1. What, in your view, are the main causes of empty homes?

A survey conducted in December 2018 of all empty home owners, which had a one-third response rate, found that the majority of empty properties were purchased by local people (often residing in the same town as the empty property). These properties were initially purchased to renovate and for the owner to move into. A small percentage of these changed over the time of renovation and the decision was made to sell or rent it out privately.

Buying an empty property to purposively renovate can take time and survey respondents told us that this often happened over a 1-4 year period. This reflects the numbers of empty properties in East Lothian, where we see the numbers of properties empty for 4 years or more decline substantially.

East Lothian has few properties which are long term empty, 30 in total, 22 which have been empty for 7 years or over, and 8 properties which have been empty 10 years or over. Those properties that have been identified as long term empty are due to relationship breakdowns or the owner has inherited the property and does not want to sell the property or it has become too big a task or cost to repair the property.

2. Is this a problem which affects all tenures of housing? Please provide further information to explain your answer.

The majority of empty homes in East Lothian are owner-occupied rather than social rented properties. The financial impact of having a void property means that Housing Associations or Local Authorities are less likely to have a large amount of empty properties.

The Private Rented Sector in East Lothian is in high demand, with prices being driven upwards. This suggests that there is very little room for PRS properties to be empty for a sustained period of time – unless undergoing renovation.

Therefore, empty homes is a largely a problem of the owner-occupied sector in East Lothian.

3. What is the impact on communities in areas where there are large numbers of empty homes?

Empty Homes are scattered through-out East Lothian with no one area having a high density of Empty Properties. The impact on communities is therefore very low. However, having one long term empty property in an area can attract vandalism, crime and generally have a negative impact. The impact of long term empty properties is often most acute for immediate neighbours especially where absent owners do not heat/ maintain/contribute to communal costs.
4. Is the issue of empty homes a problem in particular areas and if so, why?
Empty Homes are scattered throughout East Lothian with no one area having a high density of Empty Properties.

Table x: Length of Time Empty by Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>1-2 years</th>
<th>3-4 years</th>
<th>5-6 years</th>
<th>7-8 years</th>
<th>9-10 years</th>
<th>10+ years</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dunbar and East Linton</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fa'side</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haddington &amp; Lammermuir</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musselburgh</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Berwick Coastal</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preston Seton Gosford</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>67</strong></td>
<td><strong>41</strong></td>
<td><strong>5</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>7</strong></td>
<td><strong>8</strong></td>
<td><strong>135</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>49.6</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Empty Homes, particularly long-term empty homes have a greater negative impact on town centres where they lower amenity value, especially where condition or maintenance are an issue. In East Lothian, town centre properties are generally flatted or traditional tenements were issues of communal maintenance and general dilapidation is an issue. This is exacerbated by absent/delinquent owners where contributions may not be made to common costs where leaks etc can go unreported for prolonged periods of time. However, it is important to note that empty homes are no more prevalent in town centres or rural areas in East Lothian than other areas.

5. Are you aware of any areas which have made progress in addressing the issue of empty homes and if so, what other local authorities could learn?

As above our empty properties are scattered throughout the county therefore there is no one area which has a significant problem with empty properties within East Lothian. We deal with empty properties on an ad-hoc basis when a property is flagged by a neighbour or is in a condition that it is a danger to the public. However, progression of these properties through advice given by East Lothian is difficult to measure.

6. How effective are current tools open to local authorities/central government to deal with empty homes? Should they have more powers?

The tools available from Shelter Scotland to provide advice and information to owners of empty properties has been invaluable to Council staff. However in terms of powers to enforce or to reduce the amount of time a property is empty for whatever reason, this has come from Council Tax powers in increasing the rate an empty property is charged. This alone does not combat empty properties. Powers such as CPO’s are expensive. A compulsory sale order which would force the property to market would be of more use.

East Lothian Council previously shared an Empty Homes Officer with Midlothian Council 2012-2015. This post saw 30 homes brought back into use, but no use of
Empty Homes Fund (which seeks to bring empty homes back into use in the social rented sector). This Officer was able to proactively identify empty properties. However, since 2015 and the responsibility of Empty Homes sitting within Strategy and Development Team, the rate of properties being brought back into use has not diminished. This may be due to the fact that empty homes are not a massive issue in East Lothian, with owners progressing the properties into use naturally.

7. Should there be more enforcement powers for local authorities/central government to deal with the issue? If so, what could these be?

Enforcement should be in place for local authorities to either purchase or take ownership of a property that has been empty for 5 or more years, and the owner has no intention of living in the property or selling it. This would incentivise an owner who has bought a property to renovate and ensure that the work is carried out but also giving them time to do the work.

8. Is there enough information/data to provide an accurate picture of empty homes in Scotland? If not, how could this be improved?

Maintaining up to date and accurate data of empty properties in Scotland is difficult. Council Tax data is only ever useful on that day, as properties come in and out of use frequently. Contact details for owners of empty homes are not always readily available and there is no standardised approach to collecting information cross-local authorities. A national database which requires owners of empty properties for more than 6 months to register and keep their details up to date would allow Officers to target empty properties more efficiently as well as having a more accurate data log.