

Inverclyde Council Response to the Scottish Parliament, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee: Scotland's Housing Emergency

'it would be helpful if you could provide more information on the void or unlettable properties that exist in your area. While the number of void and unlettable properties is publicly available, it would be helpful if you could provide some more context on these figures and what you are doing to get properties back into use. It would also be helpful if you could share any information in terms strategies for acquiring and buying back properties.'

As a post-stock transfer local authority, Inverclyde Council does not have direct control over managing void and unlettable properties. This responsibility falls to the Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) that provide social rented housing stock in Inverclyde, namely River Clyde Homes, Oak Tree Housing Association, Cloch Housing Association, and Sanctuary. Void management is handled through the asset management plans and internal priorities of these organisations, which assess the changing needs of tenants within the overall frameworks set by the Scottish Housing Regulator.

However, as the strategic housing authority, Inverclyde Council still plays a crucial role in creating conditions that better enable housing associations to manage their void properties. The principal mechanisms by which Inverclyde Council does this are through our Local Housing Strategy (LHS), which has been co-produced with a wide range of relevant stakeholders, including the RSLs, and through the Strategic Housing Investment Programme (SHIP), which provides development funding to realise LHS priorities.

An overarching issue that frames LHS interventions is how to respond to the long-established and projected trends of depopulation. With a declining population and fewer households, without adequate interventions, the overall trajectory is towards a continued and rising situation of low-demand stock and voids. As such, the focus of the LHS is on regeneration rather than expanding the total supply of social rented properties.

Achieving this regeneration focus is facilitated through LHS delivery group partnerships, in which each RSL is represented. These groups have specific focuses on making the total housing supply suited to the needs of Inverclyde's residents. Workstreams carried out by the delivery groups include developing an empty homes strategy, which directly addresses the voids problem, creating a young persons' housing strategy to enable wider access to social rented stock for previously marginalised cohorts, upgrading stock for specialist needs, and prioritising acquisitions over new developments to consolidate existing stock profiles. Through the articulation of these strategic priorities, Inverclyde Council intends to tackle the persistent void and low-demand stock problem.

Therefore, Inverclyde Council's strategic response to Scotland's Housing Emergency and more specifically Inverclyde's pressures on its local housing system are underpinned by the LHS. Relevant LHS activity which contributes towards tackling void and unlettable properties is outlined below.

Empty Homes Strategy 2025 -2030

Inverclyde Council's approach towards tackling empty homes is captured within the LHS and one of the subsequent actions directs Inverclyde Council's Housing Strategy team to develop an empty homes strategy which will:

'Prioritise targeted investment in the Inverclyde Empty Homes Service in areas where local housing pressure is evidenced.'

Work has commenced on developing the Inverclyde Empty Homes Strategy 2025-2030 which will outline how tackling empty homes can contribute towards the wider strategic outcomes presented within the Inverclyde Local Housing Strategy 2023-2038 and the necessary interventions to achieve this.

Empty Homes Mapping Analysis

To obtain a greater insight into vacant and empty dwellings in Inverclyde, Inverclyde Council's Housing Strategy team requested Council Tax information to outline a useful snapshot of where potential empty property hotspots are located and areas where targeted interventions may yield significant impacts. Table 1 presents the number of empty properties in Inverclyde by tenure or landlord based on the council tax information provided, April 2024:

Table 1: Empty Properties in Inverclyde by tenure/landlord¹

Tenure/Landlord	Number of empty properties	% of empty properties
Cloch HA	1	0.1
Inverclyde Council	3	0.4
Larkfield HA	1	0.1
Oak Tree HA	3	0.4
Private Ownership	440	66.9
RCH	208	31.6
Sanctuary Scotland HA	1	0.1
Total	657	100

The Council Tax data demonstrates that the majority of (67%) empty properties in Inverclyde are located within the private ownership. This indicates significant attention is required in providing necessary support and advice to the individual owners of these properties to bring them back into use, something which Inverclyde's Empty Homes Advice Service will continue to provide. However, the remaining 33% of empty properties are located within the social rented housing sector with 32% of these properties within the ownership of River Clyde Homes. This highlights that effective partnership working between Inverclyde Council and RCH will be required to understand why so many empty properties are in the ownership of the social landlord and what steps can be taken to both reduce this figure and enhance

¹ Inverclyde Council, Council Tax Data. April 2024

the affordable housing supply in Inverclyde. To identify where properties are located in Inverclyde, table 2 has broken down the Council Tax data by town

Table 2: Empty Properties in Inverclyde by town²

Town	Number of empty properties	% of empty properties
Gourock	84	12.8
Greenock	34	51.9
Inverkip	14	2.1
Kilmacolm	25	3.8
Port Glasgow	178	27.1
Quarriers Village	6	0.9
Weymss Bay	9	1.3
Total	657	100

Over half of the properties are located within Greenock 51.9% and a further 27.1% of empty properties are located within Port Glasgow. Gourock accounts for 12.8% of empty properties. The peripheral Inverclyde villages of Inverkip, Kilmacolm, Quarriers Village and Weymss Bay account for only 8.1% (54) of empty properties, demonstrating that empty homes place less pressure on the available housing supply within these communities.

Inverclyde Acquisition Strategy

In cognisance of the substantial effort made by our Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners to develop new build social housing over previous years, it was determined that the Housing Need and Demand Assessment (HNDA) and accompanying evidence base did not support the requirement for large scale house building within the social rented sector. This provoked an appetite from both Inverclyde Council and RSL partners for a more nuanced approach to regeneration in Inverclyde which considered demolition, new build and renovation of existing housing stock to improve housing condition and quality rather than adding a significant net gain to the supply.

In 2021, Inverclyde Council's proposal to the Scottish Government for the acquisition of second-hand properties in Inverclyde determined the three fundamental purposes of the programme which are:

1. Consolidate stock for management and improvement purposes.
2. Secure stock where there is limited supply and limited development opportunities.
3. Secure stock for specialist housing requirements.

Inverclyde Council determined that any acquisition must address identified housing need within Inverclyde and provide value for money; the purchase must not exceed market value and must be agreed by the Council. On completion of purchase and any necessary refurbishments, RSLs are expected to update Inverclyde Council to assist with monitoring of the Programme.

² Inverclyde Council, Council Tax Data. April 2024

The strategic approach outlined above remains the shared strategic objectives of Inverclyde Council and its partners for the acquisition programme. Inverclyde Council's approach towards the acquisition of second-hand properties has been reiterated within the Inverclyde LHS 2023-2028.

*'To address these issues and to improve the sustainability of communities and places, Inverclyde Council and local RSLs have recognised the importance of investing in existing poor-quality housing through a Housing Acquisition Programme negotiated with the Scottish Government in 2021. The Acquisition Programme was designed to complement the Affordable Housing Investment Programme providing additional affordable housing in areas of poor-quality private sector housing. Buying properties from the market allows social landlords to repair, renovate and regenerate; whilst continuing to address the need for additional specialist provision and homeless accommodation in areas where new homes cannot be built.'*³

The LHS recognises the potential transformational effect the acquisition programme could have on Inverclyde's housing supply, stock condition and how it can positively contribute towards regenerating existing communities. Therefore, the LHS proposes over the duration of the next strategy the acquisition programme will be further extended.

The following points outline the key principles of the Inverclyde Acquisition Programme:

1. Action 1.10 of the Inverclyde LHS 2023-2028 instructs Inverclyde Council and partners to 'extend the RSL Acquisition Scheme by enhancing the budget and reshaping the criteria.'
2. Inverclyde SHIP 2024 – 2029 currently allocates funding for 40 units per annum towards the acquisition of second-hand properties over the five-year period.
3. Inverclyde Council will support AHSP funding requests from RSL partners for the acquisition of second-hand properties as part of the Inverclyde Acquisition Programme. Requests must comply with More Homes Division Guidance Note 2023/01. Acquisitions must also meet the strategic objectives as outlined above in line with the Inverclyde LHS 2023-2028.
4. Inverclyde Council have determined the programme will retain the same funding assumptions previously introduced in the formation of the Inverclyde Acquisition Programme e.g., 50% of purchase price (up to a maximum of £50,000 grant assistance per unit)
5. The use of the council's Affordable Housing Fund (AHF) may be used to assist purchases where the market value exceeds £100k and the acquisition meets our strategic criteria in points 3 and 4 above.
6. In reference to point 5, the use of the AHF to this end would necessitate early communication with the Council to discuss this on a case-by-case basis and how the acquisition would meet the strategic objectives of both the programme and the LHS. Inverclyde Council reserve the right to refuse this funding request.
7. Based on stakeholder feedback, a review of the acquisition process is required with further consideration towards how partners acquire properties suitable for specialist

³ Arneil Johnston, Inverclyde Local Housing Strategy 2023-2028

housing and ensure the programme can be useful to this end. This will be a focus of LHS Delivery Group 2.⁴

⁴ Inverclyde Council (2023), Internal Document.