

Scottish Land & Estates (SLE) welcomes the Local Government and Communities Committee report on Empty Homes in Scotland and is very supportive of its proposals.

As a membership organisation representing rural businesses, SLE is working to ensure that the right policy is in place to allow its members to continue to provide vital, affordable housing in Scotland's rural communities. Housing continues to be an important issue in rural Scotland and bringing empty homes back into use will create significant benefits and opportunities for rural growth and development.

Empty Homes Officers

SLE is pleased to see the recommendation that all local authorities should have Empty Homes Officers. We noted in our evidence that our members have very positive experiences dealing with Empty Homes Officers. These individuals are excellently placed to facilitate bringing empty homes back into use. They have good knowledge of their local housing environment and market. They will be able to establish good relationships with local developers, solicitors and others who can assist property owners to bring their homes back into use.

Scottish Empty Homes Partnership

SLE is a member of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership (SEHP). We are pleased to see the Committee recommend the Scottish Government work with them and COSLA to encourage local authorities to share and adopt best practice. The SEHP format is bringing an increasing number of empty homes back into use. SLE is glad to see the Scottish Government recommending that all local authorities adopt their approach to enhance empty homes services in their area.

Empty Homes and Links to Other Strategies

SLE emphasised in its evidence the importance of dealing with housing and commercial property issues together and not separately. Adopting a joined-up approach to tackling empty homes will be crucial to success, particularly in rural areas where there is a high number of empty homes. By considering housing and commercial property issues together, local authorities can support rural re-population and develop the local economy.

Measuring the Scale of the Problem

SLE agrees that the lack of data regarding the scale of homes is a block to solving the problem. SLE is supportive of further work to identify the full extent of the problem. We are pleased to see the mention of the new SEHP website, and we will encourage members to both report empty homes in their area and proactively engage with the relevant local authority about any empty properties under their ownership.

Council Tax Levy

SLE is concerned about some councils' application of the Council Tax Levy. We appreciate this is discretionary but feel there is an inconsistent approach which does not encourage investment in empty properties. Several members have approached us to express their concern that while they have active repair plans, the 200% levy has been applied without discussion. Members report that in some local

authorities, no visits are made to the property before the levy is applied. This suggests that no investigation into the current situation has taken place.

We appreciate that as this is a discretionary local levy the Scottish Government cannot dictate how council apply the levy. However, we hope that encouragement from the Scottish Government for local authorities to work with SEHP and appoint Empty Homes Officers will help ensure this levy is applied sensibly and incentivises owners to bring empty homes back into use rather than being used to raise revenue. We hope that if Empty Homes Officers are appointed in every local authority that the occurrence of active owners being penalised will reduce.

We are concerned that some local authorities will be reluctant or feel unable to change their policies and therefore also support the recommendation that the Scottish Government keep this under review and report back in a year's time with the provision that further action can be taken if it is required. In line with this we support the request for further detail on how the Scottish Government, COSLA and the SHEP will support local authorities to use and promote best practice.

The Rural & Islands Housing Fund

The Committee's report refers to the Rural and Islands Housing Fund. While this fund has had some successes, we are concerned that some of the provisions of the fund mean it is inaccessible to individuals or unworkable to organisations. This is demonstrated by the fact that while the fund is nearing its March 2021 deadline, there has been a significant underspend.

As an organisation, we are frequently approached by our members looking for advice on funds they can access to bring empty homes back into use, demonstrating that there is a substantial need for the fund. However, the fund in its current iteration is not meeting people's needs.

We would echo the proposal that if there is further funding for this grant, there should be consideration given to removing the "perpetuity" clawback arrangements. We feel this restricts the potential for the fund to be used to lease and renovate a property on a long-term basis. Instead of requiring the house to be leased at an affordable level in perpetuity we would recommend setting a timescale of 20 to 30 years.

Empty Homes Loan Fund

We appreciate that the Empty Homes Loan Fund has had some success, but we agree with the committee's concerns that it has significant limitations. We would also echo the committee's request for an update on the status of the Rural Empty Property grant scheme. As an organisation we were involved in the establishment of this scheme and feel that it was much more successful than its successors. Therefore, we would welcome an investigation into the possibility of relaunching this scheme or adapting one of the current schemes to follow its guidelines.

Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs)

We are supportive of the use of CPOs under the appropriate criteria and see these as an effective tool for bringing empty properties back into use. We welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to improving their uptake. We echo the Committee's recommendation that the Scottish Government tackle common blockages to using CPOs.

Compulsory Sales Orders (CSOs)

We are supportive of the use of CSOs under the appropriate criteria. We feel CSOs are a good alternative to CPOs and again echo the Committee's recommendation that the Scottish Government should aim to introduce these powers in this Parliamentary Session.

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