

# Shelter

Scotland



# Scottish Empty Homes Partnership

Guide to data collection

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# Introduction

‘From a local authority perspective, without at least a reliable estimate of the numbers, the impact and scale of empty private homes cannot be gauged nor an accurate assessment made, of whether they merit any priority for resources and intervention. Without knowledge of locations (addresses) it cannot be guaranteed that any supply boost would equate with the location of known housing need. Without knowledge of ownership, targeting owners to offer support or serve enforcement notices cannot be initiated.’

*Annie Flint and Hector Currie, Review of the Private Rented Sector, March 2009.*

This guide aims to provide information about data sources in Scotland for council officers embarking on private sector empty homes work. It is based on information gathered in the first weeks of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership’s work. Best practice has been gathered from the Empty Homes Network (formerly National Association of Empty Property Practitioners) (England/Wales), Homes from Empty Homes (formerly the Empty Homes Agency) (England), Shelter Cymru (Wales) and through discussions with Scottish local authorities and holders of information sources in Scotland.

We welcome feedback on the contents and usefulness of this guide and may consider producing revised versions depending on feedback as other potential approaches to data collection come to light.

Guides on other topics will be produced during the life of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership project. Their focus will be on issues identified by members of the Scottish Empty Homes Officer Network. If you have an interest in empty homes work and would like more information, please make this known to the Empty Homes Coordinator so that your wishes can be taken into account in the drafting of further papers/guides.

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## Building a database

The first step in undertaking empty homes work is to build up a picture of the number of empty homes and their location. Without an adequate measure of the problem (or the potential), it is all but impossible to tailor policy to ensure the best use of the asset that empty homes represent.

The most basic information that a database should include is:

- the number of empty homes
- the location (address) of empty homes
- the names of the owners of the empty homes.

Of course, if you decide to pursue bringing homes back into use, information about the general state of the properties and any charges against the properties will also be useful.

The 2009 Scottish Government private rented sector review found that the most useful data for councils came from:

- council tax records
- local surveys
- 2001 census.

In England, using council tax data which can be added to/made more accurate through other sources is a common practice in setting up a database. English authorities use different methods, but most recognise the importance of a database based on council tax records supplemented by sources such as those detailed throughout this guide. Many of the recommendations in the section on tracing empty property owners were the result of work by members of the Empty Homes Network which operates in England and Wales.

From the Scottish Government's 2009 review of the private rented sector survey data it is possible to build a picture of Scottish Councils' data collection for the purposes of empty homes work.

The survey shows that only three Scottish councils collected data on the number and location of empty homes at structured intervals; however, another 12 indicated that they collected this information on an ad hoc basis.

Recent discussions with local authorities have revealed that, where councils collect data about the number of empty homes or about their number and location, council tax data supplied by colleagues is the primary source of information.

Councils that do not use council tax information often have an idea of the number and geographical location of empty homes based on house conditions surveys. This data gives an idea of tenure and geographical concentrations, but not exact addresses.

Several methods can be used to compile information for empty homes work. This guide gives details of the best known and most widely used, with examples of where they have been used successfully.

Whether you are starting a database or thinking about what to do with data to hand, the Empty Homes Coordinator may be able to provide further input and ideas.



photography by Fiona Roberts



photography by Fiona Roberts

## Ceredigion Council, Wales

Ceredigion Council's empty homes database has been hailed as a good practice example. The council has a population of 75,000 and 700 empty homes. It has held a database for the past two years and updates it quarterly using council tax data. The collection of data is part of the council's empty homes strategy which links into its wider housing strategy. The finance section's cooperation was based on officers pointing to relevant legislation about data sharing and offering to feed back to council tax staff any new information they collected about properties or owners. Thus, officers working on empty homes established a process for sharing data internally, and tax staff receive useful information for their own work.

The council uses a 'Flare' database. The empty homes section is based on Microsoft Excel so it is user friendly and easy to interrogate. Using the database, the council is able to create a GIS mapping of empty properties. The council verifies the information on ownership with the land property gazetteer and uses the combined information to survey empty property owners in order to target those who want to work with the council to bring empty properties back into use.



photography by John Angerson

Work on empty homes is part of several people's jobs at Ceredigion Council and is split between environmental health officers and technical officers. It has been estimated that the council has one FTE dedicated to empty homes work (split between four members of staff).

## Overview of sources of information

This guide covers sources of information for identifying the number of empty properties in local authorities, the location (address) of empty properties, and for identifying owners of empty properties. Some sources can be used for more than one purpose, such as council tax which should always be the first port of call for identifying the numbers, addresses and owners of empty properties. Other sources can verify and/or build on this information.

The first section of this guide deals with sources of information for identifying numbers or location of empty properties:

- council tax
- postal and on foot surveys
- working internally
- working with partners

- One Scotland gazetteer
- utility companies
- publicity campaigns
- General Register Office for Scotland
- census
- Scottish neighbourhood statistics.

The second section moves on to deal with sources of information for identifying owners of empty properties:

- council tax
- people finder services
- registers of Scotland (land register)
- electoral register
- Companies House
- insolvency register.

## Data protection and internal council relations

**In Scotland, the principles of the Data Protection Act apply. The first principle states that:**

Personal data shall be processed fairly and lawfully and, in particular, shall not be processed unless –

- (a) at least one of the conditions in Schedule 2 is met, and
- (b) in the case of sensitive personal data, at least one of the conditions in Schedule 3 is also met.

**For the purposes of local government, the condition in Schedule 2 that applies is that:**

The processing is necessary for administering justice, or for exercising statutory, governmental, or other public functions.

**The Information Commissioner's Office has stated that:**

For the purposes of the Data Protection Act 1998, a local authority is a single organisation which makes its own decisions on how personal information is used. A local authority is composed of many separate departments. Because it is a single organisation, if one local authority department passes personal information to another department, this will not be a disclosure of personal information as defined by the Act. Only if the local authority passes personal information to any other organisation, will this be a disclosure of personal information.

**The second principle of the Data Protection Act states:**

Personal data shall be obtained only for one or more specified and lawful purposes, and shall not be further processed in a manner incompatible with that purpose or those purposes.

## Vacant dwellings

### Use of information obtained for council tax purposes (Section 85, Local Government Finance Act 2003)

In Schedule 2 to the Local Government Finance Act 1992 (c. 14) (council tax: administration), after paragraph 18 there is inserted –

18A (1) A billing authority may use information it has obtained for the purpose of carrying out its functions under Part 1 of this Act for the purpose of –

- (a) identifying vacant dwellings, or
- (b) taking steps to bring vacant dwellings back into use.

(2) The power under sub-paragraph (1) above, so far as relating to personal information, extends only to information which consists of an individual's name or an address or number for communicating with him.

(3) In this paragraph— 'personal information' means information which relates to an individual (living or dead) who can be identified –

- (a) from that information, or
- (b) from that information and other information of the authority, and includes any expression of opinion about the individual and any indication of the intentions of any person in respect of the individual; 'vacant dwelling' means a dwelling in which no one lives and which is substantially unfurnished.



## Developing relationships with council tax staff

Empty homes officers in England have learned that they need to foster relationships with council tax staff to make their work easier.

In the Isle of Wight, the empty homes officer has created a special form with the council's legal team which he uses to request information from council tax colleagues about the owners of empty properties. The form references the relevant legislation and details the purposes for which the information is sought. This has made it easier for the empty homes officer to work with other staff members without having to explain why he needs the information or why he is entitled to it every time he asks. The form looks and feels official and gives the council tax staff a paper record of the request and the basis for the request.

In Reading, the empty homes officer has developed a give-and-take relationship with his finance department. In exchange for interrogations of the council tax data on his



photography by Simon Rawles

behalf, council tax staff receive information from him about homes where council tax liability has changed so that they can update their records. He also works with colleagues with regard to empty home owners in council tax arrears. His work to identify the location of the owner for the purposes of bringing the home back into use is then able to be used by council tax staff to pursue debt recovery.

Some councils are more cautious than others when applying this principle to sharing internal information, for example, between council tax staff and housing staff. The question is whether data on vacant dwellings, collected in working out council tax discounts, can be used to contact owners about bringing their homes back into use without it being incompatible with the original purpose.

In England, councils have express permission in the Local Government Act (2003) s.85 to use council tax data to identify vacant dwellings and make attempts to bring such dwellings back into use.

Given that both countries operate under the same Data Protection Act, there would seem to be no impediment to applying a similar ruling in Scotland.

Of course, it is up to individual councils to interpret the legislation. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) has prepared a good practice note on data sharing between local authority departments. This is available online at:

**[http://www.ico.gov.uk/upload/documents/library/data\\_protection/practical\\_application/local\\_authorities\\_-\\_data\\_sharing001.pdf](http://www.ico.gov.uk/upload/documents/library/data_protection/practical_application/local_authorities_-_data_sharing001.pdf)**

There are examples of councils in Scotland that have successfully used council tax data to identify empty homes. Some are highlighted in the case study boxes in the following sections.

The difference between councils that share data and councils that don't sometimes depends on the types of working relationships between staff. Such relationships can be nurtured and developed so that fruitful cooperation results.

# Identifying empty properties

## Council tax

The primary source for information about empty homes is council tax records. Across Britain, this is the starting point for building a database. All councils collect information from householders to determine the amount of council tax due. Councils also give a discount on council tax for vacant properties which is noted in the council tax register. The information collected in the council tax register therefore should include the name and address of the council tax payer and the date that an empty property discount came into effect.

Interrogation of this data to extract the council's own stock as well as RSL stock should provide a global number of empty properties in the area. It should also be possible to generate a list of empty addresses

along with the name of the council tax payer. Council tax staff should be able to provide the length of time each property has been empty and the reason for the vacant dwelling council tax discount – which can be useful when it comes time to prioritise properties to focus on.

While council tax data is a good place to start, other sources can supplement the database (see the sections below). Not every empty home receives a council tax exemption. Long-term uninhabitable buildings will not be listed, along with empty spaces above shops which are taxed under business rates and non-residential properties that have the potential to be converted into homes.

### Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

#### Sharing council tax data

Housing staff in the Western Isles are aware that they have an issue with empty homes. Staff there are convinced that they have one of the highest rates of empty homes in Britain. The General Register Office for Scotland 2009 figures show a vacancy rate for the Western Isles of 6.9 per cent, if you add second homes this rises to more than 13 per cent. Ninety-eight per cent of unoccupied stock in the Western Isles is privately owned.

While these global figures were useful, and prompted the Comhairle to look at the issue, they said little about the empty homes' location. Thus, housing staff asked their council tax colleagues for data to begin their own database.

The Comhairle is aware that data protection legislation can be interpreted in a number of ways, so a decision was taken to share the addresses of homes that were indicated as being vacant, but not the owners' names. The data also included the reasons for the home being granted the council tax discount, so that staff could see at a glance whether a property was empty because it was classed as a second home, was job-related, empty less than six months or long-term.

Housing staff are now considering ways to use the data including possible surveys to owners and how to prioritise action.

## Postal and on foot surveys

Many councils find surveys/questionnaires of empty home owners (council tax payers) useful for a variety of reasons, including:

- determining the reasons why properties are empty in their area
- information gained can be used to target policies
- information gained can be used to target properties
- information gained can supplement and update the council's database of empty homes
- receiving the survey can raise awareness among owners of the desirability of filling an empty home as well as the potential to work with the council.

The survey will be most useful if transient empty properties are excluded and the focus is on long-term empties. Restricting it to owners whose properties have been empty for, say, six months or more is best. However there may be arguments for including all empty property owners, for instance, if your council has chosen to place an emphasis on early intervention and prevention.

### Renfrewshire Council

#### Paisley town centre survey

In 2008, Renfrewshire Council commissioned a consulting company to conduct a postal survey of town centre owners of empty properties, specifically vacant property above commercial premises.

This information was used to inform the consultant's report about the feasibility of converting properties into residential use.

### East Midlands – empty property survey 2008

#### Extracts from Nottingham University 2008 report (Full text available on request)

A postal questionnaire was sent to 5,095 owners of unoccupied residential properties across ten East Midlands local authority areas. Four hundred and ninety-four completed questionnaires were returned giving a response rate of 11 per cent.

The University of Nottingham's survey unit was appointed to conduct and analyse the survey. The main aims were to establish what might be preventing owners from bringing their properties back into occupation, to evaluate existing local council measures aimed at bringing properties back into use and to assess which additional services or support might be effective. It was also intended that the research findings would help to inform both the East Midlands Regional Housing Strategy, and local councils' empty properties strategies.

Lists of properties which had been empty for six months or more and contact details for their owners were drawn up by each of the ten participating local authorities and passed to the survey unit. Responses were encouraged by use of a prize draw for high street vouchers.

The results were used to make recommendations about the future direction of empty homes work in the East Midlands. For example almost a third of respondents were keen for councils to assist by providing lists of professionals and tradespeople to work on renovating and improving the properties, and 21 per cent wanted the council to offer advice on organising improvements and repairs.

In response, suggestions were made that empty property officers could have directories of public and private organisations and the way they can help. For example, help with carrying out building/electrical/gas/roofing/carpentry, glazing etc., surveyors, legal services, financial services, letting/sales agents, auctioneers, structural engineers, architects, project managers and others involved in returning empty properties to use. It was also suggested that making the empty property officer the central point of contact would be beneficial if owners had issues regarding properties they wanted to take up with the council.

## On foot survey

In 2006, a survey was carried out to get a clearer picture of what and where 'empty homes' were. A range of sources were used – closing orders, demolition orders and council tax information. The council tax services provided a list of long-term empty property with 10 per cent discounts, second homes receiving 10 per cent discount, and empty and unfurnished exemptions on

request. The private sector team at Argyll & Bute consisted of four private sector officers who were routinely out in their area assessing property for grant and other actions, so it was easy to add basic property surveys to their workload for a couple of months. To that extent, there were no additional funding required.

### Example:

#### Empty homes survey

Address: Lochgilphead  
Owner: XXXX

Survey date: 22/5/06  
Source: owner



#### Description and condition

Two terraced blocks of four houses each. Roughcast cavity brick walls, pitched slate roofs. Timber double glazed windows. Appear in good condition. Have lain empty for two years according to a neighbour and now need an

external overhaul to gutters, painting soffits and replacing a few slates. Internals look OK from what can be seen through windows.

#### Comments

Plans to demolish and re-develop the site.

There was no more detailed information but what the council could do from the basic survey information was categorise buildings into:

1. tenements where all units empty
2. tenements flats with mixed empty/occupied units
3. individual houses requiring considerable regeneration
4. individual houses apparently occupiable in current condition.

## Working internally

To supplement data obtained from the council tax register, information sharing between council departments can be invaluable.

### Possible sources

*Waste collection* – unoccupied homes do not produce household waste and/or can become a target for flytipping, so it should be easy for refuse collectors to identify empty homes. Some waste collection services keep a record of empty homes to help them plan services. Waste collection is sometimes provided directly by the council and sometimes contracted out. In either case, there may be mutual advantages to sharing information.

*Private sector house conditions survey* – if your council has carried out a house conditions survey, there may be useful information you can draw from it. It will not provide addresses, but it can help gather data about clusters of empty homes or highlight which areas of the local authority seem to have high vacancy rates. However, some house condition surveys do not always record empty properties properly due to access issues. If your council is interested in empty homes work, it might be useful to set out how you would like empty properties recorded in the next house condition survey to ensure that the data returned is useful.

*Environmental health* – environmental health officers are often the first to receive complaints about empty homes, especially where there are concerns about vermin or other health issues. They may have information about problem properties they have had to investigate. In extreme cases, these officers also undertake legal action.

*Building standards department* – building standards staff can sometimes find themselves handling complaints about empty buildings that are deemed unsafe. They might be able to supply information on the properties they are monitoring.

*Planning department* – your planning department can be useful in two ways. First, the department will hold information on approved planning applications and applications being processed. Such information can be useful in supplementing the empty homes database by indicating intent – if the owner is waiting for a decision on a planning application, this may be what is delaying the property being brought back into use.

Second, surveys of empty property owners frequently come back with comments from owners that a property is empty because of the time it takes to go through the planning process. Many report an adversarial relationship with the council, instead of cooperation. You may be able to facilitate more

productive relationships between owners (who may find the system complicated and difficult to navigate) and planning officers (who may be snowed under with work and unable to provide the one-on-one guidance and support that owners are looking for).

There will be owners who blame the planning system for no good reason, but a closer relationship with planning can ensure that you are aware of a property's potential and you may be able to help the process along.

*Citizens account* – bus pass holders and some other citizens may be signed up to a council citizen's account which holds data about them and the services they receive. Usually, account users are asked if they are happy for information they give on sign up to be shared between services within a council or with other public bodies. It may be possible to search such records for leads on owners of empty property who have accessed council services. The extent to which this data can be used must be assessed by individual councils.

*Landlord registration* – landlords must now register through the landlord registration scheme. Council staff working in this area may be open to releasing information about landlords. For example, information from the register could help identify other properties owned by landlords of empty properties or find contact details that can be used to start a dialogue about properties you are interested in.

### Excerpt from Newcastle Empty Homes Strategy 2008–2012

There is recognition that partnership working will be crucial to the success of the strategy. The delivery of the strategy is through the private sector housing team but good links with other departments such as planning, housing strategy, building control and revenue and benefits are important in the identification of empty homes, awareness raising and applying a range of enforcement measures using housing and planning legislation. It is therefore proposed that a cross department empty homes working group will be formed to meet and coordinate action.

## Working with partners

As well as sharing information internally, working with community planning and other partners can also be useful.

### Possible sources

Police and fire service – empty homes are at risk of arson and crime. Police and fire services are frequently called out to empty homes and may be willing to share information. Local police officers may also be able to help with tracing owners if they are known to them.

Housing associations – most councils have close working relationships with housing associations in their area. Housing associations can not only provide information about empty private sector dwellings within mixed blocks, for example, but they can also be part of the solution. Sharing information and becoming aware of which empty private properties are of concern to them can pay a valuable dividend.

## One Scotland gazetteer

The One Scotland gazetteer is a database of all of Scotland's properties tagged to a unique property reference number (UPRN). The gazetteer is administered by a team in the Improvement Service and all councils have their own local authority gazetteer giving these unique property reference numbers for the properties in their area.

It is possible to link up other council databases to this UPRN so that several records can be pulled up for one property. For example, you could enter a UPRN and see if it has a vacant property council tax discount, if there are charges against the property and whether the owner has applied for planning permission or change of use. There are other ways in which the database can be useful for empty homes work as well as generally adding to the efficiency of council work across departments.

Councils are at different stages with regards to integrating their systems with the gazetteer. It may be worth making enquiries in your council on what data has been integrated with the system and if there is scope to add to or access it for empty homes work.

For more information on the gazetteer, contact the Empty Homes Coordinator who can put you in touch with the gazetteer team at the Improvement Service. Also see the improvement service website at:

**<http://www.improvementservice.org.uk/national-gazetteer/>**

## Utility companies

Properties that use no utility services (gas, electricity, water) are likely to be empty. Utility companies have records of their service's usage, and of properties that have been disconnected. Such records may not be an accurate record of empty homes, but they are a good indicator. Electricity and water are likely to be the best indicators (many occupied homes have no gas supply). Many utility companies may be interested in sharing data, but two issues that may make this difficult:

- the deregulation of utility services means that there are many service providers
- the sharing of some types of data may breach data protection legislation.

Data protection issues may mean that utility companies are reluctant to share a bill payer's (or last bill payer's) name or current address. But if it is a case of verifying if a property is empty, knowing it is not receiving a utility can provide a valuable clue.



photography: Shelter

## Publicity campaigns

One method that is valuable in a) determining if a property is empty and b) finding the owner is speaking to neighbours. In England and Wales, councils have dedicated empty homes officers who go out on site visits and contact neighbours to find information. This may be possible in Scotland, especially if the empty home is a priority.

One drawback is that talking to neighbours is time-consuming. But a way to cut down on staff time is to engage in publicity campaigns, encouraging local residents to come forward with information about empty homes. The [reportemptyhomes](http://www.reportemptyhomes.com) website (**[www.reportemptyhomes.com](http://www.reportemptyhomes.com)**) can be used to funnel information through to the council.

## General Register Office for Scotland Census

As well as holding census data (see below), the General Register Office for Scotland publishes the annual 'Estimates of Households and Dwellings in Scotland' which includes information on vacant properties broken down by local authority area.

GROS figures include public and private sector dwellings. The data comes from council reports to Scottish Government on council tax discounts with an adjustment made to account for differences in recording. The report for 2009 can be found on the GROS website at: <http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/statistics/publications-and-data/household-estimates-statistics/household-estimates-2009/index.html>

Go to the list of tables and choose table 9 to get a breakdown by local authority.

Vacant dwellings in this report include:

- dwellings exempt from council tax, which are unoccupied (normally properties can be empty for up to six months and receive a council tax exemption)
- dwellings subject to a council tax discount of between 10 per cent and 50 per cent as long-term empty properties (in most cases, they will have been empty for at least six months).

Second homes are subject to a council tax discount of between 10 per cent and 50 per cent. This includes self-catering holiday accommodation let for less than 140 days per year.

Occupied dwellings are all dwellings minus vacant properties and second homes.

However, it is important to note that some vacant properties which do not receive a council tax discount or exemption may not be included. Short-term vacancies when people move house are unlikely to be counted. And second homes which are let out for more than 140 days a year are liable for non-domestic rates, but not council tax, which means they will not be listed as second homes or in the total number of dwellings.

When used in conjunction with councils' information about public sector voids, this data can be a quick way of estimating the global number of empty properties in your area, even before you approach council tax colleagues to get more accurate and geographically focused data.

A national census is carried out every ten years and provides the most complete household survey. It is possible to obtain accurate information on the numbers and whereabouts (although not exact addresses) of empty properties. General information is available free on the website of the General Register Office for Scotland <http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/census/censushm/index.html>. Most councils purchase the more detailed information on DVD as well.

On the General Register Office for Scotland website look for 'key statistics for settlements and localities in Scotland' and the table entitled 'dwellings, household spaces and accommodation type'. This table includes an estimated number of vacant dwellings for each local authority area. Clearly, the current data from 2001 will be out of date but when the 2011 data is available, this could provide a useful comparator (see above for other information available from the GRO).

The next census will be carried out in 2011 and the data should be available the following year. See: <http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/census/censushm2011/index.html> for more details.

## Scottish neighbourhood statistics

Percentages of vacant dwellings (all tenures) can be found on the Scottish neighbourhood statistics website and can be broken down by local authority area. These statistics are also taken from council supplied council tax discount data, however the website gives more options for interrogating the data than the General Register for Scotland estimates of households and dwellings site referred to above.

To see information for your local authority, access the SNS web page at <http://www.sns.gov.uk/>, then

1. select 'advanced reporter'
2. in 'area type', select 'local authority' then
3. tick the boxes for whichever LA(s) you want to select and
4. click 'next', then
5. in the top left drop down box 'main topics', select 'housing' then
6. in the box below from the 'sub topics' menu select 'household estimates' from the drop down menu.

You will see on the right hand side of the page that one of the topics available is '% dwellings which are vacant' for years 2007, 2008, 2009. Tick the box against the ones you want, click add to list, then 'view result'. A table should appear.

See: <http://www.sns.gov.uk/default.aspx>

# Identifying owners of empty properties

## Council tax

For every council tax record, there will be the name of the person who pays the tax for that property. This is not always the owner, but the majority will be. If it isn't, the person may be able to put you in touch with the owner or supply contact details.



photography: Shelter

## People finder services

If the owner doesn't live at the property, it can be a big obstacle. Council tax data can help as it will record the address of the current council tax payer, but in cases where council tax is either not being paid or a vacant home discount has not been applied for this information may not be enough. If you have tried other council departments, asked neighbours for information and have exhausted other options, you may want to use a people finder service.

There are a number of people finder services:

- companies that provide a free search service, such as Grafton Online, which offers to find property owners, next of kin, or solicitors in charge of the estate. This service is free to councils. Grafton offers its advice services, at a fee, to home owners on how to get properties back on the market. In some cases, Grafton has paid for renovations and recouped the cost on sale of the property. For the free people finder service, go to: <http://www.graftononline.com/>.
- companies that charge a fee for people searches using data from the electoral roll, birth and death certificates, etc. For examples, see:
  - <http://www.tracesmart.co.uk/>
  - <http://www.peopletrace.com/>
  - <http://www.ukpeoplefinder.com/>
- you can also pay for online services such as **192.com**, which search the electoral roll and other lists. See: <http://www.192.com/help/tools-guides/electoral-roll/> or <http://www.theukelectoralroll.co.uk/>
- other data products on sale include the UKinfo People & Business Finder CD Rom that uses data from the electoral roll, directory inquiries and company listings. An alternative database people searcher product called QAS Name Tracer Pro is available from Experian. See: <http://www.192.com/products/details/114/> or <http://www.qas.co.uk/products/id-authentication-and-name-tracing/nametracer.htm>
- HM Prison Service prisoner location service can be used if there is evidence that the owner of the property may be in prison. Email [prisoner.location.service@noms.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:prisoner.location.service@noms.gsi.gov.uk) for more information.
- Some companies such as Kin specialise in finding estate beneficiaries and can be used (for a fee) in a case where a property is lying empty because the beneficiary cannot be found. Some of Kin's services are only provided in England and Wales. See: [http://www.kin.co.uk/find\\_beneficiaries.html](http://www.kin.co.uk/find_beneficiaries.html)
- You can also try searching genealogy websites to find family links/name changes. See: <http://www.ancestry.co.uk/> or [www.genesreunited.com](http://www.genesreunited.com) or <http://www.ukbmd.org.uk/>
- With many people on social networking sites, you can also try searching on Facebook ([www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)), Bebo ([www.bebo.com](http://www.bebo.com)), MySpace ([www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)) or Twitter ([www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com)) if you are looking for an owner whose name you know. You can usually search within a city or country to narrow the results. People list lots of information on these sites, even including phone numbers.

## Owner search case in Manchester

'This case involved a derelict property in very poor condition which was a continuing eyesore and dumping ground for refuse. The council had spent close to £7,000 over a number of years clearing rubbish from the gardens and securing the property against damage and the hazard to local residents.

The house was unregistered and ownership was uncertain as the previous occupier had died some seven years earlier. We found the death of the occupier and conducted extensive research to locate next of kin, who lived in America and had moved there via Canada.

Upon contacting the family we explained the purpose of our research and offered our assistance in proving title and selling the house. The brother of the late owner had travelled to Manchester to bury his sister, but had left the UK before administrating her estate due to a lack of legal knowledge and fear of the potential costs involved.

We offered to administer the estate via our solicitors in Leeds, who also have an office in Manchester, and do so at our risk. This in effect

meant we would prove title, sell the property and arrange payment to the council of all and any monies owed to them. This we did with the understanding that if for whatever reason we could not prove title or legally sell the property we would incur all costs and expenditures. This of course gave peace of mind to the family, who were happy for us to represent them and proceed with the administration.

We managed to prove title and sell the house within a six month period. This saw the council receive all monies due to them and for the family to benefit financially.

This is a particularly good example of the benefits we can offer as this was a case which could potentially have been left in legal limbo for many years as the Treasury solicitor would not have been able to advertise such an estate without first proving title and that could only be done once the family had been found.'

Mark Byrne,  
Grafton Online Ltd.

## Registers of Scotland (land register)

Registers of Scotland hold the land register. For a fee of up to £10 plus VAT Registers of Scotland can search the register to confirm the owner of a property. They provide the name and address of the owner and details of any outstanding mortgages on the property. Turn-around time is seven days.

See: <http://www.ros.gov.uk/>

Many councils have access to the land registry through Registers Direct and it may be worth checking if your council already has an account.

See: <http://www.ros.gov.uk/registersdirect/>

This source can be useful for confirming a property's owner and getting contact details. It may also be possible to contact lenders on the charges register to locate owners.

## Electoral register

The Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) is an official appointed by the local authority to prepare and maintain the register of electors.

You can find your Electoral Registration Officer through the Scottish Assessors Association. See: [www.saa.gov.uk](http://www.saa.gov.uk)

This officer may be a good first port of call. EROs may also hold information about properties where owners have indicated that a property is vacant. It may be worth asking if they compile such records and if they are willing to share them with you.

Alternatively you can use online fee-based electoral roll searches (links to several of these in the people finder services section above).



photography: Shelter

## Companies House

Local authorities in England and Wales use Companies House as a source of information on property owners linked to a business.

The main functions of Companies House are to:

- incorporate and dissolve limited companies
- examine and store company information delivered under the Companies Act and related legislation
- and make this information available to the public.

Companies House provides some information about companies' directors, accounts, mortgages, etc free of charge and some for a fee. See:

**<http://www.companieshouse.gov.uk/toolsToHelp/findCompanyInfo.shtml>**.

## Insolvency register

The insolvency register is maintained by the Accountant in Bankruptcy and can be accessed free of charge on the AIB website. You need to set up an account with a username and password before you can search the site, but access is free and you can search as often as you like.

The register is searchable by name, address or case number and provides information on current (undischarged) bankruptcy cases. So, for example, to investigate who owns an empty property, you type the address into the search on the register, and if the owner has been declared bankrupt within the previous two years their name will appear along with the trustee for the case.

There are a variety of ways in which a search of this site could be useful for tracking down owners or to verify information. The register can also be searched for companies that have been declared bankrupt.

To sign up to an account and search the site, visit: **<http://roi.aib.gov.uk/ROI/>**

# Conclusion

This guide is intended to help you compile a database of empty homes and point you in the direction of sources of information. While some of this work is relatively new in Scotland it is possible to draw on the experience of others around the country.

## Further Information

If you would like a further information, please get in touch with the Empty Homes Coordinator at the contact details below.

### Britain's empty homes

A number of councils in England have dedicated empty homes officers. This is a considerable resource that has doubtless fuelled much of the success of some English councils in bringing properties back into use. The job of a typical empty homes officer will include compiling a database of empty homes, surveying problem properties, and communicating with owners, communities and partners to try to bring properties back into use.

The work of some of England's empty homes officers was profiled in a recent series on the BBC entitled Britain's Empty Homes. This series was so popular it has been commissioned for a second series starting in early 2011. For more information on the programme and summaries of the episodes, see: [http://www.emptyhomes.com/britains\\_empty\\_homes.html](http://www.emptyhomes.com/britains_empty_homes.html)

### Contact:

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The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership exists to help councils and their partners pursue work to bring private sector empty homes back into use through exchange of best practice, networking opportunities, and consultancy support to councils. The project is funded by the Scottish Government and housed by Shelter Scotland.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership is supported by an advisory group which includes the Scottish Government, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, Shelter Scotland, the Scottish Housing Best Value Network, the Scottish Rural Property and Business Association, Rural Housing Scotland and Historic Scotland.

# Shelter

## Scotland

### Until there's a home for everyone

In our affluent nation, tens of thousands of people wake up every day in housing that is run-down, overcrowded, or dangerous. Many others have lost their home altogether. The desperate lack of decent, affordable housing is robbing us of security, health, and a fair chance in life.

Shelter Scotland believes everyone should have a home.

We help thousands of people every year fight for their rights, get back on their feet, and find and keep a home. We also tackle the root causes of bad housing by campaigning for new laws, policies, and solutions.

Our website gets more than 100,000 visits a month; visit [shelter.org.uk](http://shelter.org.uk) to join our campaign, find housing advice, or make a donation.

We need your help to continue our work.  
Please support us.

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**[shelter.org.uk](http://shelter.org.uk)**

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