

Ariane Burgess, MSP
Convener, Local Government, Housing and Planning
Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Dear Ms Burgess,

RE: Housing Emergency

Thank you for your correspondence of 28 June 2024 seeking information on the void or unlettable properties in our area.

The Comhairle is a stock transfer authority and no longer has any housing stock, so we are unable to give data on void and unlettable properties. However, I have provided some information on vacant/empty homes in our area generally and hope it may be of some assistance.

You will be aware the percentage of vacant homes in the Outer Hebrides is significantly higher than the Scottish average. In June of this year, the National Records of Scotland outlined in its *Households and Dwellings in Scotland, 2023* publication, that 8% of dwellings in the Outer Hebrides were vacant, in comparison to 3.4% in Scotland.

Normally we would be able to cross reference this data against our Council Tax (CT) records and the Housing information that we hold in order to give current context, but the Comhairle was subject to a cyber-attack in November 2023 and we are still rebuilding systems owing to significant data loss.

Our Empty Homes Officer has been able to supply data from October 2023 via the monthly CT update that he receives, and it outlines the situation at that point. There were 1,206 empty properties, and these are tabled in the Appendix included with this letter, with further detail below on the most problematic categories.

Standard Empty & Long-Term Empty

The category with the greatest number of empty properties is “Long-Term Empty Premium” with 434. These are properties that have been empty for 12 months or more. Owners are assisted for up to 12 months in the first instance with a 10% reduction in CT once the property becomes void. Thereafter, double CT is applied with a view to encouraging owners to bring their empty property back into use. The same principle applies to the Standard Empty category (Private Rented Sector), of which there are 107.

Liabe Party Deceased - No Grant of Confirmation Made

There are 197 void properties against this category. Properties generally remain empty when Grant of Confirmation cannot be agreed between family members owing to conflict, or potential inheritors take a considerable length of time to be traced, or to respond to legal communication. Our Empty Homes Officer works proactively with companies like Fraser & Fraser (Genealogists and International Probate Researchers) and Finders International, to trace relatives where possible and attempt to offer advice and assistance in returning properties to active use. These companies offer a free service to Local Authorities.

Empty & Unfurnished Agricultural

We are aware of 158 properties in this category, where properties remain tied to their associated croft, but they are no longer habited. They are occasionally used for agricultural storage or left to fall into disrepair. What has most often happened in such instances is that a plot has been feued from the croft, a new house built on the feu, and the croft house eventually becomes void once the tenant dies. The tenancy of the croft might pass to the individual in the feued house, and they wish to retain the croft. In order to sell the house, they would have to decroft to access the deed for the house. These matters can be complex and costly, and there are often emotional ties to these former croft house, so there are barriers to bringing these properties back into use.

Receiving Care Elsewhere

There are 41 instances where properties are void because the occupier is receiving care in a care home or with family. If in a care home, the property may be tied to care charges and there is a process to go through, which may be lengthy and requires sensitive handling.

Empty & Unfurnished

This category includes amongst others, a small number of social houses, which are at the Change of Tenancy point. HHP, our only mainstream Registered Social Landlord, works hard to keep void properties to a minimum. HHP reported a slight increase in void loss from 0.5% in 2022/23 to 0.78% in 2023/24 owing to the implementation of a new Housing Management System which resulted in a period of two weeks where properties were not able to be allocated. HHP reported 60 low demand properties during 2023/24 – a drop from 80 in the previous year. These tend to be in rural areas where access to services can be problematic. Void performance is within target.

The main strategies we are deploying to address the level of vacant homes in our area is via our Empty Homes Service which has been in place since October 2018, in partnership with the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership. Our Empty Homes Officer gives advice and assistance on restoring and enabling owners with empty homes to get to the “lights on” stage. He gives advice on VAT, Council Tax, crofting, renovation, repair & maintenance, insulation grant works, property surveys, auction, and so on. There are currently 318 active cases receiving assistance.

Tighean Innse Gall, our local development agent, is also working with the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership to bring empty properties back into use for the Rent-to-Buy market. It is hoped that 12 empty homes will be brought back into effective use for affordable housing over the period of the

next Local Housing Strategy. Purchase costs on the open market are currently prohibitive and empty property condition is problematic, but work continues.

I hope this information is of assistance to you.

Your sincerely,

Malcolm Burr
Chief Executive

APPENDIX 1 – Detail on Empty Homes, October 2023

Categorisation		Number	Further Detail
1	Receiving Care Elsewhere	41	Care Home, or with family.
2	Empty & Unfurnished	33	This includes a small number of social houses at point of tenancy change.
3	Empty & Unfurnished Agricultural	158	Generally used as storage on a croft.
4	Empty Property Held for a Minister of Religion	9	Manse associated with a Church.
5	Liable Party Deceased - Grant of Confirmation Made	9	-
6	Liable Party Deceased - No Grant of Confirmation Made	197	No Grant made yet, or parties have not accepted Grant.
7	Lighthouses	6	Lighthouse automated and house owned by Northern Lighthouse Board.
8	Long Term Empty	148	Owner-occupier - 10% reduction for 12 months.
9	Long Term Empty Premium (over 12m)	434	Double CT - applies to all homes.
10	Prohibited	23	Unfit for habitation.
11	Occupier in Prison	3	-
12	Repossession	3	-
13	Six Months Exemption	17	Undergoing standard renovation - 6m exemption, then 50% CT between 6-12 months.
14	Standard Empty	107	Private Rented Sector - 10% reduction for 12 months.
15	Demolition Order Sought	9	Owner has applied for demolition order.
16	Undergoing Major Works	9	Case by case basis - generally 50% CT for first 6 months, then standard up to 12 months, however, a 6 month initial exemption might be applied depending on house condition and work required.
Total		1206	