Empty homes can have a negative impact on the local economy and our communities. Bringing empty properties back into use helps to reverse these negative effects. The benefits to Council’s include an increased supply of affordable housing, supporting communities, a revitalised property market, increased revenue through collection of council tax, reduced requirement for legal action and less intervention required by officials. The issue of empty homes can have devastating effect on communities. They provide a focus for anti-social behaviour. Causing blight in neighbourhoods if the property condition is neglected. They can undermine wider regeneration activity in the local area and reduce the size of the effective housing stock in the region. The value of neighbouring properties can be impacted greatly.

There are many reasons why homes remain empty. Financial issues, unable to afford repairs or the costs to sell a property. Lack of knowledge on how to sell, rent or repair a property. Mental health issues, family disputes and occasionally a reluctance to deal with the situation. Low demand in the housing market either for sale or rent.

Dumfries & Galloways most recent Housing Need and Demand Assessment analysed key housing market drivers, past and present, in order to estimate future housing need and demand. The HNDA provided evidence of existing housing need experienced by households and estimated future housing need for those yet to form. Future need is mainly driven by household formation which, by its very nature, has to be met through the provision of additional housing units. Most additional housing units are provided through new build, but delivery can also be made by changes in housing stock, such as conversions and bringing empty properties back into use.

Empty properties can be a localised problem that requires individual solutions on a case by case basis. RSL’s may see an increase in void stock in areas of low demand in rural areas for example or with unpopular house types. In some circumstances RSLs could consider demolition and reprovision to ensure their business plans remain robust. The success of this approach has been demonstrated in areas of North West Dumfries and Central Stranraer. The areas in Dumfries & Galloway where this is a particular problem include parts of Lochside in Dumfries, Upper Nithsdale, Central Annan, Ecclefechan and the Machars. Before intervention is made, RSLs undertake an options appraisal including consultation with those communities likely to be affected. Following this, the Council may then consider including projects of this nature in its SHIP.

Dumfries & Galloway Council supports many different initiatives and partnerships to facilitate bringing empty homes back into use including the following:
• The Council Tax Long Term Empty Property Tariff.
• The Council’s Town Centre Living Fund
• The community led Midsteeple Quarter project in Dumfries Town Centre.
• The work of the Dumfries and Galloway Small Communities Housing Trust (DGSCHT) as a key strategic partner.
• The Council supports local RSLs to buy-back former local authority homes so that they can modernise whole blocks of flats.
• Providing support to owners and local communities to reduce the number of Empty Homes in our region.
• Participating in the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP), hosted by Shelter Scotland.
• The Council led ‘DG Empty Homes Partnership’ which brings together services with direct operational experience to increase the Council’s ability to tackle empty homes.

The Local Government Finance (Unoccupied Properties etc.) (Scotland) Act 2012 allowed the Council to introduce a levy that took effect in December 2013. This means the owner is charged 200% Council Tax if their property has been empty for 12 months or more. There are a number of specific exemptions to the application of the levy, for example if evidence can be provided that it is being actively marketed for sale or is being renovated. The core purpose of the policy is to act as an incentive for owners to bring their property back into use. The Council also funds a post from the additional income generated to help bring empty homes back into use through a range of support methods targeted at property owners.

The Council’s Town Centre Living Fund makes a significant contribution to town centre regeneration by bringing empty properties back into use and increasing the availability of affordable residential accommodation. Dumfries & Galloway Council has made an annual commitment through the Council Plan to invest £1million a year in a Town Centre Living Fund. The Council’s Development Plan recognises the changing economic climate may result in commercial and office buildings becoming available which would provide opportunities for re-use. Adapting and finding new uses for buildings is supported in principle through the planning process. It is helping to create high quality places that consider the unique characteristics and diversity of Dumfries & Galloway.

A quarter of the TCLF is allocated specifically to tackle the problem of Empty Homes within the town centre boundaries. The most common hurdle for empty home owners is the cost of bringing their property back into use. A survey of empty property owners was carried out by the Council with the majority of respondents indicating they require financial assistance to carry out physical works to bring them up to the required standard. The fund is open to private landlords and private owners who intend to occupy the property.
The Midsteeple Quarter is an innovative community led initiative facilitated by the Stove Network in Dumfries. It received a funding award through the Council’s Town Centre Living Fund to help bring a group of empty buildings on Dumfries High Street back into use. This will result in a community run mixed development that re-imagines the use of this space. The Council’s funding is intended to allow Dumfries High Street Limited (community ownership organisation) to seek additional finance from a range of external sources. The first stage was to acquire a prominent publicly owned building under the terms of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. This innovative initiative has a national profile because it is piloting a new approach to town centre regeneration. The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership have supported this area of work, re-affirming the importance of housing in these locations. The learning from this work could result in similar projects being taken forward across our region and nationally.

Activity of this kind can stimulate a whole chain of inward investment, supportive behaviours, business growth, added vitality and increased civic confidence. This will help make public places more welcoming and support new fledgling attractions and enterprises. This concept provides a new opportunity to help re-establish our town centres as community spaces where a broader range of people choose to live in close proximity to facilities, schools and existing transport infrastructure.

Dumfries & Galloway Council’s Development Plan supports housing proposals in the countryside. A £25 million Rural Housing Fund has been created at a national level. It aims to increase the supply of affordable housing of all tenures in rural Scotland and contribute towards the target to deliver 50,000 affordable homes by 2021.

Many of the bids to the RHF in our region have been focussed on the refurbishment of existing properties in our villages. Examples include the Old Bank in Wigtown and a premise in Moniaive, where local groups are being supported by the DGSCHT to develop community-led housing.

The problem of empty homes requires joint working between a number of Council services and engagement with some external partners. DG Empty Homes Partnership meets to examine empty homes cases across the region, working to bring them back into use. Participants include Development Management, Building Control, Environmental Health, Ward Workers, Legal Services, Shelter Scotland, and Registered Social Landlords.

Enforcement powers are rarely used by Dumfries & Galloway Council and very much seen as a last resort. The starting point for is always to engage positively with the owner of the property or land owners to seek to identify solutions and investment required to make improvements. Although the Council has used Works Notices, Maintenance Orders, Demolition Orders and Amenity Notices enforcement is time consuming, labour intensive and expensive and does not always produce the desired
outcome. The use enforcement is a significant step that must be carefully considered and balanced between the benefits of owners and others with an interest.

The Council would like to encourage the Scottish Government to reopen bids to the national Town Centre Empty Homes Fund. The budget was intended to create affordable homes for sale and rent by converting disused commercial premises. It also targeted long-term empty homes needing renovation to make them habitable.