

Agenda Item	10
Report No	HP/41/25

The Highland Council

Committee: **Housing and Property**

Date: **5 November 2025**

Report Title: **Empty Homes Strategy**

Report By: **Assistant Chief Executive - Place**

1 Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 As detailed in Highland's Housing Challenge, the supply of housing continues to be a priority for both the Council and the Scottish Government. Providing an effective supply of quality housing and helping to create strong communities is important to the people of the Highlands, both current and future. One potential source of housing is bringing empty and under-used properties back into use, so that they provide (primary) homes for people living in Highland.
- 1.2 This report presents the Empty Homes Strategy for Highland (2025–2028). The Strategy is attached at **Appendix 2** to this report. The Strategy proposes a focus on two objectives to achieve this: encouraging and empowering owners and communities to bring empty properties back into use as primary homes and targeting resources at approaches which effectively deliver homes in communities experiencing high housing need alongside low supply and contributing, where possible, to strategic priorities including homes for 'key' workers; rural re-population and area-based regeneration.
- 1.3 This report also presents an update on the current Empty Homes Service in Highland and the outcomes of activities in 2024/2025.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:-
 - i. **Approve** the Empty Homes Strategy as detailed at **Appendix 2** of this report;
 - ii. **Note** the outcomes of activities in 2024/25 as set out in Section 7 of this report; and
 - iii. **Note** that recruitment is underway for an additional Empty Homes Officer to assist with delivery of the Strategy actions, as agreed at Housing and Property Committee in August 2025.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - There are no direct implications arising from this report although the Council and partners' ability to deliver the strategy will depend on resources as well as policy and practice considerations. Any requirement for future resources will be considered by Members of this committee.
- 3.2 **Legal** - There are no direct implications arising from this report. The development of the Empty Homes Strategy is in line with legislation and good practice guidance.
- 3.3 **Risk** – There are no risk implications arising from this report.
- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – There are no health and safety implication arising from this report.
- 3.5 **Gaelic** - There are no Gaelic implication arising from this report.

4 Impacts

- 4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.
- 4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.
- 4.3 **Integrated Impact Assessment - Summary**
 - 4.3.1 An Integrated Impact Assessment screening was undertaken on 2 September 2025. The conclusions have been subject to the relevant Manager Review and Approval.
 - 4.3.2 The Screening process has concluded that there are several positive impacts arising from the approaches proposed in the Strategy including: increased supply of housing; more opportunities for meeting housing need; incentives for owners to use properties more productively; priority access to services for owners at risk of poverty; positive impact on climate change.
 - 4.3.3 It also concluded that any potentially negative impacts are mitigated by existing processes. A full impact assessment was considered not to be required. Members are asked to consider the summary below and detailed in **Appendix 1** to support the decision-making process.

4.3.4	Impact Assessment Area	Conclusion of Screening
	Equality	No different impact on protected groups
	Socio-economic	Positive
	Human Rights	Existing processes mitigate impact
	Children's Rights and Well-being	Positive
	Island and Mainland Rural	No different impact
	Climate Change	Positive
	Data Rights	No impact

5 Background

5.1 The Highland Housing Challenge recognises the importance of doubling the number of houses, across all tenures, over the course of the next 10 years. Providing an effective supply of quality housing and helping to create strong communities is important to the people of the Highlands, both current and future. It is critical also to sustaining our communities and growing our population.

5.2 The Scottish Government's strategic framework defines empty and unproductive homes as:-

- **Long-term empty properties** are dwellings, empty for over 12 months, and liable for Council Tax. In 2024/25, around 3,660 properties were classed as this in Highland.
- **Unoccupied exemptions** are properties which are Council Tax exempt. Some exemptions are time limited, and others have no prescribed time limit. In Highland around 2,000 properties currently meet this definition - mainly due to confirmation processes following death, or the owner being in care.
- **Second homes** are furnished and lived in for at least 25 days in a 12-month period but not as someone's main residence. In Highland there are currently around 3,400 second homes.

The Empty Homes Strategy 2025-2028 focuses specifically on long-term empty properties, rather than other houses not used as primary residences.

5.3 The policy context places the empty homes agenda within a framework of strategic ambitions around housing, place, community, net zero and the economy. Whilst there are currently no specific statutory requirements for local authorities regarding empty homes, the Highland Council and various stakeholders are committed to encouraging empty homeowners to bring properties back into use and tackle housing shortages by increasing the supply of quality affordable housing.

5.4 Statutory requirements relating to bringing empty homes back into use, include:-

- [Local Government Finance \(Unoccupied properties etc.\) \(Scotland\) Act 2012](#) which allows local authorities to apply a premium charge on the Council Tax on certain homes that have been empty over a year and second homes;

- The Housing (Scotland) Act 2011 which places a duty on local authorities to develop a Local Housing Strategy (LHS) setting out their plans for housing across all tenures and types based on their assessment of need and demand;
- Local authorities' duties to homeless people including a statutory responsibility to anyone threatened with, or experiencing, homelessness.

6 Highland Empty Homes Strategy

6.1 Highland's Draft Empty Homes Strategy is set out at **Appendix 2**. The Strategy has been drafted in conjunction with the Empty Homes Partnership led by Shelter Scotland. The proposed Empty Homes Strategy sets out Highland's approach to managing issues arising from empty properties. It is based on:-

- an assessment of issues and options across Highland;
- an understanding of why properties remain empty;
- national guidance and good practice;
- learning from activity to date;
- the views and experiences of partner services and organisations; and
- a realistic assessment of the potential to bring homes back into use given the external factors outwith Highland's control.

6.2 Having a clear framework for action and investment enables services to come together and target resources at priorities and effective solutions. New approaches can be tested and evaluated - and the use of resources monitored and evaluated.

6.3 Highland's strategic aim is to bring empty and under-used properties back into use, so that they provide (primary) homes for people living in Highland communities.

6.4 The Strategy proposes a focus on two objectives to achieve this; these are to:-

1. encourage and empower owners and communities to bring empty properties back into use as primary homes (i.e. homes for people living in the community).
2. target resources at approaches which effectively deliver homes:-
 - in communities experiencing high housing need alongside low supply
 - and contribute where possible to strategic priorities including homes for 'key' workers; rural re-population and area-based regeneration.

6.5 The Strategy recognises the importance of making sure that limited public sector resources are targeted effectively. The proposed approach will:-

- Help more empty owners manage their, often difficult, issues and challenges;
- Encourage and empower communities to encourage owners to use homes in ways that benefit the area – and / or avoid homes becoming empty;
- Target specialist assistance to owners or properties which are in need of public sector input to overcome barriers stopping their properties being used as homes; and
- Focus on activities benefiting or impacting on more than one household.

6.6 In addition to the core benefit of adding to the housing supply within communities, the wider benefits of the strategy will include contributing to community sustainability and supporting the aims and objectives of place plans at a local and area level.

- 6.7 The draft Empty Homes Strategy 2025-2028 'Turning Empty Properties into Homes' is attached at **Appendix 2** to this report.
- 6.8 The Strategy focuses on the issue of empty homes and the solutions and actions to address the issues associated with these. It is important to note that it does not consider solutions or actions related to the issue of short term lets, which are not categorised as empty properties, and which were the subject of a report to Council 18 September 2025 including setting out a proposed approach for addressing issues related to properties of this nature. Separately, the Council has already implemented a strategy of increased Council Tax to address the issue of second homes.

7 Highland Council Empty Homes Service

- 7.1 Whilst the Strategy sets out the aims and objectives for addressing empty homes moving forward, work has been progressed through the Empty Homes Service funded by the Council to provide advice, assistance and help deliver Highland Empty Homes Delivery Plan. This has been funded since 2013. The post of the Empty Homes Officer, who provides much of the service, has been mainstreamed by Highland Council. It was previously jointly funded by the Scottish Government. The officer sits within the Housing Policy Team. Indications are that, in local authority areas employing such staff, long-term empty properties are more likely to be brought into use.
- 7.2 In 2024/25, 35 properties which had been empty over 12 months came back into use following advice and assistance from the Council's Empty Homes Service. The end-use of properties varied. Of these 35 properties: the majority (18 properties) became owner-occupied; 11 became private lets and six became either second homes or holiday lets. Prioritising the return of empty homes into primary dwellings remains a key focus but there are limitations around achieving this objective.
- 7.3 The type of service provided to these owners included the following (note: some properties fall into more than one category):-
- Evidence to access national merchant discounts / support a VAT reduction; or advice on accessing Auction House Scotland (25 properties / owners).
 - Providing advice on options for end use (e.g. letting); repair issues; Council Tax and funding opportunities e.g. energy or water grants. (18 properties / owners)
 - Advising or assisting with securing a Council Tax discount or exemption (11 properties / owners).
 - Discussing owner interest in purchase or lease by Highland Council (five properties). None of these properties met Highland Council's criteria for purchasing or leasing.
- 7.4 The Empty Homes Service also provides services to communities and their representatives - and assists other Council services to resolve issues; this included:-
- Eight community-based organisations being advised or assisted with issues relating to long-term empty or unproductive properties (such as assistance with assessing extent of issue by investing ownership; liaising and negotiating with owners; advising on improving properties).
 - Developing easily accessible web information and advice to help owners and communities self-manage issues and understand options.

- Providing enhanced support to help 11 owners of properties causing community blight and one other (e.g. to sell their properties by auction) – six properties were listed for sale or sold.
- Confirming 15 properties as due to pay the premium Council Tax charge.
- Identifying scope for Council Tax debt recovery on seven properties by tracing owners and / or supporting work to negotiate repayment at point of sale.
- Assisting with tracing owners e.g. by purchasing genealogist services; liaising with solicitors.
- Contributing to developing Highland's strategic approach and liaising with local authorities and the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership.

7.5 The community-based organisations given advice or assistance included:-

- Gairloch & Loch Ewe Action Forum
- Development Trust, Raasay
- Knoydart Foundation
- Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust
- Sutherland Community Planning Partnership
- Isle of Canna Development Trust
- Fort Augustus & Glenmoriston Community Council/ Glenmoriston Community Company
- Stratherrick & Foyers Community Development Trust Ltd.

7.6 The Empty Home Officer took on new casework relating to 49 properties in 2024/25. These added to existing long term empty properties known to the service. The new cases comprised:-

- Owners seeking information and advice (24 properties).
- Local Elected Members asking for action to be taken (16 properties).
- Council officials seeking assistance to explore an issue (four properties).
- Complaints from community about properties in their neighbourhood e.g. condition of property / grounds (five properties).

7.7 Since 1 April 2025, 40 properties have been brought to the attention of the Empty Homes Service:-

- Owners seeking information and advice.
- Local Elected Members asking for action to be taken.
- Council officials seeking assistance to explore an issue.
- Complaints from neighbour / community about properties in their neighbourhood.
- Community Group asking for status of properties to be checked.

Owners, communities and community representatives can find out about the service and contact the Empty Homes Officer on this web page:

www.highland.gov.uk/info/997/housing_advice/1011/empty_homes

7.8 Highland Council and the Scottish Government (via the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership) have entered into an agreement to fund an additional Empty Homes Officer. Highland funding via the Landbank Fund was approved at this Committee in August 2025.

- 7.9 The additional Empty Homes Officer will be located within the Council's Housing Development Team and will focus specifically on potential purchases to bring empty properties back into use and applying compulsory purchase orders in extreme cases where no other alternative is available. Recruitment is currently underway, and the intention is to have an additional Empty Homes Officer in place for the new calendar year or sooner if possible.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 30 September 2025

Author: Hilary Parkey, Housing Policy Officer

Background Papers: None

Appendices: **Appendix 1** – Integrated Impact Assessment
Appendix 2 – Highland Empty Homes Strategy

Impact Assessment Summary

High level summary: Highland's Empty Homes Strategy sets out strategic framework for managing issues arising from empty and unproductive homes.

Who may be affected by the proposal? All Highland Council residents who own a property which is empty or being used by them as a second home.

Equalities, poverty, and human rights

Protected characteristics

Returning long-term empty homes to use will impact on a small number of owners. Owners of empty homes come from across all strands of society etc. and are not to be made up a specific group.

Poverty and socio-economic

Where demand is outstripping supply for local housing - and this is exacerbated by concentrations of second and long-term empty homes – these approaches will ensure housing is used to best effect in terms of providing homes for primary residential use.

The approaches may incentivise empty homes or second home owners to use their homes in other ways e.g. for private rental tenancies. This could help alleviate housing pressures.

National evidence shows that second home owners are on average wealthier than households that do not own a second home or those without any property.

The approaches will have a positive socio-economic impact and positive impact on people experiencing poverty. Evidence shows that people with significant housing needs are more likely to be on lower incomes. The approaches aim to:

- ensure housing is used to best effect as homes for primary residential use and;
- increase the supply of affordable housing (e.g. premium tax income is used to fund development of new affordable homes)

The Strategy includes a commitment to include, and promote, comprehensive accessible universal information and advice on options for owners, neighbours and communities. This approach will have a positive impact on all including owners who 'inherit' a property or whose circumstances change.

The approach proposes that the Council's Empty Homes Service prioritises certain categories for its enhanced practical support and assistance service. This includes owners who require additional input from the Council (public sector) to bring their empty property (or second home) back into use on the basis that their health, or financial resources, limits their capacity to take action themselves.

The approach proposes that this support and advice service is promoted at the Council Tax billing stage i.e. when owners are informed about the additional charge.

Human rights

The approach highlights that there are enforcement processes available to the Council for nuisance properties e.g. compulsory purchase order (CPO). This Strategy does not propose to change these. These processes are underpinned by legislation which ensure that a fair balance is struck between the public interest in taking action and the individual's right to peaceful enjoyment of property.

Should new enforcement approaches be introduced by legislation, Highland Council will undertake an impact assessment before introducing their use.

Children's rights and wellbeing

Our Strategy prioritises local communities where there are housing needs. Children and young people living in or moving to these areas, may therefore benefit from improved access to, and choice of, homes to live in.

Children at risk of homelessness or living in temporary homeless housing will benefit from increased supply of housing

Data protection

The privacy notice is held on Highland Council's website www.highland.gov.uk

Public Task - Long term neglected and empty homes can pose problems for the Council and neighbours. Returning empty homes or converting other vacant property into housing use is an effective way to meet housing need. In line with the Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc) (Scotland) Act 2012.

The Council is legally obliged under the Local Government Finance Act 1992 to collect and administer Council Tax, the data is used to assess empty properties.

Island and mainland rural communities

The proposal will not affect people in these communities differently.

Climate change

The proposed strategy focuses on assisting owners to bring their properties back into use themselves and for their own use. Private owners are not required to bring properties up to energy efficiency standards if the home is to be owner occupied etc. For reasons set out in Highland's Housing Strategy and proposed empty homes strategy (including viability; cost-effectiveness; challenges with bringing Highlands empty homes up to energy standards; and as empty homes tend not be where affordable homes are required), investment by social landlords arising from this strategy which could bring empty homes into use as social rented homes (which require to meet high energy standards) will continue to be very limited. As a result, the impact in Highland is likely to be minimal.

From Empty Properties to Homes

Highland's Empty Homes Strategic Framework
2025-2028

Highland's Empty Homes Strategic Framework 2025-2028

Highland Council is committed to resolving housing shortages and helping to create strong communities. Houses lying empty for long periods are often a wasted resource.

We aim to:

- bring long-term empty houses back into use, so that they provide homes for people living in Highland's communities.
- assist communities affected by housing shortages being made worse by high levels of empty properties, to resolve their housing issues.

This framework outlines our strategic approach to doing so by engaging with empty homes owners; working with communities experiencing challenges arising from empty homes and, targeting resources at approaches which deliver homes.

Legislative framework - Statutory Duties

Statutory requirements relating to bringing empty homes back into use include:

- Local Government Finance (Unoccupied properties etc.) (Scotland) Act 2012. This allows local authorities to charge increased Council Tax on certain homes that have been empty over a year;
- The Housing (Scotland) Act 2011 places a duty on local authorities to develop a Local Housing Strategy (LHS);
- Local authorities' duties to people who are homeless, or threatened with homelessness;
- Tackling poor housing - House Condition (Housing (Scotland) Act 2006, Section 10);
- Tackling effects of Climate Change – S. 44 of the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009.

As well as duties, these offer mechanisms to help drive activities around empty homes.

National Policy Context for Empty Homes

Empty homes work supports national ambitions around housing, communities, net zero, and economic resilience. While there is no statutory duty for local authorities to act on empty homes, the Scottish Government encourages action to bring them back into use.



Contribution to Scottish Government's National Outcomes

Proactively tackling issues caused by empty homes, or bringing them back into use, helps deliver against several national outcomes.

- Economy & Fair Work supports robust communities; work and spend on materials, and skilled workforce development.
- Communities & Health improves quality of neighbourhoods, safety, reduces anti-social behaviour, and supports better mental wellbeing in regenerated communities.
- Poverty & Affordability expands access to affordable housing and helps tackle inequality.
- Environment: promotes sustainable reuse, reduces carbon emissions, and protects existing housing stock.

Alignment with Housing to 2040 Strategy – Scottish Government

This national strategy sets an ambitious national vision for Scotland's housing and a plan to achieve it. Empty homes contribute to this by:-

- Increasing affordable housing in areas of need.
- Revitalising town centres and rural communities.
- Improving housing quality and choice.
- Reducing emissions through retrofit and reuse.

The Housing to 2040 Strategic Plan includes actions under the priority objective of ensuring the housing market operates more fairly providing affordable housing options and choices in all communities.

It includes plans for helping local authorities:

- identify and determine empty properties that can be brought into use;
- have powers to regulate and charge owners appropriately for homes lying empty and ensure they have the mechanisms to bring them back into productive use;
- have tools and powers to make best use of empty and second homes and;
- fund the bringing of empty homes, and potential empty homes, back into use.

For example, the Rural and Islands Housing Fund aims to increase the supply of affordable housing across all tenures in areas of need, and helps groups such as community organisations, development trusts and private landowners to build refurbish existing properties, bring empty properties into use (including the conversion of commercial and non-domestic properties into houses) and fund feasibility studies - as well as building new affordable housing.



Support from National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4)

NPF4 Policy 9: Quality Homes encourages the reuse of existing buildings—including empty homes, and potential homes — to meet housing targets sustainably.

Strategic Context – Highland

In many parts of Highland there is an insufficient supply of housing which people can afford to buy or rent. This can have negative impacts including on people's health, educational outcomes, ability to secure sustained employment and sustainability of services and local economies. A lack of housing can influence the depopulation in some areas and make repopulation more challenging. It may also impact on business' abilities to recruit, operate and expand as potential applicants may not find suitable housing.

This is alongside:-

- restricted public sector funding to invest in measures to increase or improve housing;
- high levels of debt (43p in every pound raised through Highland Council's housing rent is needed to repay historic debt); and
- costs for building or improving rural housing being higher than the resulting value (in some cases).

Highland however has a strong track record of developing new affordable housing and in taking proactive measures to overcome the challenges of building in rural and pressured areas.

Policy Context

Our Future Highland sets out Highland Council's Programme and strategic outcomes. Successful delivery of this Empty Homes Strategy will contribute to it by:-

- supporting and empowering communities to identify local solutions and using all available resources and;
- maximising the opportunities and resources to improve people's quality of life.

In June 2024 the Council declared a [Highland Housing Challenge](#) with the aim of doubling the number of houses in Highland over a 10 year period. [The HHC Partnership Action plan](#) sets out a range of actions to increase investment, increase land supply and build capacity in order to increase housing provision across all tenures.

Highland Council's [Local Housing Strategy \(LHS\) 2023–2028](#) guides activities and investment in housing and related services across the area. It sets out the shared vision for housing – focusing on delivering strategic priorities including:-

- Increasing housing supply – and meeting housing need and demand.
 - Preventing and alleviating homelessness.
- 

- Improving housing condition and energy efficiency; tackling fuel poverty and; supporting net zero targets.

Highland's Local Housing Strategy sets a commitment to: 'Tackle empty homes - prioritise targeted and preventative investment in areas where local housing pressure is evidenced.' It highlights that this is alongside a priority focus on delivering new build housing.

The Strategic Housing Investment Plan sets out how we will use resources available to us to deliver these priorities. Communities affected by housing shortages are prioritised for investment to deliver new affordable homes. These shortages may be due in part to second and empty homes.

Highland Council raises income, as part of its Budget Plan via a premium charge on Council Tax associated with empty and second homes. It uses the ring-fenced funding to help support the delivery of affordable housing (including development loans and funding for land and infrastructure). [Highland's Council Tax premium charge discounts](#) take account of activities and issues impacting on the time it may take owners to bring their properties back into use.

Highland's Empty Homes Framework

Highland's Empty Homes Framework contributes to delivery of these strategic and corporate approaches by:-

- Expanding the housing options available (e.g. more opportunities to private rent; more accommodation for workers) and supporting area-based regeneration in towns).
- Reducing the need for social housing.
- Reducing neighbourhood blight, complaints and public resources responding to issues.
- Reducing the impact of empty or unproductive homes on communities.
- Improving housing condition.
- Supporting economic growth and community resilience.
- Improving energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions.
- Contributing to meeting needs and priorities identified within local Community Partnership and Area Place plans.

The cause, nature and extent of empty homes in Highland

Properties may be long-term empty for a variety of reasons. Understanding these informs options for bringing them back into use – and effective targeting of public resources. Reasons can relate to the building including:-

- The time it takes to undertake works and / or the cost of works or materials.



- Limited resources to invest or repay unaffordable loans restricting ability to work at pace. Many owners of long-term empty properties in Highland cite funding to upgrade their properties as a barrier to bringing their properties back into use.
- Need for major repairs / refurbishment (especially if works exceed the property's value).
- The lack of contractors and skilled labour to carry out work.
- Costs – evidence suggests that it costs 40% more to renovate property in Highland compared to Central Scotland. Many owners of long-term empty properties in Highland cite funding to upgrade their properties as a barrier to bringing their properties back into use.
- Length of time to sell the property (e.g. if the price is above the building value; if the property requires repair; if the owner faces negative equity in the current market; oversupply of housing for sale at a similar price range; challenges for buyers to secure funding etc.).
- Challenges with selling a rural property (e.g. smaller pool of buyers if it is some distance from others and services).
- Inheritance or ownership title difficulties – and legal processes.
- Owner ability to manage debts associated with the property – or overwhelmed by the decision making process.
- Planning restrictions (e.g. listed building; planning permission required for works).

The above reasons can also relate to personal circumstances. For example, a house may be empty as the owner requires to live in a care-home. As people are living longer, the prevalence of this reason is expected to increase.

Reasons can also relate to the owner's motivation, aspirations, and willingness to return their property to use at this time including:-

- purchased or retained an asset which the owner wishes to capitalise on or develop in the future;
- intention to use as a short-term holiday let;
- emotional attachment to a house e.g. if it has been inherited;
- unrealistic selling price;
- house and its land being part of a larger business (e.g. estate; working farm or private business); or
- the perceived risks of, or conditions associated with, private renting acting as a disincentive.

Similar issues may arise in relation to second homes – such as owners with connections to communities including:-

- family members reluctance to sell inherited properties due to emotional ties;



- keeping the property as a place to stay when visiting friends or relatives – or for enabling returning family members to settle in the community at a future point.

What are the impacts?

For owners, empty properties may have financial impacts in terms of lost income, Council Tax, insurance, maintenance and security.

From a wider perspective:

- empty homes or neglected and rarely used second homes can cause a negative appearance in terms of place, undermine regeneration efforts, prevent common works from taking place and lower the value of nearby properties;
- empty properties inactive within the housing market have limited contribution to economic activity within communities and do not help with meeting housing need.

Considerations

Some long-term empty properties present potential opportunities to deliver against our aim. We have developed an understanding of effective and viable solutions and will continue to take these forward.

However, in many communities across Highland, there are challenges in focusing public sector investment on attempting to bring some properties into use as homes which will meet local housing needs:-

- repair / maintenance requirements and costs, combined with letting standards and energy efficiency requirements, limits what can be viably achieved, particularly in rural properties or above shops etc.;
- many rural empty properties are remote from public transport and other services;
- a high proportion of long-term empty properties in Highland are owned by bodies or people (estates; commercial business) who often have little interest in bringing them into use as homes;
- evidence indicates that offering grants / loans to bring properties back into use as affordable housing is either of little interest or ineffective (particularly if housing markets are strong);
- effective enforcement tools are currently lacking.

Highland's challenges are evidenced through a considerable decline in the subsidised purchase of homes on the open market in the area in recent years. It is increasingly difficult to source those that can, cost-effectively, be bought to provide affordable / low-cost housing. Purchase price, combined with property condition,



and the work required to bring up to the relet standard, are resulting in unaffordable costs particularly in remote rural areas.

Understanding Issues

The Empty Home Strategic Framework is based on an understanding of issues, assessments of housing need and demand and the challenges faced in bringing properties back into use. The Scottish Government's definition of empty and homes not used as a primary residence has been defined as follows:

- Long term empty properties are dwellings, empty for over 12 months, and liable for Council Tax. In 2024/25, around 3,660 properties were classed as this in Highland.
- Unoccupied exemptions are properties which are Council Tax exempt. Some exemptions are time limited, and others have no prescribed time limit. In Highland around 2,000 properties meet this definition - mainly due to confirmation processes following death, or the owner being in care.
- Second homes are furnished and lived in for at least 25 days in a 12-month period but not as someone's main residence. In Highland there are around 3,400 second homes
- Houses used as short-term lets are viewed, by some, as adding to issues. These properties are generally subject to Non-Domestic Rates and are not included in Council Tax.

Empty, and homes not used as a primary residence, are a significant feature in many Highland's communities, particularly in rural and remote rural locations. Highland has 51% of its housing is in rural areas but has 61% of its empty homes and 83% of its second homes in rural areas.

The issue is more prevalent than in other parts of Scotland – with proportionally more long-term empty homes and second homes than the national average.

The focus of the Highland Strategy is on bringing empty homes back into use as a primary residence. There are separate workstreams to address the issues of short term lets and second homes.

Highland's historic working, population and migration patterns over the last century has influenced this. For example, there are proportionally more (old) private housing built before 1919; greater incidence of Below Tolerable Standard private homes and more properties on land forming part of larger estates or working farms (e.g. formerly tied houses / agricultural worker cottages).

Many of Highland's empty homes are not located in the places where people most need housing. Initial analysis would suggest there is a lack of alignment between



the distribution of empty properties and the communities identified as having significant housing need. This will be assessed as part of the new Housing Need and Demand Assessment which will be presented to the Scottish Government for verification in Spring 2026.

The extent to which empty properties are disproportionately located in rural / remote rural locations is illustrated by the Small Area Statistics on Households and Dwellings (National Records of Scotland). These show the proportion of properties in each of Highland's 361 data zones (small geographic areas) which are long-term empty and those which are second homes.

The Highland Council assessed the need for housing across Highland's communities and used this to set targets for increasing the supply of housing to meet these needs. These are set out in Highland's Strategic Housing Investment Programme. This analysis highlights the misalignment between the location of empty properties and housing need.

Table 1 shows the number and proportion of empty houses in each area. Many of these properties are located outwith established communities and neighbourhoods.

Table 1 Number and percentage of empty houses in Highland

Area	Long- term empty housing i.e. all over 12 months incl. discounted.	Total housing stock	% of housing in the area which is long-term empty	% of Highland housing stock	% of all Highland long-term empty homes
Badenoch & Strathspey	316	7,603	3%	6%	9%
Caithness	408	13,578	3%	11%	12%
Inverness	833	41,497	2%	34%	25%
Lochaber	329	10,709	3%	9%	10%
Nairn	128	6,525	2%	5%	4%
Ross & Cromarty	801	29,323	3%	24%	24%
Skye & Lochalsh	227	6,091	4%	5%	7%
Sutherland	342	8,173	4%	7%	10%
Highland	3,384	123,554	2.8%	100%	100%

Source: NRS Small Area Statistics (2023) provided via Scottish Empty Homes Partnership.

Analysis of long-term empty housing subject to 200% full Premium Council Tax (i.e. empty properties ineligible for discounts arising from repair, sales / rent marketing or exempt)

Evidence suggests that various features are associated with the potential success of public sector activity to bring empty homes into use as affordable or low-cost housing



– this can include: the length it has been empty (e.g. whether the property is progressing at its own, albeit slow, pace or there are significant barriers delaying the owner's progress) and ownership.

Assessment of the properties in Highland being charged the 200% 'long-term empty' Premium Council Tax (i.e. over 2,100 properties) showed:-

- The majority became liable for 200% 'long-term empty' Council Tax charge in recent years - only around 1 in 5 (21%) properties became liable before 2022.
- Many properties may have become liable due to slow turnover, rather than issues which will result in them becoming long-term empty for extended periods e.g. more than 3 years.
- Around 100 properties have had this liability status for 10 years or more. Condition may make it harder to return a property to use. Risks to condition increase with time. Preventing this will involve making owners aware of options and issues when properties are continuing to be empty. Highland Council's new comprehensive web information and advice will assist with this.
- 33% of long-term empty properties are owned by companies, organisations, estates, trusts, or are being managed by will-executors (following death). These agencies can be less motivated to work with us to bring the property back into use as homes.
- Around two-thirds of long-term empty properties (1,400) are owned by 'private individual' owners – most (97%) own only one long-term empty property. This makes proactive work targeting resources at area-based activity more challenging.

Delivering Outcomes

The strategic aim is to bring empty and under-used properties back into use, so that they provide homes for people living in Highland's communities.

The Strategic Framework will focus on two objectives to achieve this – these are to:

1. Encourage and empower owners and communities to bring empty properties back into use as (primary / main) homes.
2. Target resources at approaches which
 - (i) effectively deliver homes in communities experiencing high housing need alongside low supply; and
 - (ii) contribute to strategic priorities including homes for 'key' workers, rural re-population and area based regeneration.

The strategy's approaches will:-

- Help more empty owners manage their own issues – and prevent issues arising.



- Reduce the time it takes owners to bring their properties back into use.
- Enable more communities to take action themselves.
- Identify opportunities to bring properties into effective use using available funding streams.
- Empower communities to encourage owners who live in or have ties to the area to use unproductive homes in ways that benefit the area – and / or avoid homes becoming empty or second homes.
- Target specialist assistance to owners or properties which are in need to public sector input to overcome the barriers which are stopping them from being used as homes.
- Focus on activities benefiting or impacting on more than one household.

Delivering Effectively

Given the nature of empty homes issues in Highland, the pressures on our resources, and associated commitments to deliver services effective and focus on key priorities, it is important that activity is effectively targeted.

The framework's strategic actions are considered to have the potential to:-

- deliver a positive and significant difference to achieving the aim & objectives.
- make best use of available resources and;
- be delivered within the life of the strategy (should resources allow).

The Delivery Plan is set out at the end of this strategy; it

- enables the delivery, monitoring and evaluation of activities' impact,
- sets a framework for working, investment and delivering the aims,
- will be reviewed and updated annually – responding to changes in context and learning.

Approaches & Tools for Tackling Long-Term Empty Homes

The strategic framework builds on approaches known to be successful in bringing empty homes back into use and tools - including enforcement measures. Highland Council's Empty Homes Service provides a range of support aimed at resolving issues.

These can include:-

- Providing advice about options, issues, financial incentives, and assistance with providing evidence to access merchant discounts, Council Tax Discounts etc.
- Assistance with accessing house sales services (e.g. via auction sales).
- Tracing and attempting to engage with owners.
- Identifying status of properties for community groups and liaising on their behalf.



- Assisting services gather evidence to support enforcement activities.

Enforcement Measures

Whilst the main approach is to engage and support property owners, enforcement may be necessary where voluntary efforts fail or where there is a risk to the community. This section sets out options that may be used.

Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) are currently being reviewed by the Scottish Government and new legislation and guidance is anticipated. These currently can be considered where:-

- A property has been empty long-term.
- The owner is unresponsive or unwilling to act.
- Properties are identified as suitable for reuse with a clear plan for reuse (e.g. resale, social housing).
- Statutory procedures will be followed - Acquisition of Land (Authorisation Procedure) (Scotland) Act 1947.

Highland Council may also consider the building's scope to provide homes e.g. by sub-dividing large properties into several homes; converting formerly commercial properties.

Work Notices and Maintenance Orders – continue to use the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006 to 1. serve Work Notices requiring owners to carry out repairs 2. issue Maintenance Orders for ongoing upkeep of buildings, and 3. recover costs through charging orders if the Council undertakes the work.

Dangerous and Defective Buildings - under the Building (Scotland) Act 2003, issue:-

- Dangerous Building Notices where a property poses immediate risk.
- Defective Building Notices for serious disrepair.
- Take direct action if the owner fails to comply, with cost recovery.

Public Health and Environmental Powers - use environmental health legislation to address 1. Potential vermin infestations, 2. Accumulated waste or hazards, and 3. Impact on neighbouring properties.



Highland's Strategic Delivery Plan 2025 – 2028

Note: The Empty Homes Service refers to Highland Council's Housing Policy and Development Teams

Encourage and empower owners, and communities, to bring empty properties back into use as (primary) homes			
	Action	Milestones	Lead
1	Consider future legislative changes that may enable Councils to increase the Council Tax premium on long-term empty properties & second homes – incentivising owners to return houses to use	Track and evaluate impact on number of homes: remaining long-term empty; being used as second homes; provided as short-term lets	Corporate
2	Help owners to:- • understand their options; • self-manage bringing their properties back into use • bring their properties back into use more quickly; and; • be responsible owners	Provide information and advice on Highland Council's website which enables owners to more quickly understand their options and opportunities – and make decisions; Provide information aimed at owners struggling to pay the Council Tax Premium or need information e.g. at annual billing stage; Continue to raise awareness of Highland Trusted Trader Highland Trusted Trader The Highland Council	Empty Homes Service
3	Raise awareness amongst owners and communities of issues and options - and encourage productive relationships with owners, communities and services	Carry out media campaigns including: • key messages on issues & options (e.g. promotional banner of 'Turning Empty Houses into Homes') • Raising awareness & accessible links to Highland Council's web advice Promote awareness of Empty Homes Service across Highland Council and partner services so its use increases	Empty Homes Service
4	Streamlined accessible processes for reporting issues and accessing appropriate help & advice	Provide reporting 'portal' enabling: tailored signposting, advice & support - and data collection to assess strategic solutions; Streamline process for proof of eligibility for VAT 5% reduction on works on empty properties with <i>THC's Finance Services</i>	Empty Homes Service

5	Joint working with communities to better understand empty homes issues and options and establish approaches enabling them to: - prevent properties being long-term empty / unproductive and; - support community conversations which deliver change	Survey / consult with community representatives and engage with them around the options and issues identified. Agree activities with communities – possible options include: <i>Producing tools (e.g. template lease, letters; communication pack; pathways) for community representatives; Identifying sources for funding feasibility studies; Assessing scope for community-led projects; Sharing examples (e.g. Knoydart community) via Knowledge library HIE and similar tools; Testing out ways of helping communities to facilitate local conversations about under-used homes issues & solutions; Testing ways to increase local opportunities to purchase; Scoping out potential for local ‘Empty Homes Doctors’ (e.g. mapping context; assessing options; pathways to services).</i>	Empty Homes Service
6	Support communities significantly affected by housing shortages (due in part to unproductive homes) to have their need for homes met	Work with communities to understand & evidence their issues and identify all options for meeting their needs; Provide enhanced support to communities identifying issues within their local action / place plans e.g. flats over shops; town centre regeneration; redundant buildings.	Empty Homes Service
Target resources at approaches which effectively deliver homes:- - in communities experiencing high housing need alongside low supply. - and contribute to strategic priorities including homes for ‘key’ workers; rural re-population and area based regeneration.			
	Action	Milestones	Lead
7	Continue to use ring-fenced income raised by Premium Council Tax charge to: help resolve shortages and bring properties into use.	Meet income target and use to support the delivery of the Strategic Housing Investment Programme (e.g. via site and property purchases). Review options for providing financial assistance to bring properties into use and progress those which cost-effectively meet housing needs.	Highland Council
8	Provide Empty Homes Service and staff resources to support communities affected by empty and second homes; meet housing need and deliver the Strategy.	Fund officers within Housing Development Team & Housing Policy Team and continue to secure Scottish Government funding to deliver shared objectives.	Highland Council

9	Provide 'enhanced' Empty Homes Service support and assistance to owners who, and properties which, meet the priority criteria.	Priority criteria: a) Owners unable to take forward without THC support e.g. limited capacity due to health; reluctant etc. and: b) Property will meet an unmet housing need & strong indication that owner is committed to helping achieve this outcome or: c) Property causing significant nuisance to neighbours or: d) Council Service has requested help to trace owner and / or resolve Council debt.	Empty Homes Service
10	Effective joint working around empty properties causing significant nuisance – including Environmental Health Services, Planning & Building Control Services and Empty Homes Service	Establish and use structured case management processes and tools - and ensure complaints and priorities are progressed in a formal, timely and progressive manner and evidence is available for enforcement action (if required) e.g. CPOs; Maintain corporate Empty Homes Database to: help track progress and outcomes; underpin case management approach; provide evidence base and; support joint working. Provide tools enabling neighbours to tackle problematic nuisance properties; Consider opportunities to use Compulsory Purchase Orders following the Scottish Government review; Link into national activities to improve negotiation and enforcement tools e.g. Compulsory Sales Orders (CSOs).	Empty Homes Service
11	Maintain good cross service communication and joint working arrangement	Roles of different services & local operational links confirmed; Service operational representatives meet regularly to: 1. Co-ordinate activities re. properties identified as a priority 2. Put in place processes for streamlined joint working 3. Share learning to inform strategy and approaches.	Empty Homes Service / Council
12	Target resources effectively by: • improving our understanding of the impact of Highland's Empty Homes Service and strategic approaches. • maintaining an understanding of issues and using data intelligence, evidence and learning to identify potential options. • evaluating approaches being used by others and, in due course, progress	Gather and assess information from service users which provides an effective understanding of the impact of the Empty Homes Service. With Finance, agree on how best to track trends, evidence progress, understand what works. Further analyse data (e.g. the nature of exempted and discounted properties etc; influences affecting the time it takes for properties to get back into use) and use this to identify options which can deliver improvement.	Empty Homes Service

	options which can deliver against our aim.	Track and monitor the use of properties once they move back into use e.g. owner-occupied; rented; holiday let. Share practices, tools & learning with local authorities facing similar issues and Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP). For example –options to meet rural housing needs	
13	Continue to support: - property purchases for affordable housing (e.g. via Key Worker Fund) - community based organisations to lease or purchase properties.	Buy properties which meet Highland's Purchasing Scheme criteria ; Continue to explore leasing arrangements with public and private employers; Identify incentives to make selling to the public sector an attractive option (e.g. than via open market); Assist community-based organisations to secure leases; Assist communities to acquire 'ownerless' properties via the Ownerless Property Transfer Scheme (www.kltr.gov.uk/ownerless-property-transfer-scheme-opts/information-for-prospective-applicants/).	Empty Homes Service
14	Explore ways to make private renting a more feasible and attractive option for owners - and progress those which help deliver our aim	Scope out ways to improve rental property management options for owners e.g. property management services via social enterprises; Scope out options enabling owners to deliver private rent tenancies at mid-market / affordable rent levels.	Empty Homes Service
15	Help facilitate the national 'Matching' scheme (e.g. matching buyers or renters with property owners)	Link into the national Scottish Empty Homes Partnership scheme – and facilitate promotion to, and use by organisations, owners, etc in Highland (including estate / letting agents; Landlord Registration; use by major employers).	Empty Homes Service
16	Improve the success rate for tracing owners.	Continue to use the national genealogist service provided by Scottish Empty Homes Partnership – and explore links with the Council's Data Foundations Project; Establish approach & process (working with Environmental Health / Planning / Legal, Housing Investment Services).	Empty Homes Service
17	Support area-based regeneration	Explore potential mechanisms, and secure funding, to facilitate flats over shops.	Planning/Economic Development

18	Explore ways to increase opportunities arising from the long-term empty properties owned by land / estate owners	Raise awareness of the benefits to them and explore options with representative bodies and willing estates owners https://www.scottishlandandestates.co.uk/ e.g. via workshops	Empty Homes Service
19	Explore ways to work with solicitors / legal services and estate agents to help deliver our strategic aims	Jointly explore options for tackling barriers, delays and contributing e.g.: • Investigating titles, tracing wills / next of kin; assisting with estate administration. • Assisting in cases involving missing owners; lack of capacity; little or no proof of ownership documentation. • Assisting owners to access wide range of options (e.g. auction sales).	Empty Homes Service
20	Investigate ways to assist flat owners	Investigate options to assist with undertaking communal repairs / improvements to flats and buildings with shared features	Housing