

# Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee

10.00am, Tuesday, 27 February 2024

## Empty Homes Annual Report

Executive/routine  
Wards

Routine  
All

### 1. Recommendations

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- 1.1 It is recommended that Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee notes:
  - 1.1.1 The intention to recruit a second Empty Homes Officer for a trial period of 18 months using Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan funding;
  - 1.1.2 The intention to create a supply of additional rental properties to be used as suitable temporary accommodation for homeless households through this work; and
  - 1.1.3 That future updates on Empty Homes which have been returned to use will be provided within the Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee Business Bulletin.

#### Paul Lawrence

Executive Director of Place

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## Empty Homes Annual Report

### 2. Executive Summary

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- 2.1 The Council's Empty Homes Officer (EHO) works to bring private sector empty homes back into use. This report updates Committee on the ongoing work of the EHO and the current level of Empty Homes in the city, discharges the [action](#) agreed at Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee on 5 December 2023, and proposes to provide future updates via the Committee Business Bulletin.

### 3. Background

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- 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, Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee considered an Empty Homes Update [report](#) which proposed mainstream funding for the role of the EHO. This was agreed as part of the budget setting process in February 2022.
- 3.3 An EHO was appointed on a permanent basis in April 2022. This has ensured that Empty Homes continue to be specifically targeted to be brought back into use, while the service continues to develop and identify best practice and proactive methods of engagement with owners of Empty Homes in Edinburgh.

On 5 December 2023 the Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee approved an action which called for a report within one cycle exploring the benefits and costs of increasing the size of the Empty Homes Team (e.g. in Glasgow there are 4 Empty Homes Officers as opposed to 1 in Edinburgh).

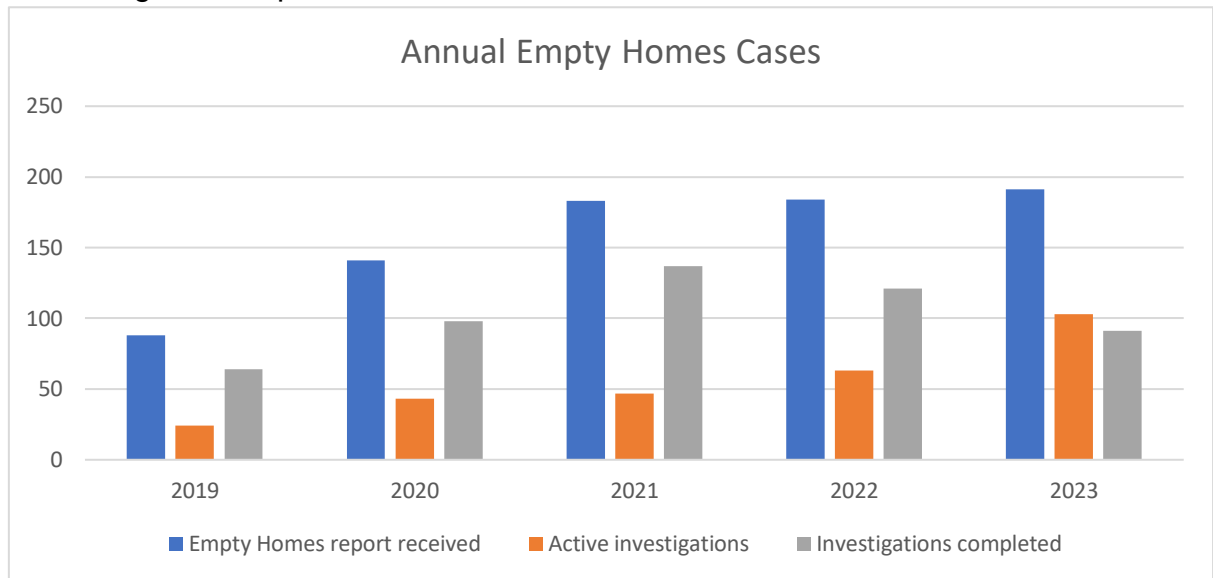
### 4. Main report

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#### Empty Homes in Edinburgh

- 4.1 A recent report by the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership concluded that there were 6,898 empty homes in Edinburgh, and that 221 had been brought back in to use by the Council's EHO since 2019.

- 4.2 The EHO continues to deal with a significant caseload in the region of 305 cases. These cases are typically generated from complaints from members of the public. Annual figures are provided in the chart below.



### Causes of Empty Homes in Edinburgh

- 4.3 Many properties have become empty through a combination of different factors, and the main reasons based on a review of the current caseload are attached at Appendix 1. The most common reason is that the owner has moved on without selling the property, or that there have been estate/inheritance issues.
- 4.4 The EHO has recorded reasons why some properties continue to be Empty Homes in Edinburgh (Appendix 2). Analysis shows that a significant number of homes are empty due to owners being unwilling to either sell or rent their property. Many owners are retaining the property in the hope of redevelopment or long-term investment, have emotional or sentimental ties to the property, or do not have capacity or do not want to go through the process of bringing an Empty Home back into use.
- 4.5 Establishing the outcomes when an Empty Home is brought back into use is often difficult. Where the EHO could identify an outcome, this has been recorded since September 2022 (Appendix 3). In the majority of cases the property has become owner occupied or privately let.

### Engagement and Best Practice

- 4.6 An important part of the role of the EHO is to continue to develop new ways of working and best practice. As part of this proactive approach, the EHO has contributed to the following workstreams over the last 12 months. Further detail is provided at Appendix 4.

4.6.1 [Council Tax for second and empty homes, and non-domestic rates thresholds;](#)

- 4.6.2 [Scottish Government Empty Homes Audit](#);
- 4.6.3 Scottish Parliament Tenement Working Group;
- 4.6.4 Development of a Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) business case; and
- 4.6.5 Encouraging appropriate use of Property Auctions.

### **Joint Working**

- 4.7 Due to the complex nature of many cases, the EHO routinely works with a range of internal and external partners to bring empty homes back into use. One recent case involved joint working with Social Work, Environmental Health, Pest Control and Housing to deal with a long-term Empty Home, where the resident had to move out into temporary accommodation due to the condition of the property and associated health issues. Coordinated working resulted in the home being sold at auction and the owner being rehoused permanently into suitable accommodation, freeing up capacity for temporary accommodation and producing associated savings. This also brought the home back into use, provided appropriate accommodation for the owner and improved the local amenity for residents.
- 4.8 The EHO works in conjunction with Edinburgh Shared Repair Service (ESRS), typically identifying owners of empty properties where communal repairs are needed, and identifying potentially dangerous properties where ESRS may need to carry out emergency works.
- 4.9 The EHO continues to work closely with Council colleagues in debt recovery to bring in additional income through proactively identifying long-term Empty Homes where the 100% Council Tax premium can be applied.

### **Homelessness and Empty Homes**

- 4.10 As of 19 January 2024, there were 4,929 homeless households in Edinburgh. Around 1,300 of these households are in what is considered to be unsuitable accommodation, such as Bed and Breakfast accommodation. Placing people in unsuitable accommodation means that the Council is in breach of the Homeless Persons (Unsuitable Accommodation) (Scotland) Order 2014 (as amended). This type of accommodation is also significantly more expensive than other types of accommodation used, and there is social and economic benefit from reducing the Council's exposure to this area of compliance and financial risk.
- 4.11 On 5 December 2023, Committee approved a report detailing high level actions deemed necessary to tackle the Housing Emergency declared by Council on 2 November 2023. A key aim of this plan is to reduce the number of homeless households in the city, and within that overall number to reduce the number of homeless households in unsuitable temporary accommodation.
- 4.12 Committee asked for an assessment of costs and benefits from having additional Empty Homes Officers. As stated in section 4.1, since 2019, 221 empty homes have been brought back in to use, and 45% of those returned to the rental market.

- 4.13 Projected costs and benefits for one additional officer for a 12 month period are as follows based on the assumption that 44 empty homes will be brought into use every year with 50% to be used as suitable temporary accommodation:

Description	Cost / (Saving)
Empty Homes Officer - 1FTE @ GR7	£52,000
Net saving from reduced use of unsuitable temporary accommodation	-£245,000
<b>Net annual saving</b>	<b>-£193,000</b>

- 4.14 The Service Director, Housing and Homelessness is proposing the use of Rapid Rehousing Transition funding to recruit an additional EHO for 18 months. The aim will be to create a supply of Empty Homes into the market that can be used for providing suitable temporary accommodation for homeless households, through the development of a 'match maker' scheme, which may be operated by the Council or in collaboration with the Council's Private Sector Leasing partner (Link Group). This will seek to be deliberate in matching homeless households to potential landlords. There may also be scope for using the Council's acquisitions policy to increase the number of properties in its own stock.

## 5. Next Steps

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- 5.1 The work of the EHO will continue as part of business as usual, with recruitment of an additional officer for 18 months currently underway. It is proposed that future updates to Committee on Empty Homes will be provided via the Committee Business Bulletin.

## 6. Financial impact

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- 6.1 Leaving a home empty costs money and loses money for the owner and the Council. This money could be being spent in the local economy, generating further additional expenditure as a result. It is estimated that the cost to a homeowner of leaving a two to three bed property empty is between £8,638 and £10,438 per annum (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.
- 6.2 The additional EHO will be funded from additional one-off Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan funding provided by the Scottish Government. Funding exists to appoint this post for an 18-month period with estimated costs of £52,000 a year.

- 6.3 Any savings generated from bringing empty homes into use as suitable temporary accommodation, with corresponding reductions in more costly unsuitable temporary accommodation, will help the service to operate within the 2024/25 approved budget. The estimated net annual savings based on 22 properties being brought into use for this purpose are £245,000.
- 6.4 Progress will be monitored, and any financial benefits will be factored into the revenue monitoring reports presented to Committee.

## **7. Equality and Poverty Impact**

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- 7.1 Matters described in this report have no relationship to the public sector general equality duty, thus there is no direct equalities impact arising from this report.

## **8. Climate and Nature Emergency Implications**

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- 8.1 Bringing Empty Homes back in to use can help to drive down the carbon emissions caused by housing and housing construction. Where the home is retrofitted to improve energy performance, this can also help to drive down the cost of heating and reduce the operational carbon emitted.

## **9. Risk, policy, compliance, governance and community impact**

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- 9.1 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.
- 9.2 The EHO continues to work closely with colleagues in debt recovery 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 ESRS - helping to find owners and engage with them on shared repairs cases.
- 9.3 EHO advice and intervention has resulted in positive feedback from Empty Home owners.

## **10. Background reading/external references**

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- 10.1 [Empty Homes Annual Report](https://democracy.edinburgh.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CIId=141&MIId=5691)  
<https://democracy.edinburgh.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CIId=141&MIId=5691> – December 2022.
- 10.2 [Council Tax for second and empty homes, and non-domestic rates thresholds](#) – Scottish Government Consultation

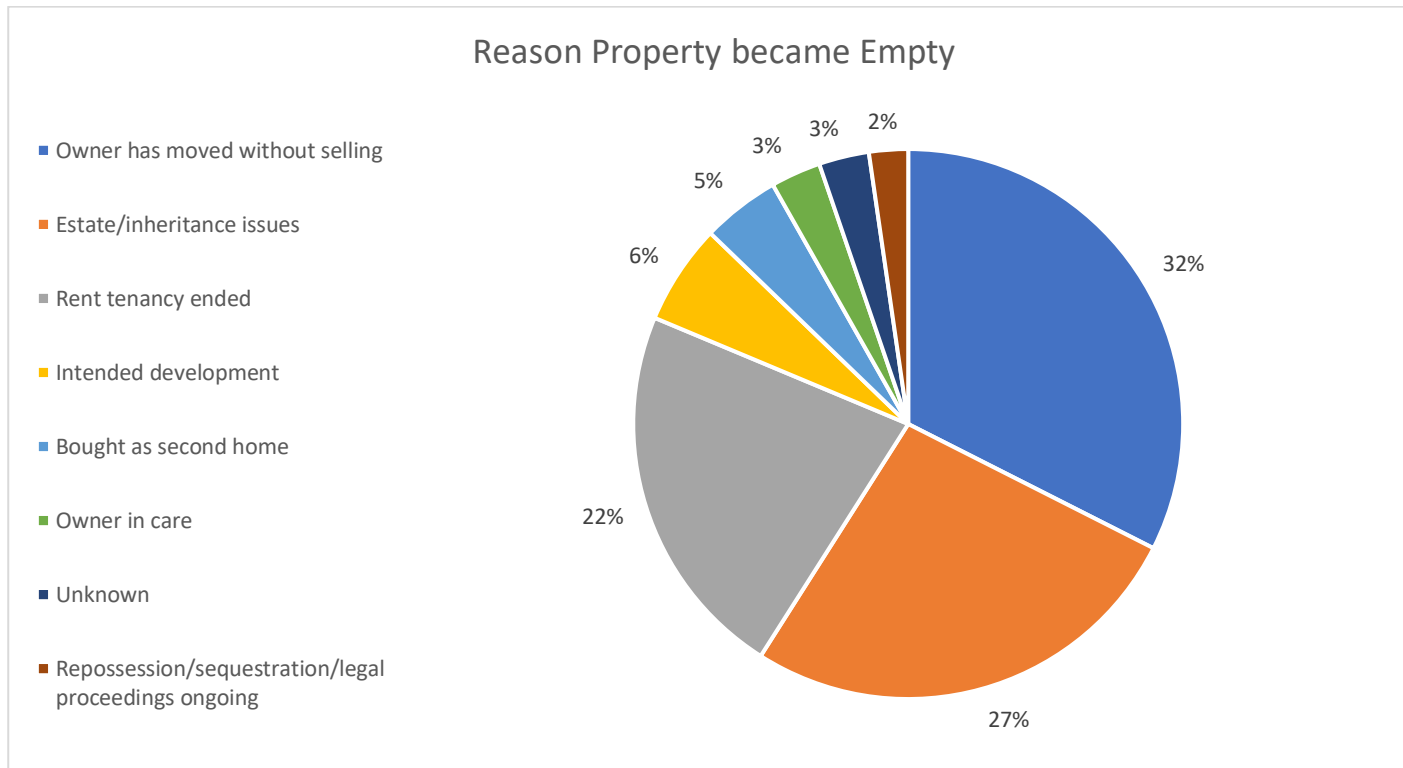
- 10.3 [Scottish Government Empty Homes Audit](#) - An independent audit of long-term empty homes policy and interventions in Scotland

## **11. Appendices**

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- 11.1 Appendix 1 – Reasons why property became empty.
- 11.2 Appendix 2 – Reasons why property remains empty.
- 11.3 Appendix 3 – Outcomes where Empty Home brought back into use.
- 11.4 Appendix 4 – further detail on engagement and Best Practice workstreams.

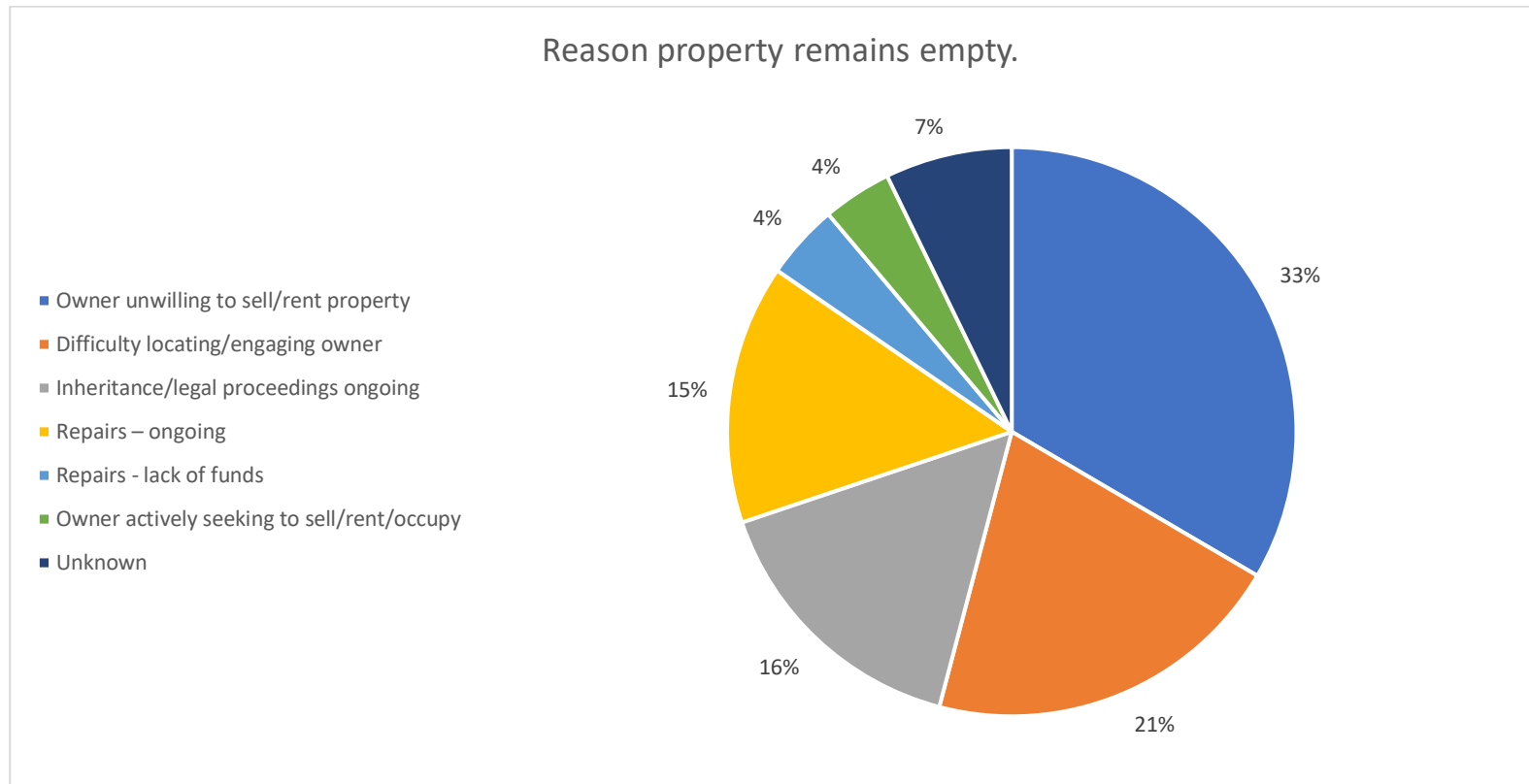
## Appendix 1





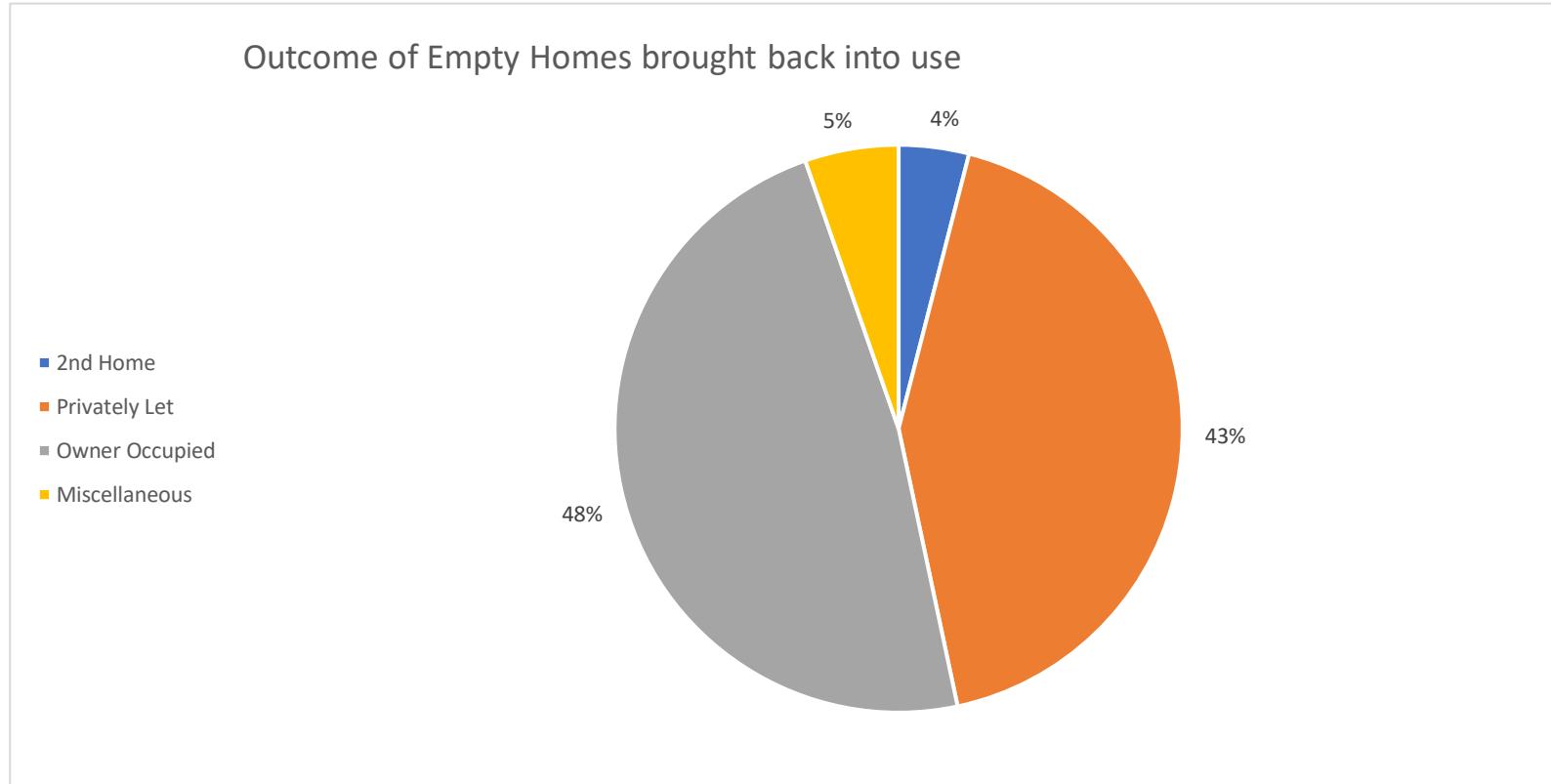
<b>Reason property became empty</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%age</b>
Owner has moved without selling	99	32%
Estate/inheritance issues	81	27%
Rent tenancy ended	68	22%
Intended development	18	6%
Bought as second home	14	5%
Owner in care	9	3%
Unknown	9	3%
Repossession/sequestration/legal proceedings ongoing	7	2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>305</b>	

## Appendix 2



<b>Reason property remains empty</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%age</b>
Owner unwilling to sell/rent property	102	33%
Difficulty locating/engaging owner	63	21%
Inheritance/legal proceedings ongoing	48	16%
Repairs – ongoing	45	15%
Repairs - lack of funds	13	4%
Owner actively seeking to sell/rent/occupy	12	4%
Unknown	22	7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>305</b>	

### Appendix 3



Outcome of Empty Homes brought back into use	Total	%age
2nd Home	3	4.0%
Privately Let	32	42.7%
Owner Occupied	36	48.0%
Miscellaneous	4	5.3%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b><u>75</u></b>	

## Appendix 4

### 1. [Council Tax for second and empty homes, and non-domestic rates thresholds](#)

This consultation sought views on giving local authorities the power to increase council tax on second homes and empty homes, as well as considering whether the current non-domestic rates thresholds for self-catering accommodation remain appropriate.

### 2. [Scottish Government Empty Homes Audit](#)

An independent audit of long-term empty homes policy and interventions in Scotland

### 3. **Scottish Parliament Tenement Working Group**

In conjunction with ESRS, the EHO has participated in the Subgroups of the Scottish Parliament Tenement Working Group on Tenement Maintenance. This also included attending an ESRS/Under One Roof Tenement Event providing information and advice for residents affected by empty homes.

### 4 **Development of a Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) business case**

The EHO has identified properties which may be suitable for CPOs as perhaps the only realistic option to bring them back into use. Procedures and best practice used by other local authorities have been reviewed, including case studies elsewhere in Scotland. However, due to the cost of properties in Edinburgh, and without an identified budget, this option has not been able to be progressed at this time.

### 5 **Encouraging appropriate use of Property Auctions**

The EHO has been engaging with a number of owners about the appropriate use of property auctions as an easier option to sell Empty Homes. This option can be appealing where owners are not required to bring their properties up to a 'show' standard for sale, requiring very little input in most cases. In total to date, five properties have been sold via auction following this approach, including properties which were derelict, had been empty for more than 10 years, and had been subject to hoarding, pests and other structural concerns. In all five cases, these properties have been brought back into use.