

Soapbox for the Hawick News Friday 6th December 2013,
from Cllr George Turnbull.

I had the privilege to attend the Scottish Empty Homes Conference held on Tuesday 26th November in Glasgow. This is the third Conference that I have attended and as usual it was interesting and brought me up to speed with what is all happening across the Public and Private Sectors.

The proceedings were chaired by Andy Young, Policy Manager, Scottish Federation of Housing Associations. A general introduction was made by Graeme Brown, Director, Shelter Scotland.

The Key Note Address was made by Margaret Burgess MSP, Minister for Housing and Welfare and a question and answer session followed.

Camelot Vacant Property Management presented the Champion of the Year Awards and I am pleased to report that through the great work by Fiona Todd Scottish Borders Council won an award.

We then split into different workshops which covered topics including,

- (1) Tips & Tricks for engaging hard to reach owners, led by Fiona Todd, Empty Homes Officer, Homes Again Project.
- (2) Lessons from the first council to use Vacant Dwelling Council Tax Powers, led by Helen Mackenzie, Head of Exchequer Services, Western Isles Council.

(3) Working with empty home owners & commercial repairs, led by Liz Dickson/Brian Parr, from SHBVN.

In the afternoon we had a Panel presentation on the Empty Homes Loan Fund which generated some very good questions and answers during this session.

Further workshops took place covering the following topics,

- (1) Argyll & Bute's £3m Empty Homes Loan and Grant Scheme led by Kelly Ferns, Argyll & Bute Council.
- (2) What energy efficiency funding can empty home owners access? Led by Mark McArthur, Energy Saving Trust.
- (3) Make it your problem: Thinking outside the box and engaging with decision makers, led by Allyson Allison, Empty Homes Officer, Forth Valley Empty Homes Project.

The final session was delivered by Jim O'Neil, Dumfries and Galloway Council,

If you liked it then you should have put a roof on it:
Tales from the Dumfries Housing Regeneration Area.

At any conference networking is a very important aspect of the event being attended and I met two officials from Coast to Country Housing Limited based in Redcar.

These officials were pioneers when they restored almost derelict buildings back into use for sale and rent and they masterminded a project that took long term unemployed off the dole utilised their skills and took on apprentices.

The long term unemployed were tradesmen who took the apprentice's under their wing and trained them on site as they redeveloped the buildings.

They arranged discounts with builders merchants and had invoices going to the Council to enable VAT claw back and even organised special mortgage deals with local Mortgage Companies.

This company is now growing at such a pace that they are willing to come and view properties in Hawick and I am making arrangements for them to meet Scottish Borders Council Officials view properties and also make a presentation to the Teviot and Liddesdale Area Forum early next year.

May I take this opportunity to wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, All the very best for 2014.

Cllr George Turnbull