

SUBMITTING EVIDENCE TO A SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT COMMITTEE

DATA PROTECTION FORM

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Organisation: (if required)	Historic Environment Scotland
Topic of submission:	Call for Evidence on Empty Homes in Scotland

I have read and understood the privacy notice about submitting evidence to a Committee.

I am happy for my name, or that of my organisation, to be on the submission, for it to be published on the Scottish Parliament website, mentioned in any Committee report and form part of the public record.

I would like to be added to the contact list to receive updates from the Committee on this and other pieces of work. I understand I can unsubscribe at any time.

Non-standard submissions

Occasionally, the Committee may agree to accept submissions in a non-standard format. Tick the box below if you would like someone from the clerking team to get in touch with you about submitting anonymously or confidentially (not for publication). It is for the Committee to take the final decision on whether you can submit in this way.

I would like to request that my submission be processed in a non-standard way.

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE
CALL FOR VIEW ON EMPTY HOMES IN SCOTLAND
SUBMISSION FROM HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT SCOTLAND (HES)**

Thank you for seeking Historic Environment Scotland's views on the issue of empty homes in Scotland. We are the lead public body set up to investigate, care for and promote our historic environment. We recognise that the use and maintenance of our existing housing stock is a critical aspect of caring for our historic environment. This not only benefits our historic residential buildings, but also brings wider benefits to other historic buildings and features that contribute to the quality of our places. We therefore welcome the focus given to empty homes as part of this parliamentary inquiry.

What, in your view, are the main causes of empty homes?

A number of factors may cause homes to become empty. Loss of employment opportunities, poor access to services and a poor quality of environment can lead to a lack of demand for housing in certain locations. Where there is little demand for housing, low land values may also make it economically unviable to maintain or undertake repairs to existing properties. This can be the case for historic buildings, which can sometimes be more costly to maintain and repair. Other factors can include ownership disputes, uncertainty over future development projects and a lack of skilled labour for the upkeep and repair of properties.

Is this a problem which affects all tenures of housing? Please provide further information to explain your answer.

This issue is most likely to affect homes under private ownership where demand is low. This issue can also affect publically owned housing, where local authorities and housing associations also have holdings in areas of low demand.

Often, vacancy can occur when owners have property that forms part of another enterprise, for example farms with cottages or shops with flats above. This is also the case for large estates, in both public and private ownership, that include a surplus of tied properties. Examples of this include NHS property with former accommodation and schools with caretakers' houses

What is the impact on communities in areas where there are large numbers of empty homes?

Large numbers of empty homes can have a severely detrimental effect on communities. Empty housing can contribute to the loss of economic activity in a place, with the local population unable to support the shops and services required to sustain a community. Where empty housing has fallen into disrepair, this can often lead to blight and the loss of amenity in an area. This can have a negative effect on the well-being of communities, contributing to health and social problems. These forces can often combine and lead to further population decline, neglect of existing buildings, closure of shops and services, and the creation of health and social problems.

Is the issue of empty homes a problem in particular areas and if so, why?

The problem of empty homes will typically occur in places with inherently low land values. These will include former industrial areas where key employment has ceased as well as rural areas with poor access to employment and services.

This is especially the case for some island communities where transport links have been reduced and employment has moved away.

We have identified a particular issue with empty homes above shops in town centres and on the edge of larger conurbations. Demand for this type of housing can be low and conversion costs or refurbishment are often perceived to be too high for the return on investment.

Are you aware of any areas which have made progress in addressing the issue of empty homes and if so, what other local authorities could learn?

The use and maintenance of our existing housing stock is a critical aspect of caring for our historic environment. This not only benefits our historic residential buildings, but also brings wider benefits to other historic buildings and features that contribute to the quality of our places. Many of our core functions therefore seek to address the issue of empty homes.

We have recently adopted the Historic Environment Policy for Scotland (HEPS, 2019). This document sets a new policy approach to the management of our heritage and requires that decisions affecting the historic environment should secure its benefits while contributing to the sustainable development of our communities and places. This means that there is an expectation that our historic buildings, including homes, should be retained and used for the benefit of our communities. We have also written a guidance note on the Use and Adaptation of Listed Buildings (2019) which includes advice on the refurbishment and adaptation of listed buildings. This advice is transferrable to unlisted buildings too, and includes information on approaches to secure the continued use or reuse of buildings. Advice on minimising risk to empty or underused buildings is also included within this document. We have also produced a Buildings at Risk Toolkit that offers solutions for property that is vacant or at risk.

We also offer funding for the use and refurbishment of existing historic buildings and places through the Historic Environment Repair Grant, and the Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme (CARS). Through such funding mechanisms, we can promote the maintenance, care and re-use of residential buildings.

At a project level, we have been involved with a number of schemes for the refurbishment and re-use of existing buildings. A good example of this has been projects associated with the Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme at Campbeltown, Argyll and Bute. Here, heritage and housing initiatives have combined to resolve and bring back into use a number of empty or poorly maintained houses. We also understand that Argyll and Bute Council have promoted the re-use of homes through providing grant funding to people moving into the area for work.

HES are also looking at opportunities to support the pilot refurbishment of a small, traditional property in Scotland using local skills and traditional materials. Through such projects we are aiming to re-generate local capacity and confidence in the repair of older buildings by local builders.

We are also keen to highlight the work of Shelter Scotland's Scottish Empty Homes Partnership which is currently pursuing

excellent initiatives for the re-use of empty homes. A good example is the work of the Empty Homes Partnership with Orkney Islands Council on the re-use of rural housing on North Ronaldsay. This project has taken a multi-agency approach to the improvement of existing infrastructure and employment with the aim of attracting young people and families to the area.

How effective are current tools open to local authorities/central government to deal with empty homes? Should they have more powers? / Should there be more enforcement powers for local authorities/central government to deal with the issue? If so, what could these be?

We are keen to champion place-based approaches as a way of effectively addressing the empty homes issue. We welcome the recent adoption of the Place Principle by Scottish Government and COSLA, which seeks to co-ordinate resources and investment in developing a vision for particular places. Holistic and multi-agency approaches can reverse the decline of places and encourage repopulation and the re-use of buildings. We are keen therefore to engage as part of such projects.

More generally, we consider that local authorities should be equipped with more powers and resources to deal with the issue of empty homes. This could include more scope to use Compulsory Purchase Order or Compulsory Lease powers where property is at risk. The recent Compulsory Purchase of a Category C listed detached house at Roseangle in Dundee is a good example of where such powers have been used with success. A case study of this project is available on the Scottish Government website.

Is there enough information/data to provide an accurate picture of empty homes in Scotland? If not, how could this be improved?

The Buildings at Risk Register (BARR) for Scotland is a key data set that can help provide an accurate picture of empty homes in Scotland. This register identifies buildings within our historic environment that are vacant, in some way threatened, or seeking a new use. Our Buildings at Risk team maintains regular contact and provides data to council Empty Homes Officers to assist them in the re-use of empty homes.

Buildings At Risk data is gathered and organised according to building typology and an assessment of heritage merit, whereas it is our understanding that Empty Homes data is gathered according to council tax data and covers all vintage of buildings. This means that there is some cross-over in the properties our respective projects identify, but also significant difference. A particular example of this lies in former residencies above shops, within tenement buildings. Such properties are regularly taxed under business rates rather than council tax therefore fall outside the immediate remit of most Empty Homes officers. The Buildings at Risk Register can therefore prove a useful starting point in identifying 'potential' new residencies as opposed to those simply needing to be brought back into use.

Historic Environment Scotland

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