LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE
CALL FOR VIEWS ON EMPTY HOMES IN SCOTLAND
SUBMISSION FROM COMHAIRLE NAM EILEAN SIAR

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

In the Outer Hebrides there are several factors which contribute to the volume of empty homes, but the main causes include depopulation, in addition to an aging population and a fragile economy. Contributing factors are outlined further below:

Depopulation

Long term demographic trends such as the “brain drain” – young adults leaving the islands to study – or adults leaving with their families to secure better employment prospects, and ultimately not returning, has contributed to the depopulation of many townships throughout the Outer Hebrides. In addition to this, a move to the centres of population in the islands themselves has also contributed to the volume of empty homes in rural areas.

Aging Population & Societal Change

The Comhairle’s current Local Housing Strategy (LHS 2017-22) highlights the issue of our aging population in that over the next 15 or so years, the population is expected to decrease, but the volume of older people as a percentage of that population is expected to increase. Older people have increasingly complex needs and require specialist care either at home or in a care home setting, and this in turn means that more homes will be vacated. In past decades, older persons either moved in with family members within their townships, or sons/daughters moved in parents as they aged and required additional assistance, but crucially, they remained within these townships. Nowadays, owing to changes in habits and depopulation, as outlined above, it is customary for elderly persons with additional needs to be moved into a care home, leaving the former home empty, and often subject to complex claims for care home fees, which means the home could remain empty for a considerable period of time before an outcome is reached. This can lead to disrepair, and render the property undesirable and difficult to sell or re-inhabit.

Economic Issues

Traditional industries such as crofting, fishing and tweed weaving have been in decline for some time now and people are moving to population centres to take up different kinds of employment, or work away from home, for example, in the oil industry. In addition to this, high fuel costs and low incomes throughout the Outer Hebrides have contributed to many families not having surplus disposable income to
assist with repair or renovation costs required to keep older homes at a tolerable standard. When they eventually become empty following the death of the inhabitant or their move to a care home, the home is in a considerable state of disrepair, and whomever the property is left to may not have the finances to bring it back to a liveable or lettable standard.

*Holiday Homes*

Often when a property is inherited and any investment is made to bring it up to a lettable standard, the financial outlay can only be recouped by renting the property out as a short-term holiday let. The property then stands empty outwith the traditional letting season and there is no incentive for the owner to consider long-term letting owing to poor returns.

*Infrastructure and Facilities*

A lack of infrastructure and facilities, i.e. schools, transport, has also contributed to the empty home problem in the islands. In this era of contracting public resources, it is difficult to justify the retention of schools with small school rolls, or several bus runs a day with one or two people per journey. When infrastructure and facilities are reduced, affected townships become less desirable.

*Emotional Attachment*

Many empty homes throughout the islands stand empty for the simple reason that the person who inherited the property has an emotional attachment to it, particularly if it was the old family home and they no longer live in the islands. This is a particularly problematic issue as they may be planning to return at some point later in life, when they are older or retired, thus adding to an aging population.

*Inheritance Issues*

Occasionally, and owing to archaic inheritance norms, where it was customary for the firstborn son to inherit the family home or croft, many elderly people in the islands failed to make a will and died intestate. If they are no living children, or if there is a dispute in respect of the estate, it can take years for probate to be resolved, so the property stands empty and falls into disrepair.

Many of the above factors re the cause of empty homes are interrelated and complex but they are the main causes we are faced with in the Outer Hebrides.
2. Is this a problem which affects all tenures of housing? Please provide further information to explain your answer.

This problem primarily affects owner-occupier homes. Proportionally there is greater owner-occupation in the Hebrides (89.2% in 2015), with a large number of these homes originating from the crofting landholding system, 70% of which were built after the Second World War. These homes are often large, detached two-storey or bungalow types and have increasing issues with energy efficiency, rendering them less desirable for purchase once they become empty, owing to the costs required to bring them to a tolerable standard.

There are some minor instances of empty homes (difficult-to-let void properties) in the social rented sector but these are within particular schemes and they are being addressed by Hebridean Housing Partnership, the landlord.

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

Where there are large numbers of empty homes, and a resulting decrease in the population in that area, this has a knock-on effect on the requirement for amenities in the area. The local school might close if there aren’t enough children in a township to justify keeping it open, the bus service might reduce, the travelling library service might be limited, the local shop may not have enough customers to be viable. Once these vital services are removed from an area, it becomes less desirable and, therefore, more problematic to attract new families. If there are fewer families, and younger, working age adults, this creates an imbalance in the age structure of an area. Such an imbalance then has a knock-on effect on the ability of elderly persons to remain living at home in that area, as there are fewer younger adults around to assist them, in either a paid or voluntary capacity, and they often end up moving closer to family members or into a care home setting. In short, it perpetuates the empty home cycle and leads to the decimation of communities.

4. Is the issue of empty homes a problem in particular areas and if so, why?

It is problematic in rural areas furthest from population centres, and particularly problematic in Harris and the Southern Isles, where there are a large number of holiday homes. I have included a table below which details percentages of empty homes by area and then added in holiday homes to give an overall percentage of empty properties in the Outer Hebrides.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>POST CODE/AREA</th>
<th>NUMBER OF HOMES</th>
<th>EMPTY HOMES</th>
<th>% EMPTY HOMES</th>
<th>NUMBER OF HOLIDAY HOMES</th>
<th>% EMPTY + HOLIDAY HOMES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HS1 Stornoway</td>
<td>2798</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS2 Rural Lewis</td>
<td>7293</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS3 North Harris</td>
<td>824</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS4 Scalpay</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS5 South Harris</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS6 North Uist &amp; Berneray</td>
<td>995</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS7 Benbecula</td>
<td>654</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS8 South Uist &amp; Eriskay</td>
<td>1068</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS9 Isle of Barra &amp; Vatersay</td>
<td>784</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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?

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar appointed an Empty Homes Officer in October 2018 so we have only recently started gathering data, attending forum meetings and engaging with Empty Homes Officers from other local authorities, so we would be keen to learn from any LA’s that have made progress in addressing this issue.

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

The current tools open to LA’s are Council Tax levies on second homes, Compulsory Purchase Orders, and the appointment of Empty Homes Officers to give advice etc.

LA’s have no authority over homes in crofting tenure other than from an advisory or safety capacity, and they are unable to cap rental income on second homes in areas where affordable housing is under pressure, yet the concentration of empty homes is high and communities are in danger of being wiped out.

There should be greater powers available to LA’s and greater resources. If, for example, an LA was able to allocate some of its housing monies to the issue of empty homes in its area i.e. by offering grants to renovate properties and make them habitable, they could then stipulate how the home could be used in the grant conditions. More flexibility in resource allocation and additional Capital funding would assist the issue of empty homes.
7. Should there be more enforcement powers for local authorities/central government to deal with the issue? If so, what could these be?

Yes. The three island authorities (Orkney, Shetland and CNES) are seeking ‘Single Pot’ funding from the Scottish Government on the back of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, so monies might be allocated according to locally determined priorities. If this were to happen there may be scope for reintroducing grant assistance towards bringing empty homes back into use, the conditions of which could determine how empty homes could be used, i.e. whether they could be used for holiday lets or affordable housing. This could potentially help to revitalise struggling townships and conditions could be enforceable.

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

No, this issue should have a higher profile. When we have homeless waiting lists stretching to thousands of individuals, and empty homes numbering thousands, there is clearly something wrong.

Perhaps a campaign is required to highlight to “the man on the street” what an empty home is, and what options “legacy owners” have open to them if they inherit a property.