ul>
<p>Pursue Additional Funding for Empty Homes Work in Scotland</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bring funding proposal to the Scottish Government</li> <li>• Input proposals to political parties during and post elections</li> <li>• Bring further proposals to new Scottish Government post election</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proposal submitted to Scottish Government</li> <li>• Empty Homes featured in manifesto discussions with political parties.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meeting held with Stephen White at Scottish Government to discuss funding proposal</li> <li>• Meeting held with Caroline Dicks re Innovation and Investment Fund.</li> <li>• Mention of private sector empty homes work included in Innovation Fund Criteria.</li> <li>• Mention of empty homes issues in manifestos of Scottish Labour, Scottish Liberal Democrats and Scottish National Party.</li> </ul>

**Empty Homes Coordinator  
Work plan June 2011 – December 2011**

<b>Objective</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Progress/Comments</b>
Sustain effective Advisory Group Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advisory group to be used to provide direction and focus to project.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meetings to be held quarterly</li> </ul>	
Encouragement of Practical Projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Specific offer to councils (and other groups?) linked to identification of local practical projects</li> <li>Supporting councils to bring properties back into use.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Aim to develop existing practical projects</li> <li>Ongoing support.</li> <li>Aim to identify a further 2-3 practical projects</li> </ul>	
Annual Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Annual project report based on survey responses.</li> <li>Annual project report to include recommendations for policy/legislative changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Report complete by June 2011.</li> </ul>	
Continued development of library of best practice/guides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continue to update best practice library on the officers network site</li> <li>Further guides?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Other guides?</li> <li>Ongoing publication of information sheets as necessary.</li> </ul>	
Support Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Initiate and participate in email/electronic forum discussions</li> <li>Encourage involvement of key officers and expansion of the network</li> <li>Engage with officers one on one to encourage further activity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ongoing support to network.</li> </ul>	

Promotion of project to key partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take advantage of opportunities to promote the project in trade press/presentations, etc.</li> <li>• Increase membership of officer network from non-council organisations.</li> <li>• Pursue opportunities to promote empty homes work to the wider public.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ongoing.</li> <li>• Ongoing work to take advantage of opportunities for mainstream media coverage to raise awareness of empty homes in Scotland.</li> </ul>	
Scottish Empty Homes Conference	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organise and run a Scottish Empty Homes Conference</li> <li>• Attract delegates from a wide range of specialism as well as elected members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To be held in November 2011</li> <li>• Aim for 70-100 delegates</li> </ul>	
Pursue Additional Funding for Empty Homes Work in Scotland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Input proposals to political parties post elections</li> <li>• Bring further proposals to new Scottish Government</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> </ul>	
Input into Scottish Government Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify opportunities to promote private sector empty homes work within Scottish Government policy</li> <li>• Pursue legislative changes that effect private sector empty homes work in Scotland?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Input into consultation on council tax changes</li> <li>• Input into other relevant consultation exercises relating to housing, regeneration, energy efficiency, conservation, etc.</li> </ul>	

### Practical Projects

West Dunbartonshire Council: 2yrs + empty in a rundown state in close proximity to housing association stock. The owner of the property has died and the council is now attempting to locate the likely heir to work with them to get the property back into use.

West Lothian Council: 3-4 years empty in a derelict state. Owner believed to be in care. Council has written to solicitor with no response.

East Ayrshire Council: Empty for a number of years, this multi-unit block has several owners who have failed to agree about selling on to a potential developer. The council is researching the possibility of CPO.

Argyll & Bute Council: 2 empty properties belonging to land owner, community association has agreed to renovate in exchange for free time-limited lease. Issues with funding renovation work. The council has contacted the association to assess the current state of the properties.

North Ayrshire Council: Council contacted by letting agent with two properties in the same close unlettable due to vandalism and safety concerns. There is also a third empty property with an unknown owner. The council is looking at potential safety measures in the area as well as trying to track down the private owner of the third empty property.

**Councils connected to Report Empty Homes.com**

Dundee City

Dumfries and Galloway

East Lothian

East Renfrewshire

Falkirk

Fife

Glasgow

Inverclyde

Midlothian

Moray

North Ayrshire

Orkney Islands Council

Scottish Borders

South Ayrshire

Stirling

West Dunbartonshire

Western Isles

West Lothian

**Seminar Feedback Summary – March 2011 seminar**

14 feedback forms completed

**1. Have you attended a Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network Event before (please circle)?**

Yes 5                  No 9

**2. What was your knowledge of approaches to private sector empty homes before the event ?(please circle)**

Excellent 1          Good 5          Average 3          Weak 5          None at all 0

**3. How do you rate your knowledge of approaches to private sector empty homes work now? (please circle)**

Excellent 4          Good 6          Average 5          Weak 0          None at all 0

**Comments:**

- Very productive and informative event

**4. Through our Seminars, we aim to inform professionals and influence practice. Will this conference affect how you deal with the topics raised today? In what ways?**

Yes 11                  No 1

**Comments:**

- Better placed to identify potential or rule out approaches
- Some interesting elements of practice for consideration
- Better understanding of local authority position. Norfolk PL session very positive
- Useful to transfer ideas for use in heritage sector. Important to involve LAs as partners
- CPOs – more going on (or possible) than experience suggests. Are CPOs on listed buildings less effective/common than anecdotal evidence?
- Taking forward positive lessons from the seminar
- Had no previous knowledge. Better equipped to signpost
- CPO clearly highlighted as an easier option than previously thought

**5. What did you find most useful today? (Please rate 1 – 4)**

1 – not useful

2 – quite useful

3 – useful

4 – very useful

Morning Session	Rate			
	1	2	3	4
Kristen Miller - chair	0	2	5	4

Catherine Johnson	0	3	3	8
Steve Grimshaw	1	2	3	8
Facilitated Discussion	0	3	5	5

Afternoon Session	Rate			
	1	2	3	4
Chris Skinner	0	3	4	7
Jackie McGuire	0	4	6	4
Brian Parr	0	1	3	7

**6. How would you rate today's venue? (please circle)**

**The Room:**

Excellent 7      Good 7      Average 0      Below Average 0      Poor 0

**Location & access:**

Excellent 8      Good 3      Average 3      Below Average 0      Poor 0

**Refreshments & Lunch:**

Excellent 4      Good 7      Average 3      Below Average 0      Poor 0

**Comments:**

- Excellent – for car travel
- Would benefit from water at tables

**7. How did you hear about the seminar? (Please circle)**

Email 5      Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network website 8      Colleague 1

**8. What other areas of empty homes policy and practice would you be interested in events on:**

- Potential links with housing associations
- Advice/information to owners of empty properties

**9. Any other comments or suggestions?**

- Case studies/photos/stories all really excellent and useful
- Might be worth considering a few small comfort breaks, especially if the timetable over-runs