

HOUSING EMERGENCY – EMPTY HOMES AND WORKER ACCOMMODATION PROJECT

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The main purpose of this report is to provide members with progress on a project funded by Shelter and the Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) which aimed to identify empty properties and bring them into use for HSCP workers, and to seek funding to continue the post.
- 1.2 The report provides examples of empty properties which have been identified and brought back into use for HSCP workers. The report also provides examples of workers being matched to available properties in the local authority area to enable them to take up key positions within the HSCP. These are tangible successes in ensuring the provision of accommodation for key workers.
- 1.3 The project funding comes to an end in September and the HSCP no longer have available funding. However, to build on the work achieved to date Shelter has offered to continue to part fund the post for another 2 years widening the scope of the post beyond the HSCP to other public and private sector employers, if the Council can match fund. The post has objectives which are in line with 2 of the 4 high level actions within the Argyll and Bute Housing Emergency Action Plan – **Enable the Delivery of More Homes for Argyll and Bute’s Workforce** and **Make the Best use of Existing Homes in Argyll and Bute**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Council:-

- i) Consider the content of the report;
- ii) Approve £60,000 of Strategic Housing Fund to match fund the Shelter contribution for the 2 year extension to the post to cover all employers in Argyll and Bute.

HOUSING EMERGENCY – EMPTY HOMES AND WORKER ACCOMMODATION PROJECT

2.0 INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 In September 2023 Housing Services appointed an Officer to identify empty homes which could be used for Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) workers taking up employment in Argyll and Bute. The post was jointly funded by Shelter and the HSCP for a 2 year trial period, but the HSCP no longer have continued funding.
- 2.2 The objectives of the post fits with 2 of the 4 high level actions within the Argyll and Bute Council Housing Emergency Action Plan:-
- Enable the delivery of more homes for Argyll and Bute's Workforce
 - Make the best use of existing homes in Argyll and Bute
- 2.3 The post has been a tangible success in providing accommodation for key workers, which is outlined in section 4 of the report. The post holder received a commendation for her work at the National Empty Homes award in the Outstanding Contribution category.
- 2.4 Shelter has offered to match fund the post for another 2 years with the objective of building on the work already carried out and widening the scope of the post beyond the HSCP to other public and private sector employers. This is a key opportunity to continue to facilitate accommodation for key workers.

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 It is recommended that Council:-
- i) Consider the content of the report;
 - ii) Approve £60,000 of Strategic Housing Fund to match fund the Shelter contribution for the 2 year extension to the post to cover all employers in Argyll and Bute

4.0 DETAIL

- 4.1 This section of the report provides detail on a wide variety of activity which has been driven by the Empty Homes Project Officer over the last two years and

demonstrates the tangible direct benefit that has been achieved. Particularly outlined are:

- the major refurbishment projects linked to the post which have, or will, enable empty homes to be brought back into use for HSCP workers;
- the facilitation of coordinated activity to better achieve results;
- direct engagement with the social rented and private rented sector; and,
- direct engagement with staff to enable accommodation options to be provided.

4.2 Coll – Doctor and Nurses House

The Doctor and Nurses houses on Coll were both long term empty properties for approximately seven years. These two properties required major renovation and restoration. By securing Strategic Housing Fund funding, these properties are currently in a programme of works, the Nurses House is complete (Appendix 1) and the Doctor's house to be completed shortly. They will accommodate the local GP and other health and social care workers.

4.3 Dunallan – Connel

Dunallan (Appendix 2) is situated in Connel village, and is a large standalone property owned by ACHA. Dunallan has been long term empty since 2018. A project team is in place with plans drawn up to renovate to a four bedroom House of Multiple Occupancy, this has Strategic Housing Fund funding of up to £200,000 already approved. On completion this property will accommodate workers to carry out health and social care services throughout the Oban area.

4.4 Tigh A Ruhda Flat – Tiree

To accommodate staff on Tiree and enable a high standard of care within Tigh A Ruhda Care Home (Appendix 3), the long term unoccupied flat has now been brought back into use with assistance from Strategic Housing Fund. This will enable two HSCP staff to take up occupation on the island.

4.5 Former Dental Surgery – Bowmore, Islay

The NHS Dental Surgery in Bowmore has been closed for several years. It has been identified as a suitable building for a Change of Use to form a two bedroom short term accommodation for workers coming to the area temporarily, or as launchpad accommodation. It is in close proximity to the Hospital and Care Home in Bowmore. Plans have been submitted for the Change of Use (Appendix 4). Conversion of the dental surgery is a cost-effective use of redundant property for the HSCP and will assist with relocation of permanent workers to Islay.

4.6 Islay Accommodation Group

The Islay Accommodation Group was borne out of a need to have all stakeholders and Housing Associations working together to source accommodation, mainly for agency workers, coming to the island to work in Gortanvogie Care Home and Care in the Community. Currently there are approximately seven agency workers in Short Term Lets. By giving the option of HSCP provided short term shared accommodation, there is a significant reduction of costs. It is also crucial to move away from dependency on short term let accommodation as that type of accommodation is not always available in peak holiday seasons, thus putting at risk the delivery of essential health services. Moreover, the level and location of accommodation is unpredictable, and providing certainty in the provision of accommodation is crucial to encouraging agency staff to return to the area. Following joint working with Trust Housing Association and Argyll Community Housing Association, the HSCP now has two properties it can use to address these issues.

4.7 Registered Social Landlord (RSL) Sector

ACHA - Lennox Street, Port Ellen

Two bedroom flat owned by ACHA is situated in Port Ellen (Appendix 5), Lennox Street is decorated and furnished to a basic standard. This will accommodate two Care in the Community staff working within the community of Port Ellen.

Trust Housing Association - Donald Caskie Square, Bowmore

Three bedroom flat owned by Trust Housing Association in the main village of Bowmore. This property is central to all areas of Islay. Once furnished it will be suitable as a two bedroom short-term accommodation for staff who are working in the wider community of Islay and within the Care Home or Hospital.

4.8 Private Rented Sector

A property owner on Islay approached the Empty Homes Officer offering their furnished house knowing the challenges of housing and recruitment on the island. Assisting the owner through Landlord Registration, the property is now available to accommodate two workers who were previously in costly Short Term Lets.

A property investor in Dunoon made contact with the Empty Homes Officer stating they had significantly refurbished a property and were looking to house an HSCP Worker. An e-mail with details was issued to Managers and Team Leaders with all information regarding the lease. A Mental Health Assistant is now a long-term resident in the property.

Private Landlords who previously had HSCP staff leasing their properties also make contact giving first offer on their property. By making use of the

Enabling Budget, the property can be secured temporarily, and an e-mail is issued with the details of the property.

4.9 Direct Employee Assistance

In addition to enabling major refurbishment projects and working with RSLs and the private rented sector to secure specific properties in areas of high demand the project worker has pro-actively engaged with HSCP staff and matched them to accommodation opportunities across the local authority area. The tables below provide evidence of that work along with testimony from partners including staff and landlords.

Table 1: Specific Case Examples

Job Title	Area	Support
Occupational Therapist	Campbeltown	Relocation from NZ. Flat sourced undergoing renovation. Liaising with Landlord and OT. Agreement on lease made and deposit paid from discretionary funding.
Team Lead	Mid-Argyll/Campbeltown	Assisted Team Lead based in Mid-Argyll. No suitable properties. Discussed options as a hybrid/commute from Campbeltown. Put in touch with new landlord I had provided advice, supporting both Team Lead and Landlord in the process. He has now secured a long term rental within his required budget.
Care Worker	Islay	Care Worker resident in shared short term accommodation with a minimal rental budget, non-driving and working in the hospital. Working with the Housing Association he was offered a tenancy, however, due to bereavement, had to leave the country suddenly. The tenancy was secured by use of discretionary fund and on return he took up occupation and continued his role within the hospital and integration in the community.
Agency Dialysis Nurse	Campbeltown	Locating to cover renal unit, temporarily in an Air B and B significantly out of town. Supporting in viewing, liaising with letting agent with initially teething issues, lease signing and furnishing property. Community support was fantastic with social media requests.
Care Home Manager	Islay	Much needed permanent care home manager resident in short term accommodation, provided with Housing Options and advice, she then successfully secured a tenancy with RSL.
Mental Health Nurse	Islay	Relocating back to Islay, no issue with location. An owner had been in contact from outlying village. Negotiating rent and paying a period of time prior to MH Nurse lease commencing to secure property.

		Has now gone on to purchase house. Owner has been in contact to offer house again.
Mental Health Support Worker	Dunoon	Owners of a refurbished property in contact offering to HSCP. With all information, this was circulated to team leads by e-mail. The MHS Worker contacted the owners and quickly secured their tenancy. Owners have been back in contact asking for advice out with location. Therefore, putting in touch with other EHOs.
Radiographer	Mid-Argyll	In temporary accommodation, on initial contact provided Home Argyll information and advice. They went on to be successful in securing a tenancy with RSL.
Social Worker	Relocation	Assisted and secured accommodation in another area of Argyll. Also providing housing advice and options.

Table 2: Client Testimony

Additional Information
<p>OT Quote – <i>“Isla made contact early on in the relocation and having her assistance to find, screen & visit possible tenancies was massively supportive. This reduced the unknowns I was dealing with, and was especially helpful given that I was in New Zealand. Also Isla liaising with my future landlady helped enable me to secure a tenancy in a timely manner which meant I didn't have to scramble around trying to find somewhere when I arrived. This felt like a streamlined and supportive process for my relocation from NZ to Campbeltown.”</i></p> <p>Landlord Quote – <i>“We didn't realise the project Isla works with existed, this is a great way to help people locating to Campbeltown for much needed jobs within the NHS. Isla has been great with communication between myself and our new tenant *****. Hopefully we'll be able to work with Isla again in the near future.”</i></p>
<p>Team Lead Quote – <i>“Isla has been absolutely superb since my first interaction with her, kind, knowledgeable and easy to speak with. If it was not for the support I was given by Isla I would not have been able to experience living and working in this wonderful part of Scotland.”</i></p> <p>Landlord Quote – <i>“My wife and I would personally like to thank you for all your work and expertise in helping us to find a suitable tenant for our property. You went to great lengths in keeping us right and advising us through till the end. Very much appreciated and will always be looking at you in the future for advice.”</i></p>

Support Worker Team Lead Quote – “I would just like to say a big thank you from me as Senior Charge Nurse for Islay Hospital for all your support and help with arranging and securing the tenancy for one of my HCSW's. Accommodation on Islay is very difficult to find and afford and this impacts on our ability to recruit staff to the island. Isla was a huge asset in being able to find suitable accommodation and negotiate and secure a tenancy for our worker. This resulted in some job security for the staff member and a commitment to stay on the island and continue his employment and development. It is extremely difficult to find the time to look at the options available and navigate the housing applications and systems. Having Isla in post made this so much easier for all concerned. Having a contact to assist staff would hopefully improve our ability to recruit to posts on the island.”

Housing Association Quote – “The accommodation group meetings we have been having with NHS, Argyll & Bute Council and other RSL's have been very informative, giving us an insight into the struggles of individuals finding permanent accommodation on Islay. I worked alongside Isla Binnie, Empty Homes Officer to secure a tenancy for Mr *****. Sadly, Mr **** was unable to take on his tenancy straight away. Working with Isla meant that Mr **** was able to continue working within the island community and ensure his tenancy was secured when he returned to the island. Without her assistance, we would have been unable to hold the property for Mr *****.

We have also been liaising regarding another of our Empty Homes in Bowmore which are now in the final stages of discussions. This will be a lease between ourselves and Argyll & Bute council for their employees on the island.”

Support Worker Quote - I am very great full and happy with the level of support you gave to me while securing my tenancy with Trust Housing. You were forth coming with updates every week and you were amazing with getting me settled especially as the offer came when i wasn't entirely ready. But I was offered favourable options which enabled me to take the house offer and easily get settled. Thank you once again for all your efforts.

Dialysis Nurse Quote – “Isla had been very supportive and was never too busy to assist me Thank you Isla, I am settling in nicely. So grateful. Thank you for making all of this possible.”

Area Manager Kintyre & Islay – “Within Campbeltown Hospital there is a small renal dialysis unit. Service delivery was paused in November 2024 due to ongoing difficulties staffing the unit and a decrease in need for the service locally. Early in 2025 the local need increased again and planning to restart the service began. There was no scope for staffing the unit locally so it was agreed that non local staffing models would be explored. We were fortunate to find an experienced renal nurse willing to move to Campbeltown. The support of Isla Binnie, EHO, was invaluable in helping this nurse source accommodation, navigate the lease process and furnish the property. All of this was done within a tight time frame and enabled the nurse to relocate quickly and commence work in what is a highly valued local service.”

5.0 CONCLUSION

- 5.1 The report demonstrates the success which can be achieved by having a dedicated worker co-ordinating resources across Argyll and Bute. This has led

to empty homes being brought into use, RSL's offering tenancies in identified areas of need, and private landlords engaging and offering properties for let which may have otherwise been lost to the short term let market.

- 5.2 Extending the Empty Homes and Key Workers project to all sectors of the employment industry in Argyll and Bute will be key to delivering on the agreed actions within the Housing Emergency in relation to delivering more homes for Argyll and Bute's workforce and making best use of existing homes.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 Policy – the ongoing activity in the report is consistent with current Council priorities and the Local Housing Strategy vision and outcomes which are directly aligned with the overarching objectives of the Outcome Improvement Plan – Outcome 2: Housing.
- 6.2 Financial – the financial request is from the Strategic Housing Fund – this is a ring fenced budget for housing activity – there is sufficient capacity in the budget to meet the financial request in the report.
- 6.3 Legal – none.
- 6.4 HR – none.
- 6.5 Customer Service – none.
- 6.6 Risk – there is a risk of depopulation, damage to the economy, a risk to delivering essential services in the local authority area if partners cannot effectively tackle the Housing Emergency.
- 6.7 Climate Change – making best use of existing stock by bringing empty properties back into use and installing energy efficiency measures helps towards achieving climate change targets.
- 6.8 Fairer Scotland Duty - the delivery of housing opportunities across Argyll and Bute facilitates social-economic opportunities for all. The activity in the report links to the Child Poverty Strategy.
- 6.9 Equalities – protected characteristics – the activity outlined in the report is consistent with the aims and objectives set out in the Local Housing Strategy which is subject to an EQIA..
- 6.10 Consumer Duty - the housing projects detailed in the paper deliver essential affordable accommodation and will enable key workers to deliver services.
- 6.11 Island Communities – many of the housing projects detailed in the report are being delivered on the islands which will provided many benefits such as employment and the continued delivery of essential services to island communities..

6.12 Children's Rights and Wellbeing – the delivery of more housing options for HSCP and other workers will enable more children to have a safe secure environment.

Kirsty Flanagan – Executive Director with Responsibility for Development and Economic Growth

Council Leader Jim Lynch – Policy Lead for Economic Development, Islands, Rural Communities and Housing

April 2025

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Coll NHS houses

Appendix 2 – Dunallen, Connel

Appendix 3 – Tigh An Rhuda, Tiree

Appendix 4 – NHS Dental Surgery, Bowmore

Appendix 5 – Lennox Street, Port Ellen



Appendix 1 – Coll NHS houses

NHS Highland

Isle of Coll, Nurses House Refurbishment

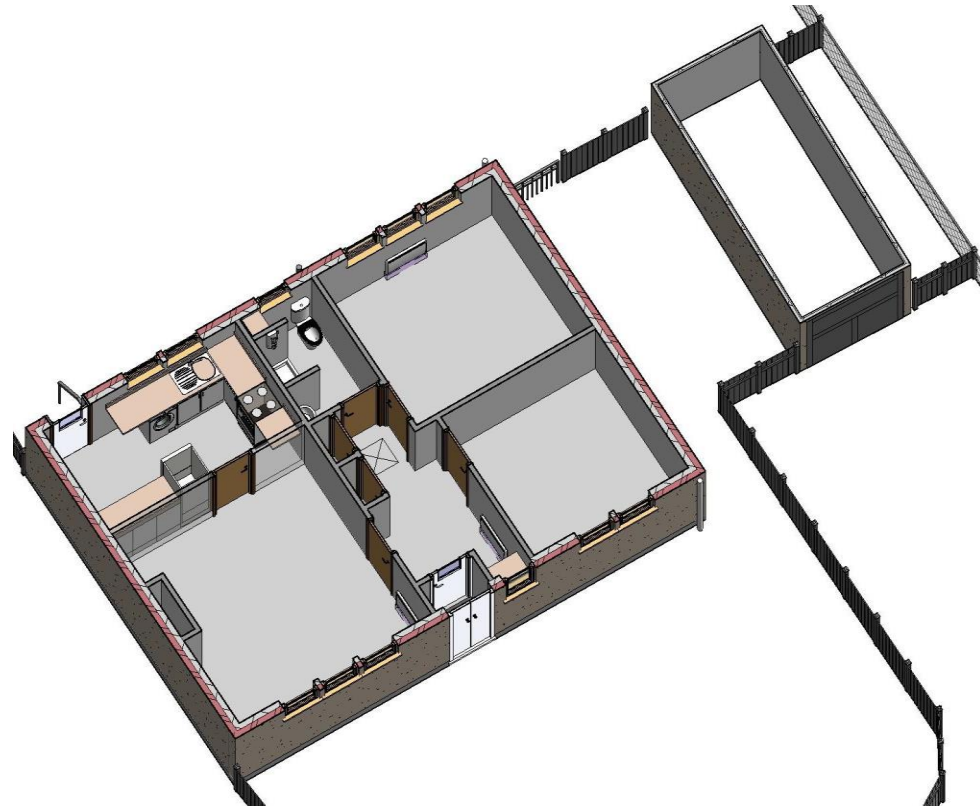
Upgrades Value £ 170K

Refurbishment Upgrade of existing semi-detached nurse accommodation

Design scope covered full external and internal refurbishment of existing property.

External works: New roof, external wall additional insulation, with roughcast render, new external windows and fencing.

Internal works included new bathrooms, kitchen, new fire doors, flooring and decoration.





Nurses House Refurbishment Upgrades



Before: Front elevation.



After: Front elevation with new roof, windows, insulation/ render and fencing.



Before: Existing kitchen



After: New kitchen



Before: Bathroom



After: New shower room

HSCP EMPTY HOMES PROJECT APPENDIX 2

Dunallen, Connel – ACHA 4 bedroom property to be refurbished to accommodate an HMO style suitable for four people.



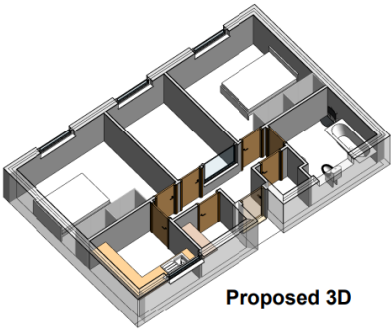
HSCP EMPTY HOMES PROJECT APPENDIX 3

Tigh An Rhuda, Tiree – Flat which adjoins the care home now refurbished to accommodate workers to carry out their role within the care home.



HSCP EMPTY HOMES PROJECT APPENDIX 4

NHS Dental Surgery, Bowmore – Unused dental surgery subject to planning to be converted to short term accommodation for two workers.



Proposed Plan
1 : 50

Room Schedule		
Name	Area	Comments
Bathroom	5.8 m²	Room fitted with new fixtures & fittings
Bed 1	12.4 m²	
Bed 2	12.4 m²	
Entrance Hall	5.3 m²	
Kitchen	5.8 m²	Room fitted with new kitchen fixtures & fittings
Lounge	8.1 m²	
Store	1.8 m²	
Utility	2.5 m²	Room fitted with new fixtures & fittings

- ND New 30 mins rated internal fire door
- NS New 30 mins rated glazed screen
- NED New external door
- New partition
- Demolished element

hlp

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Project
2 Bed Staff Residences
Birch Drive, Islay
NHS Highland

Drawn
JB

Checked
GB

Date
15.06.22

Cad Ref

Drawing No.
22023 03

Rev

Scale@A3
As Indicated



HSCP EMPTY HOMES PROJECT APPENDIX 5

Lennox Street, Port Ellen – 2 bedroom ACHA property in Port Ellen, which has been basic furnished and suitable to accommodate two workers short term to carry out their role in the community.

