

Empty Homes Advice and Information Leaflet

# Keeping your Empty Property Safe and Secure

A long term empty home is one that has been vacant for 6 months or more. An empty home can cost its owner thousands of pounds each year through Council Tax, Insurance, security (e.g. boarding up windows) and maintenance.

Bringing it back into use not only saves the owner these costs, it can provide rental income or a lump sum through sale.

While your property remains empty, it is important that you take the time to ensure it does not deteriorate. As a bare minimum you should ensure that it is secured and maintained and make every effort to ensure that it does not become a nuisance to neighbours.

We recommend that you:

* Maintain gardens and exterior spaces
* Check the property regularly
* Repair any accidental damage or vandalism
* Hang curtains or blinds so it looks occupied
* Ensure property is adequately insured
* Leave a contact telephone number with neighbours

Every effort should be made to prevent deterioration of your property, especially over the winter months when there are a number of increased risks. In particular, water pipes can freeze and split, and pipes can burst: when a property is empty this can go unnoticed for some considerable time.

# Council Tax

The Scottish Government introduced new legislation in 2013, which the Council implemented from 01 April 2017. If your home has been unoccupied for 12 months or more it may be subject to a 200% charge, there will be no addition to Water & Waste charges. The legislation was introduced to encourage owners of long term empty properties to rent / sell these properties to get them back into use.

There are certain protections from this levy e.g. if the property is being marketed for sale or rent then the additional charge would not apply until after 24 months, or if the property is occupied as a second home for at least 25 days each year.

An exemption form is available via this link [https://www.falkirk.gov.uk/services/council-](https://www.falkirk.gov.uk/services/council-tax/discount.aspx) [tax/discount.aspx](https://www.falkirk.gov.uk/services/council-tax/discount.aspx)

Tel: 01324 506070 or email revenues1@falkirk.gov.uk.

# Repairs and Renovation

If you have identified that repairs need to be carried out to your building, either from your own observation or as the result of a survey, you should get a professional opinion on the work involved and the likely cost.

The Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland and Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors can provide details of local architects and surveyors. Using an architect, surveyor or engineer may cost more, but you could get better value for money in the long term.

## Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS)

Tel: 0131 229 7545

Web: [www.rias.org.uk](http://www.rias.org.uk/) Email: info@rias.org.uk

## Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors

Tel: 024 76868555

Web: [www.rics.org](http://www.rics.org/)

Email: contactrics@rics.org

You should get two or three quotes based on your schedule of work and specifications. Ask for a list of works and detailed written quotations, rather than estimates. A quotation is a fixed price that cannot be changed (unless there is additional work required which you agree to). If a quotation is detailed, you can compare it with the other quotes. Check if the price includes VAT. Agree how payments will be made before the job starts. If you are employing a tradesman yourself you will need to set out the working arrangements in writing.

Depending on the work that needs to be undertaken, it is likely that you will need to apply for planning permission or for a building warrant. The Council’s website has detailed information and guidance on how to apply.

Full details can be found online at: <https://www.falkirk.gov.uk/services/planning-building/>

Email: dc@falkirk.gov.uk

Tel: 01324 504748

# Under one Roof

Under One Roof is a website that provides information that is designed to help home owners understand their rights and responsibilities and to understand what professionals tell them.

The technical information on repairs is designed to help owners spot problems with their building and then understand quotations from builders so they can get the best job carried out at the best price.

The information on the site can only act as general guidance. It is not "advice" or a recommended course of action which can only be given in the light of full knowledge of a particular situation or

building. When it comes to action, the owner should always seek professional help with anything more than a simple problem - it will generally pay in the long run.

Web: <http://www.underoneroof.scot/>

# Home Improvement Discounts

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership has secured discounts from several Builder’s Merchants and suppliers on a range of products that can help owners of empty homes return them to use. The discounts are standardised, so no matter which branch the owner shops at, the discount will be the same.

If you are an empty home owner who would like to explore the benefit of purchasing goods from these companies, you should contact your local Empty Homes Officer to discuss your plan for bringing the empty property back into use. The EHO will be able to provide you with a comprehensive list of contact telephone numbers and emails for each business, as well as a named contact.

# VAT

If you are bringing a home that has been empty for two years or more back into use, then you may be eligible to pay a reduced rate of VAT (currently 5%) on renovation work, goods, and materials.

However, to access reduced rate VAT, you must use a VAT-registered contractor and the contractor must provide services for you. This means that they must work on the property and not just provide the goods and materials for you to install.

If the property you are renovating has been empty for more than ten years, and you intend to bring it back into use as a family home, you may be eligible for zero-rated VAT on building materials you have purchased and on the services of conversion.

HMRC will require evidence to prove that the property has been empty for two years or more.

You can obtain this from an Empty Homes Officer who can provide a letter certifying that the property has not been lived in for two years. **VAT Notice 708: Buildings and Construction**, states that if you have such a letter you do not need any other evidence. It goes on to note that if an Empty Homes Officer is unsure about when a property was last lived in they should write with their best estimate.

You can obtain copies of Notice 708 at [Notice 70](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/vat-notice-708-buildings-and-construction/vat-notice-708-buildings-and-construction)8 or via the HMRC at: [HMRC](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/hm-revenue-customs)

# Energy Efficiency

If your empty home requires work this can be a good opportunity to make it more energy efficient. Funding is available in Scotland to increase energy efficiency and reduce carbon emissions from homes making them easier to heat. There are various funding streams in Scotland aimed at increasing energy efficiency and reducing carbon emissions that can be accessed by private sector empty home owners, depending on the situation. These schemes can vary by area, so you are advised to check with the Council’s Home Energy Officer for what is available for you.

Considering energy efficiency measures as part of a refurbishment project can provide a number of benefits, including:

* Access to upfront loans and funding;
* Increased property value;
* Higher EPC (energy performance) levels, making the property easier to let;
* Lower energy bills for either you or the tenant.

You are advised to check with the Building Standards section of the Council to ensure that you are meeting the latest requirements of insulation and energy efficiency for the property.

## Energy Saving Trust

Web: [www.energysavingtrust.org.uk](http://www.energysavingtrust.org.uk/)

Tel: 0808 808 2282.

## Falkirk Council Energy Team

Tel: [01324 590797, option 2](http://www.underoneroof.scot/)

Email: programmes.resources@falkirk.gov.uk

# Selling your home

If you are thinking of selling your empty homes, you probably want to achieve a quick sale. It is frustrating and costly to have a property on the market for a long period and if you are carrying out the viewings yourself, can be very time consuming. A prompt sale will reduce your costs for the property and also reduce the risk of the property being vandalised or falling into greater disrepair.

You should set an asking price that reflects the condition of the property, the location and the

current housing market. Many estate agents offer free valuations so it’s possible to arrange for two or more local estate agents to provide the information. You will also require a Home Report, completed by a qualified surveyor for selling your home; this will include a market valuation.

The Home Report is a pack of three documents: a single survey (which gives a professional valuation), an energy report and a property questionnaire. The price of a Home Report ranges from

£300-£800, depending on the size of the property.

Further information on Home Reports and exemptions can be found on the Scottish Government website; <https://www2.gov.scot/homereport>

You should always consider how to present your property for sale and who your target purchaser is. There are steps that can be taken to make sure your home has the best chance of selling such as:

* Keeping the house and garden tidy, de-cluttering to show off the size of the rooms and dealing with any strong odours.
* Demonstrate potential by undertaking small repair issues and obtain quotes for larger works and estimates for major works.
* If a property has potential for an extension or loft conversion, you could apply for these permissions yourself. While you have to pay for plans and application fees, the increase in value of your property could be significant with that permission in place.

As the seller, you are in a strong position with estate agents, they need properties to sell to make commission. Don’t be afraid to ask them questions prior to agreeing to sell with them and throughout. Make sure that the agent has experience of selling properties like yours, check there are similar properties to yours in the window or online. Look at the agent’s website to see if the pictures are well taken and the descriptions are clear and relevant. If the estate agent uses the internet, ensure they use other sites such as Rightmove or Zoopla to get as much coverage of your property as possible.

Some agents charge a percentage of the sale value of the home while others charge a flat rate. Usually the percentage charge is between 1-3.5% & VAT of the selling price. Online estate agents can charge a flat rate of between £99-£999 but the package offered varies substantially.

# Selling at Auction

If the property requires major refurbishment or is a development opportunity, you may consider other options for selling your property such as at auction. If this is the case it would be beneficial for you to obtain Planning consent or Building Warrants for any work. Make sure that any Planning Permissions or Building Warrants are included in the marketing of the property. This is to ensure that potential purchasers know redevelopment is possible. As far as practical you should keep the property tidy, cutting back vegetation and making sure the property is wind and water tight.

# Matchmaker Scheme

The Property Matchmaker is a ‘dating agency’ for empty homes: it aims to match empty property home owners who are trying to sell or who are thinking about selling with people who want to buy an empty property.

The Council holds two lists; one of potential buyers and one of owners interested in selling their empty property. These contain information relating to the property type, location, approximate purchase price and condition.

When the Empty Homes Officer spots a 'match' between an empty home for sale and a buyer's requirements, the empty home owner and the buyer will receive each other’s details to follow-up.

Note that the Property Matchmaker is not an estate agency, and all negotiations and sales processes take place between the owner and buyer. We recommend that anyone who is seeking to sell their property obtains independent professional valuation and legal advice (from a solicitor or estate agent).

Contact your Empty Homes Officer to request an owner or buyer registration form. Email: eh@falkirk.gov.uk

Tel: 07921 942232 or 07738 627139

# Buy Back Scheme

The Buy Back Scheme considers buying back ex-council properties that were sold under the Right to Buy. This helps the Council increase the amount of affordable housing in the Falkirk area. The types of properties we wish to buy must meet the following conditions:

* Former council property
* Currently being advertised for sale, with an up to date Home Buyer's report
* The owner must have made their own arrangements for rehousing
* One or 2 bedroom properties, houses with more than 2 bedrooms

Priority is given to areas with the greatest need for affordable housing. We will also consider:

* If the property brings us back into majority ownership in that block
* If the property will be able to feature in our future housing investment programme
* How much it would cost to bring the property up to the [Scottish Housing Quality Standard](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Built-Environment/Housing/16342/shqs) and the Letting Standards

We find properties through online advertising and information from estate agents. All properties must be located in the Falkirk Council area. A District Valuer will survey the property to decide the current market value and how much it would cost to bring the property up to Scottish Housing Quality Standard. We will not make an offer on every property surveyed. Any offer made will be within the price range given by the District Valuer. We will act as "any other buyer" and no officer from Falkirk Council will meet with a seller or estate agent. The seller is responsible for their own legal fees.

If you feel your empty property meets the criteria for the buy-back scheme then contact the team: Email: bb@falkirk.gov.uk

Tel: [01324 590797 (option 2)](https://www.falkirk.gov.uk/services/homes-property/council-housing/council-tenancy/right-to-buy-your-home.aspx)

# Private Sector Leasing

Private Sector Leasing is a mechanism for a local authority to lease properties from the private rented sector. Properties leased will be used by Falkirk Council to fulfil their legal obligation to provide temporary accommodation, to individuals, following a homeless assessment. The Council’s Private Sector Leasing scheme has been in operation since January 2011. To be eligible for inclusion within this scheme you must be a Registered Landlord within the Falkirk Council area.

An initial assessment will be made of properties offered for the Private Sector Leasing Scheme to assess if the property is suitable and any repairs that need to be undertaken. If your property is accepted onto the scheme and all the highlighted works undertaken, the property will be leased to Falkirk Council for a minimum of 3 years.

Tel: 01324 590797 (option 2)

Email: privatesector.housing@falkirk.gov.uk

# Renting Privately

Before you can rent out your property you have to register with the council. Registering before you rent out your property makes sure you meet the minimum legal requirements. Joint owners (anyone else who's named on the title deeds) need to register too, but they will not be charged. Before any person or agency is registered, the council will have to check that the applicant is a fit and proper person to let a property.

If a landlord hasn’t registered, or haven't applied for registration, it's a criminal offence to continue

to let out a property, and a landlord can be fined £50000.

You need to inform your mortgage lender you want to rent your property out. Some lenders have restrictions on who you can rent a property to. Renting your property out can also affect your insurance. You need to make certain your insurers understand you'll be renting out your property and provide adequate coverage.

If your property is going to be let to three or more unrelated tenants, then you'll need to apply for an [HMO (house in multiple occupancy) license.](http://www.lettingprotectionscotland.com/#houses-in-multiple-occupation-licensing) There are extra criteria you’ll need to meet if your property will be used in this way.

Your property must meet the repairing standard, which means it must meet a specific set of conditions, including:

* the property is wind and watertight
* the structure and exterior are in a reasonable condition
* the installations for water, gas, electricity, sanitation and heating are in a reasonable state of repair and working order
* any fixtures, fittings or appliances provided by the landlord (like carpets, light fittings and household equipment) are in a reasonable state of repair and proper working order
* any furnishings provided by the landlord can be used safely for the purpose they were designed
* it's fitted with suitable fire detection devices – at least one smoke alarm in the living room, one in every hall or landing and a heat alarm in every kitchen
* it's fitted with a carbon monoxide detector in any room with a carbon fuelled appliance (such as a heater or boiler, but not a cooker) or there is a flue from such an appliance

Electrical safety inspections have to be carried out by a qualified electrician at least once every five years. Also, if you have any gas appliances, arrange for a safety check every 12 months, called an Annual Landlord Gas Safety Record. This should be done by a Gas Safe engineer. You will have to get an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) for your property and must include the rating in any advertising. Landlords also have to carry out a Legionella risk assessment of the property.

Shelter Scotland <https://scotland.shelter.org.uk/housing_advice> has an information hub for both tenants and landlords in the private rented sector in Scotland. At this website you can find detailed information about a landlords legal requirements.

## Finding a tenant

There are a number of ways you can find a tenant for your property:

* Do it yourself - you can find a tenant yourself through advertising in a local paper, local shop advertising boards, hospital or education notice boards, or online via social media or dedicated selling and advertising pages.
* Through a letting agency - a lettings agent will be able to market your property, find a tenant, and deal with the contracts. If you wish they will also be able to manage the property on your behalf. Lettings companies will charge a fee for their services. Always shop around to find the correct agency that meets your needs, and please make sure they are a member of an appropriate accreditation authority (for example the Association of Residential Letting Agents or Landlord Accreditation Scotland).

# Tenancy Deposit Scheme

A landlord may ask a tenant to pay a sum of money at the start of their tenancy which will be held as security. Once a tenant has paid the deposit for a property, the landlord or letting agent has to lodge it with a tenancy deposit scheme within 30 working days of the beginning of the tenancy.

There are three tenancy deposit scheme providers to choose from in Scotland that have been approved by the Scottish Government:

* [Letting Protection Service Scotland](https://www.lettingprotectionscotland.com/)
* [SafesDeposits Scotland](https://safedepositsscotland.com/)
* [mydeposits Scotland](https://www.mydepositsscotland.co.uk/)

Once the landlord lodges the deposit with one of these providers, within 30 working days, they have to give a tenant in writing:

* the amount of the deposit and the date they received it
* the date the deposit was paid into the tenancy deposit scheme
* the address of the property
* a statement confirming they're registered (or have applied to be registered) as a landlord in the property's local council area
* the name and contact details of the tenancy deposit scheme provider they used
* the conditions in which all or part of your deposit can be kept at the end of the tenancy

# Money advice

Money Advice Service are a national umbrella organisation which promotes the development of free, independent, impartial and confidential debt advice and financial inclusion.

Contact them by email: info@moneyadvicescotland.org.uk

# Credit Unions

A credit union is a place where you can save your money and get loans at competitive rates. What makes credit unions different is that they’re not-for-profit, so any money they make goes back to the people who use them via their rates and dividends.

Falkirk District Credit Union covers the full area covered by the boundary of Falkirk Council. You can join at the main office, online or at a community collection point. There are also various ways of paying into your account.

**Tel:** 01324 473695 **Email:** office@falkirkcreditunion.co.uk

**Web:** [https://www.falkirkcreditunion.co.uk](https://www.falkirkcreditunion.co.uk/)