

Item: 10

Education, Leisure and Housing Committee: 6 February 2019.

Empty Homes Strategy.

Report by Executive Director of Education, Leisure and Housing.

1. Purpose of Report

To consider the Empty Homes Strategy 2018 to 2023.

2. Recommendations

The Committee is invited to note:

2.1.

That Scottish Government figures indicate Orkney has the highest percentage of empty homes in Scotland.

2.2.

That, between 27 September and 24 October 2018, the draft Empty Homes Strategy 2018 to 2023, was the subject of consultation, with input sought specifically from partners, including Shelter Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and isles development trusts.

2.3.

That three responses were received to the consultation, resulting in minor revisions to the draft Strategy.

It is recommended:

2.4.

That the Empty Homes Strategy 2018 to 2023, attached at Appendix 1 to this report, be approved.

3. Background

3.1.

According to Scottish Government figures Orkney has the highest percentage of empty homes in Scotland, as well as a high percentage of second homes.

3.2.

Empty Homes represent a significant drain on the local community and lead to a drop in the local economy. In smaller isles communities this is compounded and can lead to the closure of facilities including schools. Working towards bringing empty homes back into use can stop closures happening.

3.3.

The Empty Homes Strategy 2018 to 2023 is the key strategic document that will be used by the Council to bring empty properties back into positive use. The Strategy covers work that has been undertaken over the previous year, as well as identifying gaps which exist and potential projects that could be utilised to try and bring more properties back into use.

3.4.

The Strategy has four objectives as follows:

- To understand the scale of the long-term empty home issue across Orkney.
- To develop a process based on advice and assistance to bring empty properties back into use.
- To raise awareness of issues relating to empty homes across Orkney.
- To work with Development Trusts and communities to improve housing in their area.

3.5.

A dedicated staffing resource within Housing Services will be required beyond the initial two year project ending in June 2019 to deliver on these objectives which will be the subject of a further report to the Committee in due course.

4. Consultation and Responses

4.1.

The draft Empty Homes Strategy 2018 to 2023 was published on the Council's website for consultation between 27 September and 24 October 2018.

4.2.

The consultation was sent specifically to partners in Shelter Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the isles development trusts who have been involved in the Council's empty homes project.

4.3.

Three responses to the consultation were received from partner agencies and members of the public, none of which required major changes to the draft Strategy.

4.4.

The revised Empty Homes Strategy 2018 to 2023, incorporating the minor changes received through the consultation process, is attached as Appendix 1 to this report.

5. Links to Council Plan

5.1.

The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the Council Plan strategic priority of Thriving Communities.

5.2.

The proposals in this report relate directly to Priority 3.8 we will review the Local Housing Strategy of the Council Delivery Plan.

6. Links to Local Outcomes Improvement Plan

The proposals in this report support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the Local Outcomes Improvement Plan priority of Strong Communities where our communities have vibrant, innovative, sustainable and inclusive populations.

7. Financial Aspects

There are no significant financial implications arising from this report.

8. Legal Aspects

There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

9. Contact Officers

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10. Appendix

Appendix 1 – Empty Homes Strategy 2018 to 2023.



Orkney Islands Council Empty Homes Strategy 2018-2023

Document Ref.	Issue.	Rev.	Date.	Reason for Issue.	Reviewer.	Sign.
HS STRAT 124.	01.		12/09/2018.	New strategy.	Empty Homes Development Officer.	

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Foreword

The Empty Homes issue in Orkney is a unique one, statistics released by the National Records of Scotland in 2017 suggested that Orkney had the highest percentage of empty dwellings anywhere in Scotland as recorded in the National Records of Scotland's Estimates of Households and Dwellings in Scotland, 2016 which includes figures on occupied and vacant dwellings, second homes and trends in household types NRS (on page 51). This represented 759 long-term empty properties lying vacant for more than six months.

Empty homes represent a significant drain in rural communities, affecting their ability to rejuvenate and grow. They can, however, be utilised to directly counter the issues they once caused. An empty home brought back into use as a primary residence represents another family in the community, potentially more children in local schools, and more money spent at local businesses. The Empty Homes Strategy 2018-2023 sets out the ways in which Orkney Islands Council can help Orkney's empty home owners to bring their properties back into use.

The Empty Homes Development Officer post is part-funded by both Shelter Scotland and Highlands and Islands Enterprise and we must thank them for their ongoing help and support to tackle the empty homes of Orkney.

The first 12-months of Orkney's Empty Homes Project has proved very successful and as well as seeing 18 empty properties brought back into use, the project has worked with a number of suppliers to establish discounts on products needed by empty home owners to bring their property's back in to use and the Empty Homes Development Officer has contacted 960 households via mailout, with 64% of households responding to the questionnaire. A total of 690 households have been given advice and additional information by the Empty Homes Development Officer over the first year of the project. The project also won a 'Best Use of the Media Award' at the Howdens Scottish Empty Homes Champion of the Year Awards, 2017.

Year two of the project aims to bring a minimum of 20 more properties back in to use continuing to actively reduce the number of long-term empty homes in the county helping to enhance Orkney's communities and economy.

Councillor Rob Crichton.

Chair of the Education, Leisure and Housing Committee.

Introduction

This strategy sets out how Orkney Islands Council intends to identify and tackle private sector empty homes and the issues associated with them. This will be done through the implementing of four key objectives:

- Understanding the scale of the long-term empty home issue across Orkney.
- Develop a process based on advice and assistance to bring empty properties back into use.
- Raise awareness of issues relating to empty homes in Orkney.
- Work with Development Trusts and communities to improve housing in their area.

The Scottish Empty Homes Network

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP) was established in June 2010 as a response to the Scottish Government's review of the Private Rented Sector in 2009. This report highlighted the need for more dedicated focus on empty properties across the country. SEHP was formed with the aim of helping to bring the 37,135 long-term empty properties across Scotland back into use. SEHP is run from a base within Shelter Scotland currently employing a total of three dedicated staff. Twenty councils now employ a dedicated Empty Homes Officer, proactively working to assist empty home owners. In the year 2017/18, 742 homes were brought back into use through engagement with an Empty Homes Officer meaning the total number of homes brought back into use through SEHP since 2010/11 is 3,216.

SEHP offer support, information and training to council officers across Scotland as well as networking opportunities for Empty Homes Officers. SEHP also offers a fantastic source of advertising for empty homes work nationally. As the first Islands Council to employ an Empty Homes Officer, the links to SEHP's press officers means increased exposure to the good work of Orkney Islands Council at a national level. They have also worked relentlessly supporting policy changes to bring about further powers for Councils including increasing Council Tax powers surrounding empty properties and making Council Tax records accessible to Empty Homes Officers.

Empty homes can be categorised in two ways: transitional vacancies and long-term vacancies. A transitional vacancy exists for a short period of time usually while a property is renovated or while awaiting a sale. A long-term empty home is defined as a residential property which has been vacant for more than six months. SEHP focuses on these long-term empty properties which, in many cases, have become 'stuck' in a state of disuse. By reutilising these empty properties, it is hoped that there will be a lesser need for building on green sites nationally with local housing needs being largely met by the existing housing stock.

The reasons for homes becoming empty are varied and diverse however they often reflect alterations in personal circumstances. Most commonly homes have been bought to be renovated, circumstances then have meant that these works have taken longer than initially anticipated or have had to be placed on hold indefinitely. Another common cause is bereavement and inheritance of properties, often legal issues can arise around such inheritances and the process of sale in accordance with the deceased wishes can take longer than anticipated. Due to the agricultural

nature of Orkney, it is also common that a farm property is bought for its land, there is no immediate need for the housing and renting such a property could be problematic in the centre of a farm. A small number of properties are empty because their owners are in long-term hospital or residential care. See Figure 6 for full details of what causes homes to be empty in Orkney.

The Orkney Context

Lying off the north-eastern coast of Scotland, Orkney is Scotland's smallest local authority comprising around seventy islands, nineteen of which are inhabited for most or part of the year. The population of Orkney was estimated by the National Records of Scotland to be 21,850 in 2016. This continues the upward trend in population however the population continues to be significantly lower than the highs of 29,000 one-hundred years ago. The Housing Needs and Demand Assessment (HNDA) 2016 projected that by 2037 Orkney's population will have increased by a further 5% from present levels to around 22,700. There is, therefore, a need for adequate provision of housing, some of which can be provided by bringing long-term empty properties back into use.

In 2018, there was a total of 11,245 dwellings across Orkney. Approximately one-third of Orkney's population lives in Kirkwall (the Mainland capital and administrative centre). The second largest town is Stromness in the West Mainland with a population of around 2,500. There are also a number of smaller villages and settlements and a high proportion of separate and scattered dwellings.

The outer islands each have an individual character and landscape. Those closer to the Mainland offer the potential for commuting to Kirkwall and the rest of the Mainland Orkney. On the further remote islands delivering and accessing services can prove logistically challenging, this means that the more northerly islands are generally more self-reliant as a community. Many of these outer islands have suffered from depopulation and some continue to struggle with this.

Orkney is estimated (as of June 2018) to have 713 long-term empty homes according to the data collected from the Empty Property Surveys and Council Tax records. The number of empty homes regularly fluctuates as property use and ownership change meaning that figures are only accurate at the time of issue.

Many homes across Orkney are registered as second homes, this means that they are in use for more than 28 days each year but are not a primary residence for their owners, this is a legitimate use of these homes and they are not included in the empty homes figures. It is important that the balance is maintained between maintaining the tourism industry within Orkney while also ensuring there is adequate housing for full-time residents.

Empty properties which are placed for sale average 8.6 months on the market and gain an average sale price of £135,759 which is based on empty property sales data collected July 2017 to July 2018 where final sale price is known. Sales on the outer islands regularly take longer and gain a lower sale price, again based on empty properties sales data collected July 2017 to July 2018 the sale average £65,602 and time to sell average 14 months.

Average sale prices of empty homes by area and the amount of time elapsed from marketing to sale between July 2017 and July 2018, although please note for the South Isles fewer sales makes this data less reliable than the other areas:

	Average sale price.	Average time taken to sell.
Kirkwall.	£143433.	6 months.
Stromness.	£145159.	6 months.
West Mainland.	103641.	9 months.
East Mainland, Burray and South Ronaldsay.	£178400.	6 months.
North Isles.	£68162.	11 months.
South Isles.	£40000.	22 months.
Orkney.	£135759.	12 months.

Map of Orkney for Reference



Need

Requirement for an Empty Homes Focus

The need for an increased focus on Orkney's Empty Homes has been highlighted in the Local Housing Strategy (LHS) 2011-2016, Housing Need and Demand Assessment (HNDA) 2016, Local House Condition Survey (LHCS) 2016, and the Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP) 2016-2019. The HNDA in 2016 highlights the extent of the empty homes within Orkney and the need for helping to bring these back into use. It highlights that the percentage of housing stock which is deemed 'ineffective' in the Isles and Stromness is 11.6% and 8.4% respectively. The national average for ineffective stock is 4.1%, highlighting Orkney's problem with underutilised housing. The HNDA recommends that, 'an increased focus on bringing empty homes back into use in Orkney would help make use of these vacant and ineffective properties, while also helping to meet Orkney's housing need.' The LHCS suggests that 12.8% of Orkney's dwellings are classed as 'general vacancies (this term includes 'short-term' empty properties, those with ongoing repairs, and long-term empty homes). Of these empty properties 77.9% are thought to require repairs and 19.6% are judged to be Below the Tolerable Standard (BTS) for habitation.

The LOIP highlights a need to support 'strong communities' and also 'supporting remote and rural housing development' and the LHS prioritises sustaining Orkney's communities. An empty home that is brought back into use in effect creates more viable housing within rural and island communities. It also helps to maintain these communities and strengthens the local economies.

Legal Context

The work of the SEHP is safeguarded by key legislation as the Scottish Government encourages empty home owners and local authorities to bring properties back into use.

- Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, Section 86
 - Defines the Tolerable Standard for housing, this was later amended in the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006, Section 11.
- Housing (Scotland) Act 2006
 - Defines the Repairing Standard for properties. It also gives powers to Councils to deal with sub-standard housing including Housing Renewal Areas, Works Notices, Closing Orders, Demolition Notices, Demolition Orders and Maintenance Orders.
- Building (Scotland) Act 2003
 - This legislation gives Local Authorities the power to serve notice requiring the owner to make their property safe where the building is considered to be dangerous. It also defines the Local Authority's powers to use Compulsory Purchase Orders where the Council has carried out work under a Dangerous Buildings Notice and cannot trace the owner to recoup the cost.
- Housing (Scotland) Act 2010, Section 157

- Allowed Council Tax data to be used for the purposes of Empty Homes regeneration enabling EHOs to contact owners directly by post.
- Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.) (Scotland) Act 2012
 - This legislation gave Local Authorities the power to vary the amount of Council Tax charged to long-term empty properties, each Local Authority has the power to implement a surcharge of up to 100% as a lever to bring empty homes back into use. Orkney Islands Council does not currently implement this power.

Equality and Diversity

Orkney Islands Council is committed to promoting equal opportunities, challenging discrimination and fostering good relations, both in employment and in carrying out its work and delivering services. We want Orkney to be a community where we all have the opportunity to fulfil our potential.

As a partner in the OCPP the Council has signed up to the OCPP equality and diversity strategy and its position on equality and diversity, as follows.

Promoting equalities means recognising that everyone has different needs and taking positive action to ensure that everyone is able to contribute to society. We will do our best to provide equal opportunities to our most remote communities and hard-to-reach individuals, while respecting everybody's right to privacy.

Promote equal opportunities for all:

- Ensure that everyone is enabled to participate in society.
- Welcome and celebrate diversity.
- Place equality at the heart of policy and practice.
- Raise acceptance of rights and responsibilities.
- Secure access for all to national services.

In addition, we have separate strategies focussing on equalities and accessibility.

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

GDPR came into force on 25th May 2018. Empty Homes Development Officers have a 'legitimate interest' in the Council Tax data provided and contact the owners under the 'public task' basis. Article 6 (1)(e) protects the use of data where "processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority vested in the controller". The Housing (Scotland) Act 2010 gives Empty Homes Officers the right to access Council Tax data to enable them to contact empty home owners by post, the intention being to help them to bring their homes back into use. Once contact is established then other forms of contact will be used with the owners' consent. All data storage and use is fully GDPR compliant.

Impact of Empty Homes

Empty homes may adversely affect their surroundings and the impact of long-term empty properties is diverse. Some of the primary issues that affect empty homes and the surrounding communities are:

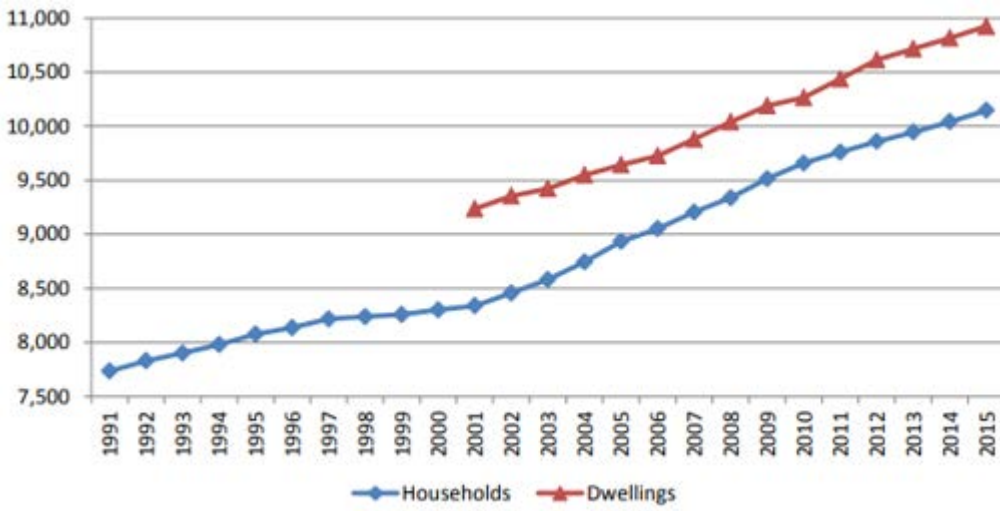
- Empty homes represent a drain on financial resources for their owners. Shelter Scotland estimates that empty homes can cost their owners in excess of £7,000 per year in bills and lost rental income,
- Disused homes or those only used for a few days/ weeks a year represent a wasted resource. They are an underutilisation of both land and building materials and are therefore the antithesis of sustainability,
- An excess of long-term empty properties adversely affects the local community and leads to a drop in the local economy. This is particularly true in rural areas where local shops and schools are unable to continue operating further impacting the wider community. Depopulation affecting island amenities has already led to the closure of island and other amenities,
- Visibly empty properties and those with overgrown gardens can become a blight on their neighbourhood and ultimately indirectly affect the value and marketability of neighbouring properties,
 - Further to the above, adjacent dereliction compounds this issue and further decreases the value of houses in the vicinity,
- Empty homes can directly damage adjoining properties particularly through damp and other infestations if left untreated,
- Empty homes can become a locus for antisocial behaviour including graffiti, squatting, and arson.

Benefits of Empty Homes Work

The principal benefits of Empty Homes work are to reverse the symptoms of decline that are detailed above. A successful Empty Homes Scheme could;

- Increase the amount of housing available to local people,
- Reduce and, in some cases, eliminate the need for new housing developments on green field sites,
- Improve the sustainability and economy of local communities (and especially outer island communities),
- Remove the potential for nuisance caused to neighbours through damp and infestations,
- Reduces the impact on the value of properties in proximity to empty homes,
- Provides a potential source of income for the owners rather than being a drain on their resources.

Increase in households and dwellings in Orkney 1991 to 2015 according to the National Records of Scotland:



Aims and Objectives

The principle aims of the initiative are to introduce measures to:

- Make effective use of existing housing stock by helping to bring long-term empty homes back into use,
- Help to 'create' housing in areas of need without relying on developing green sites,
- Assist homeowners to maximise the use of empty properties.

The following objectives have been identified to bring long-term empty properties back into use.

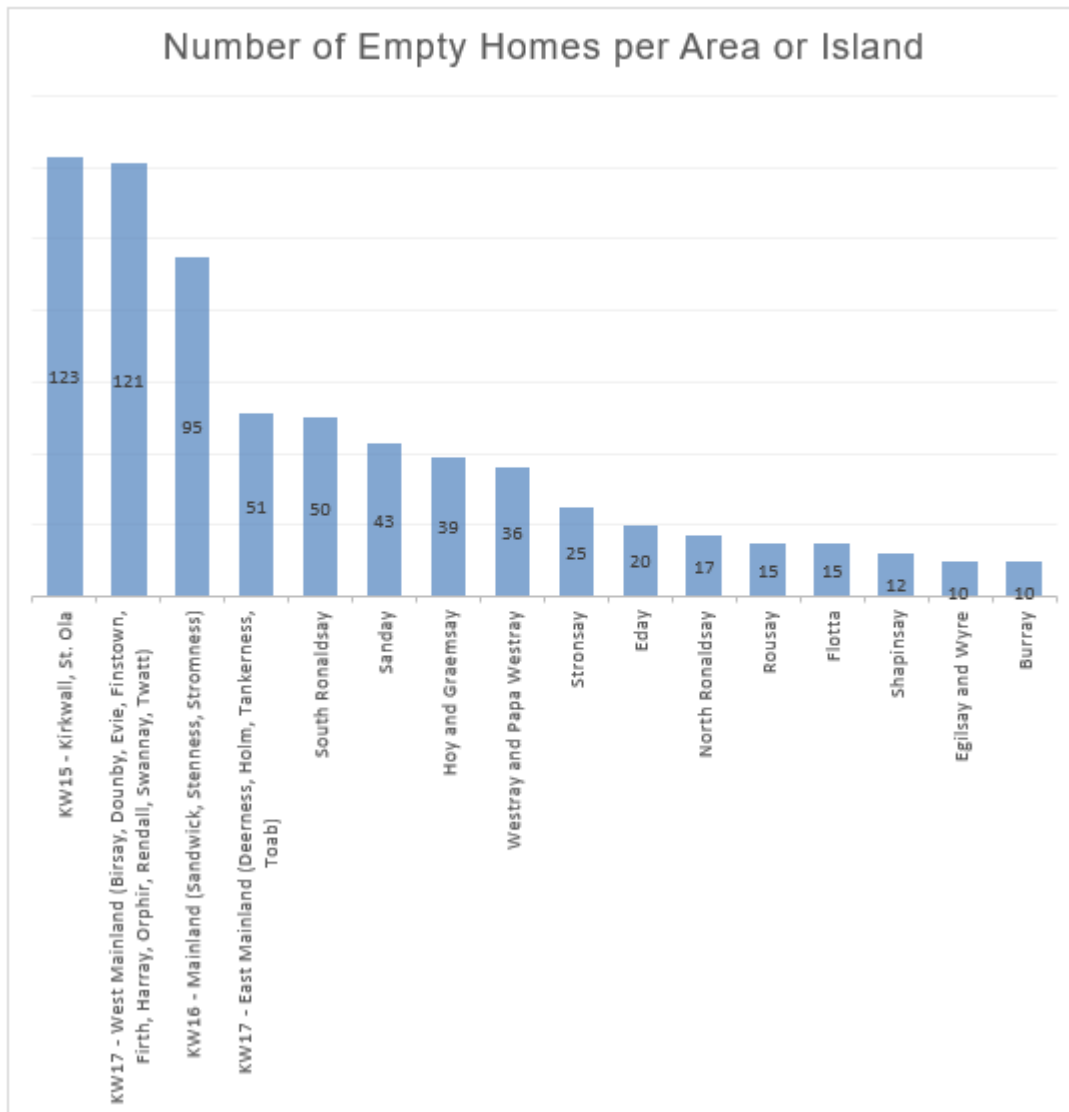
Objective One: To understand the scale of the long-term empty home issue across Orkney

Understanding the extent of the Empty Homes issue within Orkney and the reasons for them being empty is key to being able to move forwards with assisting owners to bring them back into use. The combined knowledge of the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network members is extremely valuable when establishing advice documents when beginning the Empty Homes Scheme in Orkney however, the unique circumstances that exist within Orkney mean that a thorough picture of the empty properties needs to be gained to most effectively help their owners.

Since an Empty Homes Development Officer was employed in June 2017, an empty homes database has been developed and maintained. The information in this was initially provided by the Council Tax Register, but this has been built on through self-referrals and information from other Council officers. Using the Council Tax Register as a primary source of information is a well-established practice recommended by the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network. The Council Tax Register includes the name and address of the owner of the empty home as well as the length of time it has been registered as empty. A good relationship with the council tax team is essential to effectively run an empty homes scheme. All data is used and stored in line with GDPR legislation, see information on page 9.

Using the data provided by the council tax section, letters containing surveys have been sent to the owners of every property listed as not being a primary residence for more than six months. These letters and surveys have a twofold purpose: to create an accurate picture of empty homes across Orkney and the reasons for them remaining empty (see Figures 4 and 6); and to raise awareness of the Empty Homes Scheme.

The survey response rate has been excellent at over 60%. Every owner who completes the survey is contacted and offered advice and information on how to bring their empty home back into use. Those owners who actively engage with the Empty Homes Development Officer are prioritised as they are the most likely to proactively work alongside the Empty Homes Scheme.



Number of Empty Homes by area or island (July 2018): This graph shows the number of long-term empty properties in each area or island within Orkney. Where islands have been paired together this is to enable anonymity owing to their being fewer than five empty homes in one or both of the islands that have been paired.

Going forward it is key that the links being developed between the Empty Homes Development Officer and the Revenues Section are maintained and strengthened in order to keep the Empty Homes Database up to date. Through this all long-term empty homes can be targeted and offered help by the Empty Homes Development Officer. This will also enable the Empty Homes Development Officer to monitor any changes in the reasons for properties becoming empty and the timescales for them being brought back into use. This comprehensive data collection will mean the current empty homes situation is always known and can be used by multiple sections within the Council.

It will also be beneficial to map the known empty properties via the available GIS (Geographic Information Systems) Mapping software. This could help to indicate 'hotspots' of empty homes and could also help to show where the properties are that have been empty the longest. By finding trends in the length of time homes have

been empty as well as their location, it should enable the Empty Homes Development Officer to target specific communities more effectively.

Links will also continue to be established and maintained with community groups and Council Officers in order to utilise local knowledge of properties and developments. The knowledge that they can provide regarding the progress of empty home regeneration and current usage of properties is invaluable as is the communities ability to bring homes back into use and this should not be ignored.

E-mail	Letter	Meeting	Call	Returned survey	Total returned	Total Distributed	Mailout Number	Area covered	Percentage
5	2	1	8	69	85	134	1	Eday, Westray, Papay, Sanday, Stronsay.	61.43%
1	2	2	5	54	64	107	2	Shapinsay, Egilsay, Wyre, Rousay, Hoy, Flotta, Graemsay.	59.81%
7	3	1	14	85	110	156	3	KW16 (Sandwick, Stennes, Stromness), South Ronaldsay, Burray.	70.51%
2	3		4	50	59	98	4	KW15 (majority).	60.20%
1	1	2	4	74	82	126	5	KW15 (remainder), KW17 (Deerness, Firth, Holm, Orphir, Tankerness, Toab).	63.49%

Percentage	Area covered	Mailout Number	Total Distributed	Total returned	Returned survey	Call	Meeting	Letter	E-mail
67.05%	KW17 (Birsay, Dounby, Evie, Kirbister, Orphir, Rendall, Twatt.	6	88	61	49	6			6
63.23%	Additional properties, all areas March 2018.	7	223	141	102	22	3	4	10
81.82%	Lone surveys.	N/A	11	9	1	1			7
63.65%			960	611	Total				

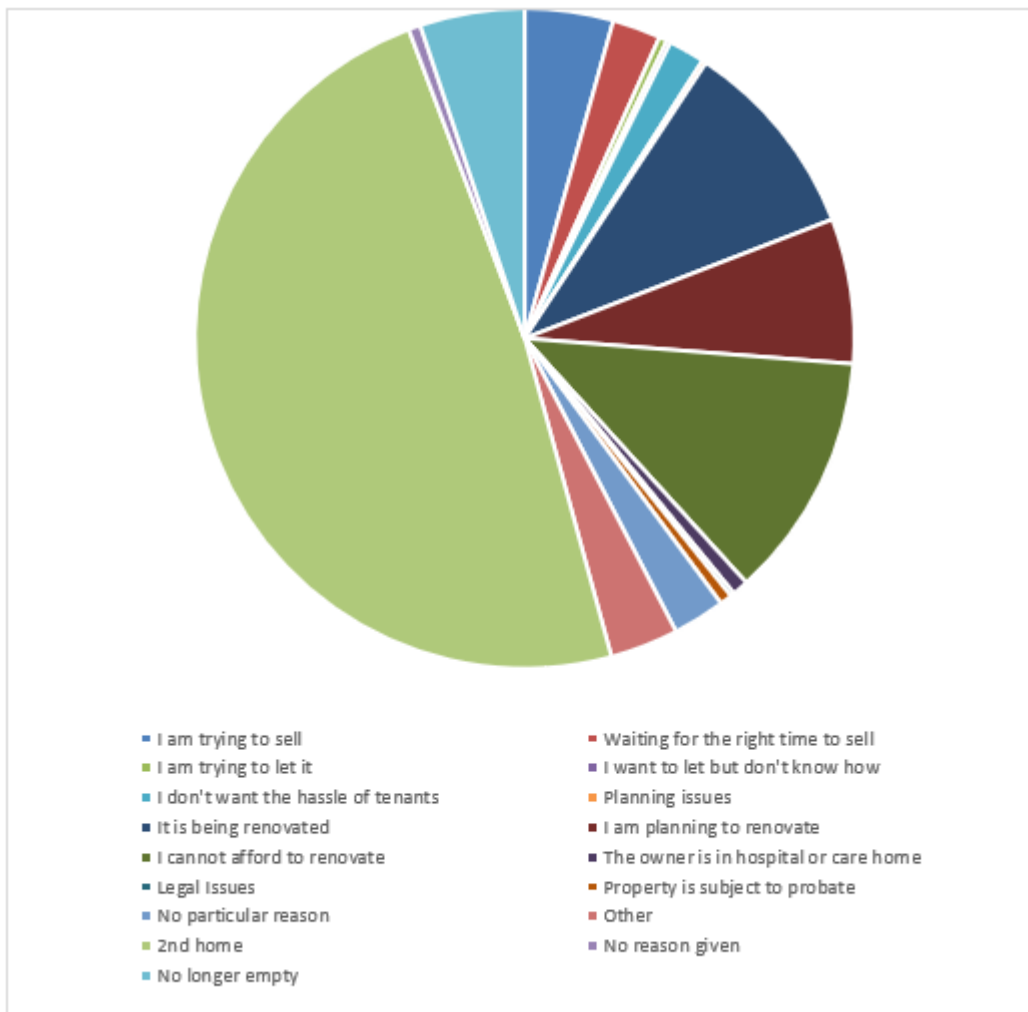
Mail outs by area and the response rate received (July 2018). This data was collected through responses to the Empty Properties Survey which was posted to empty home owners between August 2017 and March 2018.

	I am trying to sell.	Waiting to sell.	Trying to let.	I want to let	I don't want hassle.	Planning issues.	Being renovated	Planning to renovate	I cannot afford to renovate.	Owner in hospital or care home.	Legal Issues.	Property is subject to probate.	No reason.	Other.	2nd home.	No reason given.	No longer empty.
KW15.	3	1			2		14	7	7	1			1	4	48		14
KW16.	2		1	1	2		5	6	5			1	2	2	38		4
KW17.	2	5			5	1	11	11	14	3	1	1	5	5	58	1	4
Burray and South Ronaldsay.	4	1					3	1	7				1	1	28	1	1
Rousay, Egilsay and Wyre.	1	1						2	1						10		1
Hoy, Flotta and Graemsay.	3	3					2	2	6				1	1	20		
Sanday, and North Ronaldsay.	1		1				9	3	9			1	1	1	8	1	2
Shapinsay.	2							1	2						3		
Stronsay.	3						2	1	5				2	2	10		

	I am trying to sell.	Waiting to sell.	Trying to let.	I want to let	I don't want hassle.	Planning issues.	Being renovated	Planning to renovate	I cannot afford to renovate.	Owner in hospital or care home.	Legal Issues.	Property is subject to probate.	No reason.	Other.	2nd home.	No reason given.	No longer empty.
Westray and Papay Westray.	1						3		4				1	1	16		
Eday.		1					1	2	1						7		
Total.	22	12	2	1	9	1	50	36	61	4	1	3	13	17	246	3	26

Reasons stated for properties being empty by area (July 2018). Information gained through the responses received from empty property survey mailouts between August 2017 and July 2018. It shows that a large proportion of empty home owners are keen to actively engage with the future of their properties and with the Empty Homes Scheme. This information can be used to improve the specialised help and assistance provided to Empty Home Owners across Orkney.

Reasons for properties not being in primary occupation by their owners as reported in response to the Empty Properties Survey mailouts (July 2018):



Objective Two: Develop a process based on advice and assistance to bring empty properties back into use

The reasons for properties being left empty varies enormously from case to case. Many find it difficult to sell their properties especially those on outer islands or in a poor state of repair. Others are reluctant to rent out their homes due to personal circumstances or worries surrounding becoming a landlord. In some cases, the owners are trying to renovate the property but high labour charges and difficulties in engaging contractors slows down the renovation process. In some cases, the empty home was bought for the land it came with therefore the use of the house itself is not a priority.

No matter what the reason for not utilising their empty homes, by developing a comprehensive system of advice and support, the owners will be given the requisite help to bring these properties back into use.

Advice and Information Leaflets

Eleven advice documents have been created for distribution to both the owners of empty homes and community groups. By giving the advice leaflets to community groups such as Community Councils and Development Trusts it is hoped that they can be distributed to those within their communities, subsequently encouraging engagement.

The advice documents are intended to be used to signpost useful websites, courses of action and to inform. They should ideally be used as a prompt alongside discussion with the Empty Homes Development Officer. If used solely by the individual it is likely that key information would be missed.

These advice documents include:

- VAT discounts (both two years empty and ten years empty).
 - These detail work that would be eligible for VAT-discounts through VAT-registered contractors. Letters to gain this discount can be obtained through the Empty Homes Development Officer,
- Orkney Empty Homes Advice Pack.
 - This booklet is given to the majority of empty home owners. It provides information on caring for empty properties, repairs and renovation, and renting or selling a home. It provides signposting to many sources of useful information,
- Retailers Discounts.
 - A brief document listing the national retailers offering discounts to empty home owners and the nearest shops to Orkney. These discounts have been organised by members of the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network to be used by any empty home owner across Scotland who is renovating or repairing their property. It is anticipated that more businesses with a base in Orkney will be brought into this scheme over time.

Empty Homes Matchmaker Scheme

Orkney Islands Council operates an Empty Homes Matchmaker Scheme as part of the Empty Homes Scheme.

The Matchmaker Scheme aims to pair people looking to buy empty homes with owners wishing to sell them. Owners and buyers register their property or interest with the Empty Homes Development Officer. When a buyer and property 'match' both parties will be put in touch in order to discuss further details of the property and arrange viewings.

This service cannot function as an estate agency and all negotiations and sales processes take place between the seller and the buyer. Its main purpose is to gain further exposure for empty homes that owners are trying to sell, in other authority areas this has helped to decrease the amount of time registered properties are on the market for sale.

Internal Partnerships within the Council

Ensuring that staff in other Council Services are aware of the Empty Homes Scheme is key to the success of the Empty Homes Scheme on Orkney. The information and advice that Council Tax, Planning and Environmental Health can provide to the Empty Homes Development Officer is essential to aiding empty home owners to bring their homes back into use.

Future Discounts and Funding

Over the coming years the Empty Homes Development Officer will work to establish further retailers' discounts to offer to the owners of empty homes who are renovating their properties. At present the discounts have been organised centrally by the Scottish Empty Homes Officers Network meaning that the majority do not have shops in Orkney and do not necessarily deliver to addresses across the county. By establishing discounts within Orkney, it is anticipated that these will be able to assist more Empty Home owners to bring their properties back into use.

It may also be beneficial to establish a means of grant or loan funding empty home renovations for private sector owners. 23% of people who responded to the Empty Properties Survey stating that their property was empty stated that the main reason it was not in use was because they could not afford to renovate. Establishing a pot of funding that would be available to these owners would be beneficial in bringing more empty homes into use. If the Council Tax surcharge on empty properties was to be utilised in accordance with the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.) (Scotland) Act 2012, the increased income could be used to create a source of funding for owners needing assistance. Depending on the stipulations placed on such funding, this could also help to create more affordable rentals across Orkney.

Council Tax Rates

In line with the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.) (Scotland) Act 2012, the raising of a surcharge on empty properties within Orkney has been considered by Council and will be brought into place on 1st October 2019. From 1st April 2019, a 10 per cent default discount will be maintained on all newly-registered empty homes and second homes for the first 12 months. From 1st October 2019, any property registered as having been empty for 12 months or more will have an additional surcharge of 100% added to the council tax charge. Registered second homes will maintain their default 10% discount.

When applying the 100% surcharge discretion will be used in the following cases:

- Where the owner of the property is completing renovation works in order to bring the property back into use by moving in, selling or letting the property. Any delays caused while completing renovations may also be taken into account for example where there has been delays to obtaining Planning Permission or Building Warrants.
- A long-term second home where there is demonstrable evidence of a history of 25-days occupancy in previous years, but this has not been the case in the previous 12-month period due to the personal circumstances of the owner.

- A property that is taking a long time to sell or let despite being appropriately priced, due to a stagnant market.
- Where the owner of a long-term empty property has engaged with the Empty Homes Development Officer and is making positive steps to reoccupying the property, the Empty Homes Development Officer will have the discretion to recommend a temporary cessation of the surcharge. This is only to be used in cases where it is felt that the discretion, if used, would encourage the property to be brought back into use sooner than would be the case without the discretion being shown.
- Where the empty property is part of an estate which is still in the name of an Executor, but the initial exemption period has ended, they will be given a discretionary year of paying Council Tax at a reduced rate of 10% prior to the surcharge being applied.

Discretion will be used on a case by case basis to delay the implementation of a surcharge of 100% until the property has been unoccupied for a period not exceeding two years, as long as at least one of the above conditions are met. During this time the usual 10% discount will be chargeable. In addition to this, any empty property marketed as for sale or to let on the Outer Isles will be exempt from the surcharge of 100% for a period of up to three years rather than the standard two years. This is to reflect that properties on these islands typically take longer to sell than those on Mainland, Burray and South Ronaldsay.

From 1st April 2014, the existing discount of 50% on empty properties, that are both unoccupied and unfurnished, remains in place for a period of up to six months following a period of. This discount will remain in place.

Objective Three: Raise awareness of issues relating to empty homes across Orkney

Without advertising the assistance available through the Empty Homes Scheme within Orkney, it is unlikely that any empty home owners would engage with the help available. It is, therefore, key to the success of the Scheme to advertise it through as many means as possible to those who might make use of the help available.

Development Trusts and Community Councils

Engaging with Development Trusts and Community Councils is extremely important to the success of the Empty Homes Scheme on Orkney. Owing to the difficulty of regularly accessing large numbers of the empty homes across the Isles, interested members of each island community can help to promote the Scheme to island residents. These organisations can access the advice documents that would usually be distributed by the Empty Homes Development Officer. This means that, even when the Empty Homes Development Officer cannot immediately visit an empty property, or if the Empty Home owner is not aware of the Scheme, the Development Trust can assist with advice and advertise the authorities Empty Homes Scheme locally.

Development Trusts also engage with the Empty Homes Scheme as the Council can help them to make applications for various grants and loans including, but not limited to, the Scottish Land Fund, the Islands Housing Fund and Nationwide Fund. The Empty Homes Scheme can also work in tandem with other initiatives in each area finding innovative ways to use empty properties.

Role of Councillors

Councillors have a direct link with the community and their ability to advertise the Empty Homes Scheme and the role of the Empty Homes Development Officer is invaluable. Councillors have been made aware of the work being undertaken and have been encouraged to report empty properties within their ward.

Council Website

An Empty Homes page has been established on the Council's website. This page includes information about the role of the Empty Homes Development Officer and the Empty Homes Scheme. It also includes registration forms for the Matchmaker Scheme and the way to contact the Empty Homes Development Officer.

Local Media

The Empty Homes issue is one that interests and affects many people across Orkney. This means that local media outlets are keen to cover all aspects of the Empty Homes Scheme. Many people across Orkney engage with the local media so this is a useful means of communicating with and promoting the issue with the wider public. The Empty Homes Development Officer and Team Leader (Policy and Planning) have both been interviewed by the local radio station and the Matchmaker Scheme has been advertised in the local newspaper. A noticeable increase in enquiries was seen immediately after each of these occasions.

The Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network

This group brings together a wealth of expertise which also draws on good practice and the experience of Empty Homes Officers across Scotland, with links to other officers in England and Wales. This experience exchange is beneficial to all local authorities that are focussing on bringing empty homes back into use. The Empty Homes Development Officer has been very active within this group promoting the unique circumstances of island communities and the challenges of geography and depopulation that are specific to Orkney. A blog has also been created for other Empty Homes Officers informally assessing empty homes across Orkney, further advertising the Council's work. This blog is privately published within Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network.

Local Businesses

Many businesses currently assist with advertising the Empty Homes Scheme in Orkney. Chief amongst these are the estate agents who recommend contacting the Empty Homes Development Officer to those who have purchased empty properties to renovate.

Objective Four: Work with Development Trusts and communities to improve housing in their area

Empty Homes primarily affect those who live in close proximity to them by increasing the risk of damage to adjoining properties, lowering neighbouring house prices, adversely affecting the community and economy, and attracting anti-social behaviour. Involving the local community in minimising the number of empty properties and their impact means that in many cases the community can be involved in the decision making around the future use of the properties.

Engaging with the Development Trusts, and encouraging them to tackle empty homes, places power in the hands of residents to determine solutions to an issue which affects both the health and prosperity of the community as a whole. They also discuss innovative methods of bringing empty homes back into use by using them for the benefit of the community not just that of an individual.

Community groups also have access to various funding options which are not open to private home owners should they choose to take on an empty property. Development Trusts can access this funding with support from the Empty Homes Development Officer, allowing them to bring homes back into use for the benefit of the community.

Funding

Development Trusts can apply for funding from a number of sources to help them to buy and renovate empty properties. Using sources of funding (such as 'the Islands Housing Fund', and 'the Land Fund') allows Development Trusts and other community groups to target Empty Homes within their area, boosting the community and the economy for their own benefit. Once renovation work has been completed these properties create a rental income for the Development Trust.

'Gateway Homes' have proved a popular means of combatting both empty homes and depopulation as they attract new families into the community for a set amount of time, encouraging them to settle longer term. Gateway Homes have traditionally offered fixed-term letting options to those families that wish to try living on a small island without committing long-term (i.e. through buying a property). Private Resident Tenancy (PRT) legislation has now made the use of Gateway Homes more difficult as now fixed-term can be placed on a rental agreement. The Development Trusts that run such ventures may have to arrange alternative uses for these properties such as tied accommodation or as long-term lets.

Action Plan

Orkney Islands Council Housing Services – Empty Homes Strategy 2018 to 2023 Action Plan				
Objective	Action	Timescale	Resources	Responsibility
To understand the scale of the long-term empty home issue across Orkney.	Establish contact with the owners of every long-term empty home through the Empty Properties Survey.	Within a month of notification of property being long term empty.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer.
	Arrange for Council Tax Section to provide a report containing new empty properties which have been empty for more than 6 months, twice a year.	Maximum, every six months.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer, Revenues manager.
	Map empty properties on GIS to identify any 'hotspots'.	June 2019.	Existing staff.	Technology officers.
	Incorporate referrals and intelligence from the community and council officers regarding empty homes.	Ongoing.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer.
Develop a process based on advice and	Produce empty homes leaflets and posters to	Ongoing.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer.

assistance to bring empty properties back into use.	be distributed to empty home owners and within the community.			
	Twenty properties to be brought back into use each year.	31 October each year.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer.
	Consider the potential loan/ grant funding for incentivising owners to bring empty homes back into use.	Ongoing.	Existing staff.	Housing services.
	Advertise and promote the Empty Homes Matchmaker to encourage more people to advertise their properties through it.	Ongoing.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer.
	Establish further discounts to encourage empty home owners to renovate their properties.	October 2018.	Existing staff and outside retailers.	Empty homes development officer.
	Establish and improve internal relationships with other departments so that the number of people assisted to	Ongoing.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer.

	renovate their empty homes is optimised.			
	Continue the use of the Matchmaker Scheme.	Ongoing.	Existing staff and members of the development trusts.	Empty homes development officer.
Raise awareness of issues relating to empty homes across Orkney.	Contact and establish links with all the Development Trusts across Orkney.	May 2018.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer.
	Assist at least two Development Trusts to apply for Scottish Government Funding and renovate the homes thereafter.	June 2019.	Existing staff.	Team leader (Policy and planny), Empty homes development officer.
	Use local media to promote work undertaken by the Empty Homes Development Officer.	Bi-yearly.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer.
Raise awareness of issues relating to empty homes across Orkney.	Continue to promote the Orkney Empty Homes Scheme through the Scottish Empty Homes Officers Network.	Ongoing, every three months.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer.
	Update the 'Empty Homes' page on the Council website to	Every six months, June and December.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer.

	include up to date information and case studies.			
	Provide information and advice documents to Elected Members so they can raise awareness of the Empty Homes Scheme to constituents in their ward.	Yearly.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer.
	Establish links with community groups and Development Trusts, allowing them to support members of their communities.	Ongoing.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer.
Work with Development Trusts and communities to improve housing in their area.	Continue regular contact with Development Trusts across Orkney.	Ongoing.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer.
	Produce advertising posters for use by the Development Trusts.	Ongoing.	Existing staff.	Empty homes development officer.