

Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee

10.00am, Thursday, 1 December 2022

Empty Homes Annual Report

Executive/routine Wards Council Commitments	Routine All
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1. Recommendations

- 1.1 It is recommended that the Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee notes the contents of this report, which has been produced in response to a report approved by the Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee on 4 November 2021.

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Empty Homes Annual Report

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 The Council's Empty Homes Officer works to bring private sector empty homes back into use. On [4 November 2021](#) the Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee approved a motion for the preparation of a business case for the Empty Homes Officer (EHO) post to become a permanent role. It was proposed that the funding for this post should come from income generated from Council Tax and Council Tax debt arising from Empty Homes.
- 2.2 This report updates Committee on the appointment of an EHO on a permanent basis and provides an update by setting out the work of the EHO since 4 November 2021.

3. Background

- 3.1 An EHO post was first introduced on a pilot basis in 2019, for up to two years, jointly funded by the Council and the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership.
- 3.2 On [4 November 2021](#), the Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee considered an Empty Homes update which set out the potential to mainstream funding for the role of the EHO, detailed how the work of the EHO supports wider Council objectives on ending homelessness, and described the processes which are in place for following up debt recovery on empty properties.
- 3.3 Committee approved the following motion:
 - 3.3.1 To note the report, which had been produced in response to a report approved by the Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee on [14 January 2021](#); and
 - 3.3.2 To agree that a business case for the EHO post to continue, funded from income generated (as set out in 4.13 and 4.14), would be prepared for consideration as part of the 2022/23 budget setting process.

4. Main report

Permanent appointment of an Empty Homes Officer (EHO)

- 4.1 Following the Committee decision, on 4 November 2021, a business case was prepared to seek to appoint an EHO on a permanent basis. It was proposed that the funding for this post would come from Council Tax and Council Tax debt identified by the EHO arising from empty homes.
- 4.2 The business case was subsequently approved and, following a recruitment exercise, an EHO was appointed on a permanent basis in April 2022. The mainstreaming of the EHO role will ensure that Empty Homes continue to be specifically targeted to be brought back into use, while the role continues to develop and identify best practice and proactive methods of engagement with owners of empty homes.

Progress since 4 November 2021

- 4.3 Housing supply in Edinburgh remains under pressure in the wake of the pandemic and increasing demand. This, together with the economic pressures of rising inflation and interest rates, will continue to put people at the risk of homelessness. Any increase in housing stock contributes to mitigating these risks in Edinburgh.
- 4.4 Bringing empty homes into use can contribute to increasing the housing supply but, as previously reported, the owner occupied market in the city has been buoyant and therefore most empty homes being returned to use have remained in that sector.
- 4.5 The EHO has worked with colleagues from across the Council to resolve complaints and remedy issues resulting from long term empty homes. Examples of some of the activities carried out by the EHO include:
 - 4.5.1 Receiving complaints and reports from members of the public, internal and external stakeholders about empty homes in Edinburgh;
 - 4.5.2 Proactively identifying empty homes from Council systems or while visiting properties and/or areas affected by empty homes;
 - 4.5.3 Addressing the backlog of empty homes enquiries or complaints resulting from the pandemic where restrictions were a barrier for properties requiring physical visits or assessments;
 - 4.5.4 Successfully tracing and engaging owners of empty homes which have been empty in excess of 10 years and have generated numerous neighbour complaints;
 - 4.5.5 A pilot initiative including Environmental Health, Pest Control and Social Work teams arranged for the clearance of two empty properties where owners had been unable to do this themselves. This enabled these properties to be auctioned or otherwise sold, returning them to the housing market;
 - 4.5.6 Where an owners needs additional support because of vulnerabilities they have been given advice, guidance and support to assist in the process and practicalities of clearing and selling their properties;

- 4.5.7 Providing VAT reduction entitlement advice and guidance to owners seeking to renovate empty homes and bring them back into use;
- 4.5.8 Working with Council Tax teams to correct records, facilitate recovery and add empty homes premiums to properties which had not already been identified as empty homes; and
- 4.5.9 Engaging with the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, contributing to the development of the Empty Homes Framework and keeping abreast of best practice and legislative development.

Empty Homes reports received

- 4.6 The table below summarises the Empty Homes reports received by the Council since 2016, providing a breakdown of those still under active investigation and those which have been completed.

Year	Empty Homes report received	Active investigations	Investigations completed
2016	32	7	25
2017	71	13	58
2018	59	16	43
2019	88	28	60
2020	141	58	83
2021	183	58	125
2022 (to date)	143	76	67
Total	717	256	461

- 4.7 Analysis of a sample of 61 properties brought back into use after being empty homes since 1 January 2022 to date shows 48% have come back into use as owner occupied properties, 46% have been privately let and 6% have returned to use by the City of Edinburgh Council or via a Housing association.

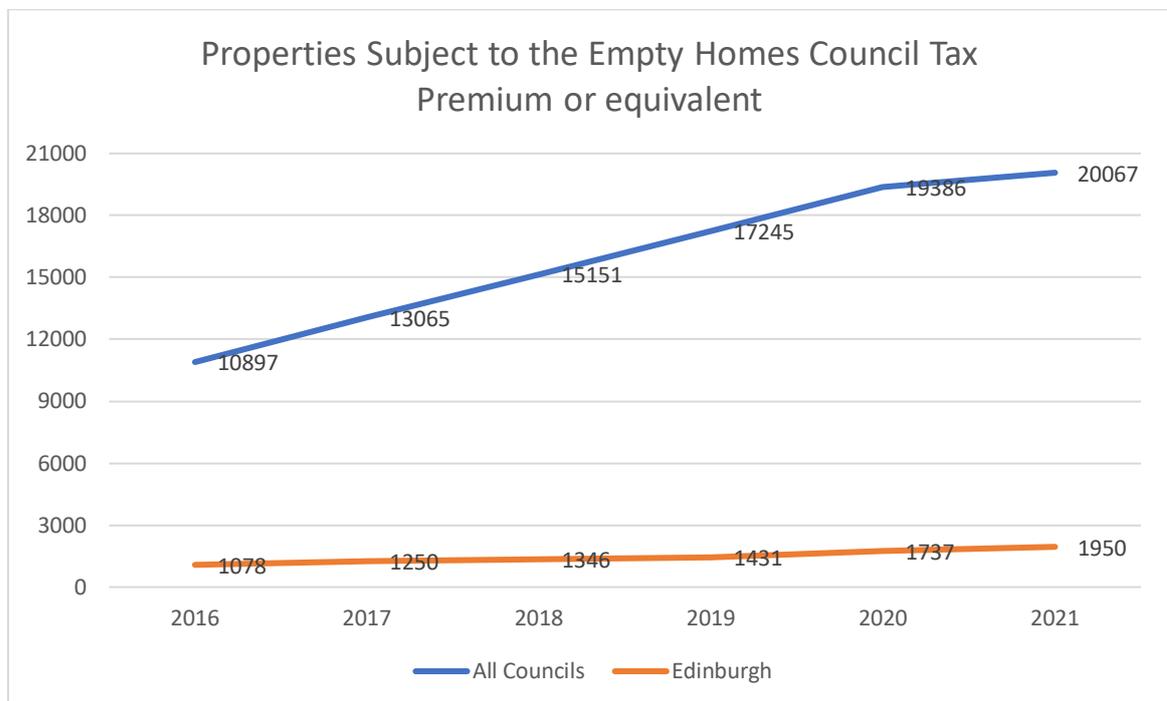
Income identified from unpaid Council Tax or Council Tax debt

- 4.8 The EHO role is funded by Council Tax and Council Tax debt arising from Empty Homes, which is a by-product of the investigation and case management of empty homes by the EHO. Since the figures were reported to the November 2021 Committee, the EHO has continued to work closely with Council Tax teams and identified a further £966,000 of unpaid Council Tax and Council Tax debt arising from empty homes. A full breakdown is provided below.

Council Tax debt identified by EHO	£370,000
Council tax arrears – Information identified by EHO	£122,000
Ongoing investigation net value (where more information is required before these can be passed on to Council Tax Teams)	£250,000
Deceased occupant or tenant /inactive cases identified by the EHO	£101,000
100% premiums added to Council Tax systems by EHO to date	£48,000
100% premiums yet to be added (est. value)	£75,000
Total value identified for recovery	£966,000

Moving Forward

- 4.9 1,950 properties are currently recorded by the Council as having been empty for more than one year, while not listed for sale or let and not being used as a second home. This is an increase of 233 properties since November 2021, which continues an upward trend which has been observed over the last five years. While this does reflect a national trend, it is intended that the EHO will investigate this trend aiming to intervene where possible to assist owners to bring these properties back in to use.



5. Next Steps

- 5.1 The role of the EHO will continue to be developed, with a number of active enquiries and new approaches being explored to bring as many empty homes back into use as possible.
- 5.2 Where barriers are identified, these will continue to be explored and discussed with partners, including the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, to identify opportunities or areas where a new approach to empty homes may be required.

6. Financial impact

- 6.1 Leaving a home empty costs money and loses money for the owner and the Council. This is money that could be being spent in the local economy, generating further additional expenditure as a result. It is estimated that the cost of leaving a two to three bed property empty is between £8,638 and £10,438 (rent loss, maintenance, insurance and Council Tax). Bringing an empty home back into use can also help prevent reactive spend associated with addressing anti-social behaviour and can have a positive impact on the value of neighbouring homes.

7. Stakeholder/Community Impact

- 7.1 Empty homes are more prone to anti-social behaviour than an occupied home as they can be entered more easily either by squatters or people looking to use the property for anti-social purposes or to commit anti-social acts. As a result, areas with concentrations of empty homes can trap local authorities and other public agencies into a spiral of reactive spend.
- 7.2 The EHO continues to work closely with colleagues in debt recovery in the council on empty homes and bringing in additional income through proactively identifying long-term empty homes where the 100% Council Tax premium can be applied. Work is also ongoing with Edinburgh Shared Repairs Service (helping to find owners and engage with them on shared repairs cases).
- 7.3 EHO advice and intervention has resulted in positive feedback from empty home owners.

8. Background reading/external references

- 8.1 [Empty Homes Update](#) – January 2021.
- 8.2 [Empty Homes Update](#) – November 2021.

9. Appendices

- 9.1 None.