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

There are a variety of reasons for homes being empty. These can include: homes being on the market for sale or rent, homes requiring or undergoing repair, owners being in care/hospital, inheritance issues following the death of an owner or, in some cases, owners are undecided on what to do with the empty property in the longer term (or simply choose to keep it empty and pay Council Tax due on the property).

In some areas of the country owners might find it difficult to sell their home but this is not an issue which has arisen in Edinburgh in relation to empty homes, given the buoyant housing market.

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

In Edinburgh the focus of empty homes work is on private sector empty homes. Void figures are low for social rented housing in the city due to high levels of demand.

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

Edinburgh does not have large numbers of empty homes in concentrated areas. Analysis of Council Tax records has shown that empty homes are spread throughout the city. However, having just one problematic empty home in a street or block can have a detrimental impact on neighbours or the wider community if it is neglected (unsightly and/or attracting anti-social behaviour for example) or owners are difficult to contact where issues arise in relation to communal repairs.

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

Edinburgh does not have large numbers of empty homes in concentrated areas and therefore it is difficult to identify any trends.

There are different issues in different parts of Scotland, potentially between rural and urban areas for example and depending on the nature of the housing market e.g. in some areas an owner may find it difficult to sell an empty home or empty homes could be linked to areas where there is wider regeneration activity.

The majority of privately owned empty homes in Edinburgh, including those empty for over 12 months, do not cause issues within local areas (in relation to their condition or impact on neighbours or the wider community) and most owners are paying the Council Tax that is due on their property (based on information for empty homes where
the 100% Council Tax surcharge has been applied). Problems with empty homes tend to arise where they are in poor condition and are causing issues for neighbouring properties or the wider community, combined with the owners of these homes failing to respond to correspondence or where they are unable to be traced. The reason for lack of engagement by owners varies. For example, people who inherit a property being unsure of what to do with it, the empty home has repair issues or an owner may have debt issues that they are reluctant to address.

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?

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership brings local authorities together, administering the empty homes knowledge hub and best practice group for example, and providing opportunities to learn from each other and share good practice.

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

In some cases it can be easier to deal with an empty property which is part of a block, where there are mechanisms to deal with missing shares in relation to repair work for example. However, it can be more difficult to address issues with stand-alone/detached empty homes, particularly if the empty property is not directly affecting the fabric of neighbouring buildings.

In relation to empty homes work, resources within Edinburgh tend to be targeted at dealing with problematic empty homes, which, by their nature, are more complex to address. Joint work between local authority services such as Public Safety or the Shared Repairs Service can help to resolve some nuisance or repair issues. However, when owners cannot be traced or repeatedly fail to respond to attempted contact, there are limited options to force them to deal with the issues their empty home is causing.

There are some enforcement powers available e.g. CPO powers as well as tools such as serving maintenance orders. However, implementing these measures can be resource intensive and costly, competing with other resource priorities in local authority areas. They also tend to be at the ‘last resort’ end of the scale in terms of enforcement powers. The costs of pursuing a CPO vary significantly but an approximate estimate is that legal and administrative costs associated with an individual case can be £20,000 to £30,000 and, as such, could limit the Council’s financial capacity to pursue CPOs beyond dealing with a small number of very problematic properties. There are risks involved in the compulsory purchase of relatively expensive properties in an area like Edinburgh, particularly as the compensation rules around CPOs are quite complex.

Different parts of a local authority have enforcement powers to deal with certain issues e.g. Environmental Health powers, but such powers can be limited to dealing with specific issues and might not be effective in dealing with wider issues such as anti-social behaviour (and criminal behaviour) relating to an empty home, where the Police may also need to be involved.
It would be useful to look at measures other organisations could take to help deal with empty homes, including banks and other private lenders.

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

Compulsory Sales Orders (which are already being considered) could be another tool available to local authorities in dealing with empty homes. However, if the process to serve a CSO is lengthy and complex it may deter local authorities from making use of this power. For example, if local authorities incur legal costs in implementing a CSO will these be recouped at a later stage in the process?

Most empty homes do not cause issues in terms of having a negative impact on neighbouring properties and the wider community in which they are located. Local authorities can encourage people to bring their empty home back into use but there is no overall legislation which prevents people from having an empty home so more time and resources tend to be spent on dealing with complex, problematic empty homes (which generally account for a small percentage of the overall number of empty homes in an area).

Enforcement is not the only tool. Providing advice and information to owners on additional options for empty homes, such as PSL schemes, which can help ensure homes are made available to those most in need rather than lying empty and at the same time providing an income for owners.

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

Most of the data relating to the number of empty homes comes from Council Tax information held by local authorities. This is useful, although depending on how information is collated and reported it can be difficult to make like for like comparisons. It is difficult to know what other source of data could be easily utilised to give an accurate picture.

Other information, such as the reasons homes are empty or number of empty homes brought back into use each year, generally seems to be collated on a more ad-hoc basis by local authorities and other organisations, where, again, it can be difficult to compare like for like information. The reason for a home being empty is more likely to be known where the empty home is being dealt with as an ‘active’ case (when complaints have been received about the home for example). For most empty homes registered as such on Council Tax records it will be less clear why they are empty, although different Council Tax codes can be applied to empty homes falling into different categories.