

Key Information

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A CIH CYMRU POLICY BRIEFING PAPER

Empty Properties

Making the most of the existing stock

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Introduction

Wasted homes have obvious consequences for people in housing need. With over 80,000 households on local authority waiting lists and the credit crisis reducing the opportunities to provide much needed affordable housing in Wales, thousands of properties that could significantly contribute to housing need continue to lie empty and blight communities across the country. At least 26,000 homes in private hands have been empty for over six months in Wales, with this number likely to rise significantly. At the same time, repossessions are rising and people are struggling more than ever to find affordable housing.

Though empty properties are not the whole answer to the housing crisis, government and local authorities cannot ignore their potential – there is a need to ensure that owners are both encouraged, and where appropriate, required to unlock the potential of this wasted resource.

There is an increasing pressure on housing authorities to develop effective empty homes strategies to make best use of the existing stock in the face of a growing population, increases in the rate of household formation driven by smaller household sizes, and growing pressure on social housing. Although some local authorities and their partners are carrying out positive work to make better use of empty homes, using the range of formal powers available to them, much more is required in terms of innovative solutions, use of legislative powers and financial resources.

There is an under supply of housing to meet the high demand for property across all tenures and price brackets. Returning empty properties to use can make a significant contribution to increasing overall housing supply and meeting housing demand.

This briefing:

- Sets out the policy context for empty properties in Wales
- Provides a brief overview of the legislation relating to empty homes
- Highlights a range of positive and innovative practice being undertaken by local authorities in Wales in attempting to bring empty properties back into use
- Provides a list of practical resources and where to find further information

This briefing does not aim to provide a comprehensive overview of all relevant policy, law and positive practice, but it is hoped that the information contained here is found to be interesting and informative to housing practitioners in Wales and beyond.

Empty Properties

Making the most of the existing stock



Section 1

Setting out the Challenge

Defining Empty Properties

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) classes Problematic Vacancies as those that are inactive in the housing market and have been empty for more than six months.

However, there is no widely accepted definition of an empty property and a range of terms, such as vacant and redundant are also often used. Generally speaking, a vacant dwelling is defined as a unit of residential accommodation that is empty at a particular point in time. This includes dwellings that are:

- empty between change of occupants;
- undergoing modernisation, repair or conversion;
- awaiting demolition;
- newly completed but not occupied.

Due to this wide definition, true 'empty properties' are not always as straightforward to identify as it may seem. For example:

- a home which appears empty may be a person's second home and occupied infrequently;
- an empty property may have been earmarked as part of a regeneration programme and demolition may have already been planned;
- properties could be empty pending planning consent, refurbishment or whilst awaiting the new resident to move in;
- there may be sign of occupation but this may be from squatters;
- a property may be occupied but the garden may be overgrown and the home neglected.

Information can be obtained from Council Tax records for the purpose of identifying empty dwellings and for taking steps to bring empty dwellings back into use.

Why properties become empty

Individual factors

- Unresolved ownership usually following the death of the owner;
- Bankruptcy of owner;
- Owner may be institutionalised – hospital, prison etc;
- Lack of expertise in property and tenancy management.

Property factors

- The property may have been acquired solely for speculative investment purposes;
- The owner may not fully appreciate the financial benefits of bringing the empty property back into use;
- Poor property condition where the costs of bringing the property back into use may be prohibitive, relative to the income that could be generated;
- Repossession.

Housing Market Factors

- Low demand;
- Housing market collapse – repossession, negative equity;
- Over supply of certain property types;
- Area regeneration may result in properties being empty pending renovation or demolition.

Benefits of bringing empty properties back into use

Owners could benefit from:

- Rental income or capital if the property is sold;
- Security against vandalism and squatting;
- Help with repairs (via grant assistance, advice or access to reputable builders);
- Long term investment potential;
- Potential property management by Registered Social Landlords.

Neighbours may benefit from:

- Increased property value;
- Improvement in their local environment;
- Reduction in vandalism and squatters;
- Making their area a more attractive place to live;
- Reduction in disrepair of empty property affecting their home;
- General sense of well being.

People in housing need:

- Greater availability;
- Greater choice;
- A landlord accredited by the local authority;
- Opportunity to occupy a more spacious property;
- Improved standards of housing;
- More affordable housing;
- Reduced reliance on temporary accommodation or bed and breakfast;
- Accommodation for people in housing crisis.

Local Economy:

- Encourages economic vitality – through the multiplier effect within the local economy and from employment and training opportunities that can be generated.

Wider Community:

- Increased Council Tax income for occupied homes means that more money can be invested;
- Reduced demand on services such as fire, police and the council to deal with problems means that resources can be used more effectively elsewhere;
- Using existing housing reduces the demand for building on greenfield sites, preserving the environment for current and future generations.

The Policy Context

UK policy overview

The Welsh Assembly is currently gathering information from local authorities on empty homes and the measures authorities are taking to tackle the problems. They are particularly interested in the nature of empty property strategies and policies in each local authority with the aim of producing a further advice to local authorities in preparing effective empty homes policies/strategies during 2009.

This work is running hand in hand with a Shelter Cymru project, funded by WAG (see page 8). The overall purpose of the project is to support local authorities to make more effective use of privately owned empty homes to meet housing need by providing free advice, training and good practice.

This section provides a brief overview of the Welsh national policy context within which the issue of empty homes needs to be considered. It also includes a brief summary of the approach to empty homes being adopted in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

One Wales

The Welsh Assembly Government's aims for housing in Wales were set out in *One Wales – A progressive agenda for the government of Wales*. This set out an aspiration for all households in all communities irrespective of their means, to be able to afford a decent home.

The One Wales agenda recognised that many communities in Wales experience severe housing pressure, and set out a commitment to tackling housing need using a variety of methods.

A stock of good-quality, affordable homes is the foundation of thriving local communities in all four corners of Wales... The shortage of affordable housing, to rent or to buy, is one of the greatest challenges facing many communities in Wales.

The Essex Review

In October 2007, Jocelyn Davies, the Deputy Minister for Housing announced that she was establishing a Task and Finish Group to explore the barriers and opportunities presented by the Assembly Government's priority to deliver significantly more affordable homes in Wales by 2011. The work was led by Sue Essex who was joined by Dr Robert Smith, Director of the Regeneration Institute at Cardiff University and Dr Peter Williams, formerly Deputy Director General of the Council of Mortgage Lenders.

Empty Properties

Making the most of the existing stock



The origins of the Essex Review focused on the investment in, and regulation of, housing associations. In the end, the terms of reference of the task and finish group covered a much wider and more complex area, including, but not limited to:

- how housing associations could be helped to build more homes;
- the opportunities to attract more investment into housing in Wales;
- how environmental standards of housing could be improved; and
- how the Making the Connections agenda could help improve delivery of affordable housing.

During the Review, the team met with over 70 organisations or individuals engaged either directly or indirectly with housing. The final report 'Affordable Housing in Wales' was published in June 2008 and recommended wide-ranging changes to the way that the provision of affordable housing is regulated, funded, planned and delivered in Wales.

The report specifically mentions the need to maximise the use of existing housing, both privately owned and owned by social landlords. It states that:

Local authorities should develop an up to date picture of the scale and nature of empty property in their areas through their council tax data base and should also have a programme of action on tackling long term empty property, working with landlord organisations and housing associations where appropriate. They should also give consideration to how existing housing may be converted to give more/better units, or non residential buildings could be renovated or converted. In addition there may be opportunities for area and estate reconfiguration that could add housing numbers and/or a better mixed tenure¹.

Out of the 43 recommendations put forward by the Essex review, recommendation 26 relates directly to private sector empty property:

Local authorities should develop an ongoing programme of tackling empty private housing in their area, working with landlords, housing associations and developers where appropriate.

To consider the review recommendations and implement some of the required changes, the *Essex Implementation Programme* was set up. This has involved a wide range of stakeholders working across four workstreams each considering a series of related issues, including:

1. Existing properties and responding to the credit crunch;
2. Affordable Housing Delivery;
3. Finance;
4. Regulation.

The issue of empty properties is being addressed by the first of these workstreams

Sustainable Homes: A National Housing Strategy for Wales

Consultation on a new national housing strategy to replace *Better Homes for People in Wales* was launched by the Welsh Assembly Government in January 2009. The National Housing Strategy sets out the Government's long term vision for housing in Wales, focused around the following six principles

- Providing the right mix of housing;
- Using housing as a catalyst to improve lives;
- Strengthening communities;
- Radically reducing the ecological footprint;
- Ensuring better services; and
- Delivering together.

The strategy recognises that increased action on tackling empty homes is likely to be a key factor in addressing housing demand in future. It suggests that action plans to quantify and address empty homes should be part of the armoury of affordable housing delivery and that this could extend to homes such as holiday and second homes.

¹ Affordable Housing Task and Finish Group Report to the Deputy Minister for Housing (June 2008)



Affordable Housing Delivery Statements

The One Wales agreement gave an undertaking to increase the supply of affordable homes in Wales by at least 6,500 over the four year term of government. It also identifies a key role for locally prepared Affordable Housing Delivery Statements (AHDS) in achieving the target. In February 2009 the Welsh Assembly Government issued guidance for local authorities on preparing Affordable Housing Delivery Statements. The aim of the AHDS is to:

- Strengthen the response by local authorities and partners to local housing pressures;
- Incentivise the efficient and effective delivery of affordable housing.

Empty homes form a key requirement of the AHDS, with housing associations and local authorities being encouraged as part of an agreed strategy, to bring long-term empty private sector homes back into re-use to improve access to affordable homes. Local authorities are expected to have submitted their AHDS by the end of May 2009.

Local Housing Strategies

Local authorities in Wales are responsible for producing local housing strategies for their communities. They must assess current housing and the particular needs of their area then plan how to meet the housing requirements identified. The strategies set out a locally agreed, long term housing vision and the direction, objectives and target outcomes to achieve it. Strategies should be evidence-based using the findings of a Local Housing Market Assessment. Guidance from the Welsh Assembly Government on preparing local housing strategies² suggests that authorities should make reference to their policy in terms of empty homes and the powers it intends to utilise to bring them back into use, including Empty Dwelling Management Orders as contained in the Housing Act 2004.

Under the 'Plan Rationalisation' process since April 2008 the key elements of the local housing strategies are required to be reflected within the Community Strategy.

Empty Homes in England

Between 1997 and 2008 the total number of empty homes in England reduced by 9 per cent, from 763,234 to 697,055 dwellings. This means that about 3 per cent of the housing stock is empty at any one time.

The private sector accounts for 88 per cent of the total and 1.6 per cent of the private sector stock (293,728 dwellings) are vacant for more than six months.

The problem is relatively well spread across England. London, the South East and East of England account for nearly a third of all private sector dwellings empty for six or more months – 90,046 dwellings. This compares to 120,564 in the three Northern regions and 83,118 in the three remaining regions.

Communities and Local Government (CLG) is the government department responsible for shaping housing policy in England and the use of the existing housing stock therefore falls within its remit. CLG takes the view that it is important to maximise use of the existing housing stock so that we can minimise the number of new homes that need to be built each year, particularly in areas of the country where housing demand is high, such as the south east of England.

The Government, working with the independent Empty Homes Agency, encourages local authorities not only to deal with their own empty properties but also to adopt measures to bring privately owned empty homes back into use as part of their strategic housing approach, through engaging with owners to find solutions and offering incentives such as grants, loans or advice on selling, leasing and tax issues.

It also acknowledges that local authorities may also resort to enforcement action where it has not proved possible to achieve re-occupation of empty homes through voluntary means – these include compulsory purchase and enforced sale. More recently, the Government has introduced an alternative last resort power – Empty Dwelling Management Orders.

² Welsh assembly government (2007) *Preparing Local housing strategies Revised guidance to local Authorities in Wales*

Empty Properties

Making the most of the existing stock



Empty Homes in Northern Ireland

The 2006 House Condition Survey indicated that there are 40,400 empty dwellings in Northern Ireland (5.7%), a significant increase from the 31,900 (4.9%) in 2001 – primarily due to the growth in buy-to-let (or buy-to-leave in this circumstance). Around 5000 of these are made up of Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Housing Association Stock with the rest being in the private sector.

John Semple in his Review into Affordable Housing (2007) recommended that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive should act as an Empty Homes Agency for Northern Ireland with responsibility for the production of an Empty Homes Strategy. He suggested such a strategy should encompass:

- A register of empty homes (for longer than 6 months);
- A new system of rating to provide for 100% rating for private sector properties vacant for 6 months or more, rising to 200% if vacant for a year or more;
- Incentives to bring empty properties back into use e.g. private sector grants;
- More use of existing powers to address empty dwellings;
- A review of current demolitions.

He also suggested that the government should support the new role through the introduction of new legislation (similar to EDMOs in England and Wales). Having considered the review the Minister (Margaret Ritchie) then asked the NIHE to develop a strategy.

A copy of the strategy can be viewed at: http://www.nihe.gov.uk/empty_homes_strategy.pdf

The Department of Finance and Personnel has also issued a report stating its intention to introduce 100% rating liability for empty homes in April 2010.

Empty Homes in Scotland

Part of the Scottish Government Private Rented Sector Review published in April 2009 looked at the reasons for empty homes and examined ways of bringing empty property into use. The review forms part of the policy direction of working more closely with the Private Rented Sector (as stated in the discussion document *Firm Foundations*) and looking to it to provide more solutions for vulnerable households.

See: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/264862/0079319.pdf>

The research found that there is little strategic direction in relation to empty homes in place at present and the size of the issue is difficult to assess, with most local authorities not identifying it as a particular problem. Various reasons were given on why properties were empty including a reluctance on some owners to become landlords.

The researchers made recommendations (which stopped short of the English model of management powers) instead centring on local authorities establishing an Empty Homes Policy and the requirement for more strategic and focused activity that features explicitly in local housing strategies. They state that effective management of empty homes requires a lead service and joint service co-operation. The limited Rural Empty Properties Grants were held up as a positive example of targeted funding but this subsidy was insufficient and they suggest a review of the level of grants. Overall, they recommend carrot and stick approaches to dealing with empty homes using current legislation along with offers of support.

In essence, there has been a relatively limited focus on empty properties in Scotland, although the review and the research suggests this may change. Existing initiatives focus on rural empty homes in a fairly limited way. The Rural Properties Empty Homes grant supports owners to carry out repairs on the basis that the property is ultimately to be let out. Similarly the Lead Tenancies Scheme aims to improve/repair empty rural homes which are then let out via an RSL for a lease period, with the property then returning to the owner after that period.

Shelter Cymru Empty Homes Project

Shelter Cymru received Social Housing Management Grant during 2008-09 and 2009/10 for an all-Wales empty homes project. The purpose of the project is to support local authorities and their partners to make more effective use of privately owned empty homes to meet housing need, by providing free advice, consultancy and good practice exchanges to accelerate current work in this area. The project aims to embed good practice approaches and expertise on empty homes, drawing on the experience of the Empty Homes Agency to develop good practice models. In addition to completing an initial survey of the number of longer-term empty homes in Wales, the project also undertook a questionnaire survey of local authorities that included gathering information on the nature of assistance required by individual authorities.

The project commenced in Summer 2008 and the first phase involved:

- gathering data on empty properties in Wales;
- a survey of local authorities to explore support needs;
- direct contact to support local authorities and partners, and to raise awareness of the project.

The second phase focuses on the training and consultancy element, including working directly with private owners who are looking for help and advice in bringing their properties back in to use. As part of its work to raise the profile of the partnership work and investment required to bring empty homes back into use as a contribution to the supply of affordable housing, the project arranged two successful seminars in April 2009. The seminars brought together local authorities, housing providers, landlord representatives, third sector and professional organisation as well as elected members and developers, and highlighted good practice initiatives from across Wales and England.

Shelter Cymru's work will also contribute good practice examples to the Assembly Government's guidance to local authorities and is developing a briefing for local councillors on empty homes and the importance of their support in increasing the priority given to this issue.

The research and work undertaken as part of the project to date has been used to inform this briefing

The National Picture – Results of Shelter Cymru Research

The initial stages of Shelter Cymru's Empty Homes Project has included extensive consultation with local authorities, both through directly contacting Empty Property Officers and their equivalents and through undertaking a questionnaire survey to discover the current local position on empty homes initiatives, prioritisation of this area of operations and the support provided to officers engaged in this work. The questionnaire was circulated to the twenty two local authorities, with a 100 per cent response rate.

What is clear from the results is that individual local authorities in Wales are at different stages of development with regard to their work on empty homes strategies and the implementation of initiatives. Some authorities are leading and producing excellent good practice initiatives in bringing back empty private properties back into use; some are developing and implementing their strategies for the first time; while others are not prioritising empty properties as a tool to meet housing need.

A more detailed analysis of the results of the survey is provided below.

The scale of the problem

Authority area	Long Term Empty
Isle of Anglesey	716
Blaenau Gwent	900
Bridgend	1,820
Caerphilly	1,074
Cardiff	2,289
Carmarthenshire	1,954
Ceredigion	597
Conwy	1,050
Denbighshire	893
Flintshire	868
Gwynedd	1,308
Merthyr Tydfil	817
Monmouthshire	1,482
Neath Port Talbot	1,248
Newport	2,078
Pembrokeshire	1,000
Powys*	60
Rhondda Cynon Taf	3,000
Swansea	1,881
Torfaen	295
Vale of Glamorgan	817
Wrexham	260
Wales	26,407

Source: Council Tax Dwellings (CT1) Return & Shelter Cymru EHO work in July 2008

* This figure was provided by the local authority. Data Unit Wales figure for Powys for 2006-2007 is 1,217 longer-term empty properties.

Empty Properties

Making the most of the existing stock



Corporate commitment to tackling empty homes

There was generally a high level of political commitment with 18 out of 22 local authorities having given public support or endorsement to the issue of tackling empty homes. Three authorities were seeking this support at the time the questionnaire was carried out with only one authority stating that it had not been given political support.

Target setting

The survey revealed that more than half the local authorities in Wales had put in place a target for reducing the number of empty homes within its area. Some had specified a precise number whilst others expressed this as a percentage of the number of empty homes identified. Of those authorities who had set targets there was considerable variation in the number of properties that authorities aimed to bring back in to use, with this figure ranging from 3 to 77. There was some correlation between the scale of the empty property problem within an area and the target for bringing back in to use, although this wasn't always the case. Five authorities specified that they had not set any targets and one was planning on setting a target after their empty property strategy had been through a consultation process.

Use of enforcement solutions

Local authorities were asked whether officers had been encouraged by elected members to take enforcement action against long term empty homes and whether the authority had used such action in practice. The majority (18) had been given such authorisation, with 17 authorities stating that they had taken enforcement action against long-term empty homes. Two authorities were in process of seeking endorsement and one had been given a directive to use enforcement action for only problematic empty properties. Only one authority stated that that had not received agreement from elected members to use enforcement solutions. Out of the authorities who had not taken any enforcement action, two were developing their enforcement procedures with a view to using this solution in the future.

Use of financial incentives

Financial incentives were also widely used by local authorities with 16 stating that they have used such measures to help bring empty properties back in to use.

Support to potential landlords

A significant number of local authorities offered a leasing scheme, tenant finding scheme or similar to help owners of empty homes – 14 local authorities were involved in some scheme of this kind whilst 8 stated that such a service was not part of their empty homes strategy.

Marketing and publicity

This was seen as a key tool in addressing the problem of empty properties across Wales with all but three local authorities having undertaken some publicity or marketing to promote returning empty homes into use. Awareness raising is arguably a low-level and relatively inexpensive measure which can generate significant outcomes.

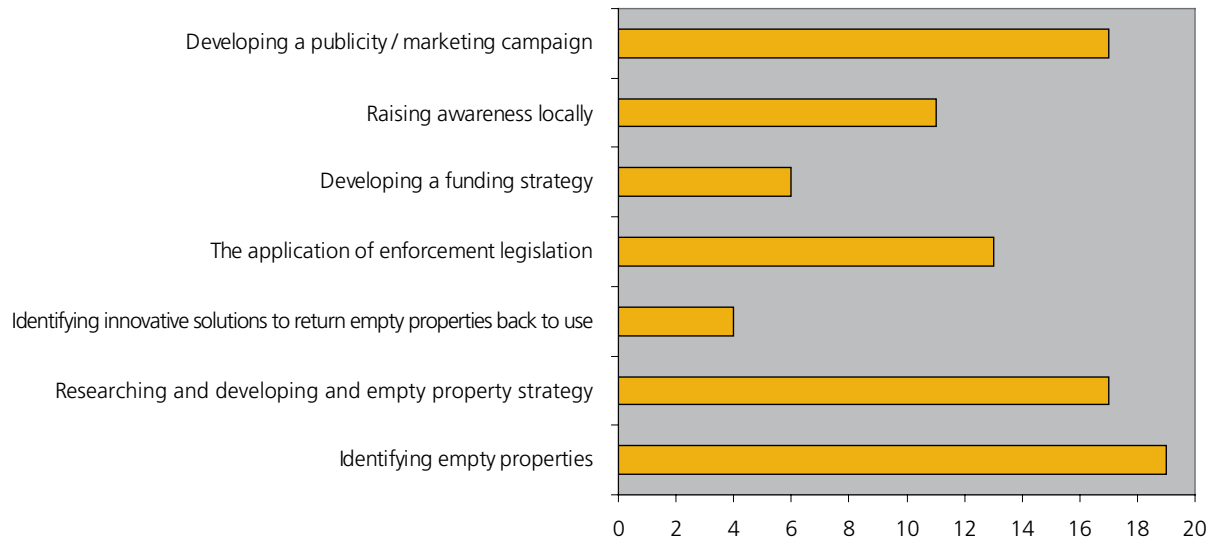
Cross boundary work

It is widely acknowledged that housing markets transcend local authority boundaries and the issues around empty homes are no exception.

Half of local authorities in Wales have undertaken some form of cross-boundary work with neighbouring local authorities or other bodies for tackling empty homes. Regional working can help make best use of resources, particularly when it involves the sharing of knowledge and expertise. For examples of regional working see 'partnership working' under the good practice section later on.

Future support to local authorities

The Shelter Cymru questionnaire asked respondents what areas of empty property work they felt they needed help or support with. Every local authority identified at least one area where they would benefit from additional support. Details of the responses are illustrated in the graph overleaf, which shows that identifying empty properties and developing a marketing/publicity campaign were the two most significant areas.



Summary of issues and challenges in Wales

The following list summarises the issues identified by Shelter Cymru through both through the survey and face-to face engagement with empty property officers across Wales:

- There is in some areas a lack of support to employ a dedicated empty property officer and also a lack of political leadership in relation to this issue;
- Although there are leading local authorities who have excellent examples of good practice, officers are aware they need to look at other initiatives to ensure their approach is well balanced in terms of both enforcement and supportive initiatives;
- Empty homes are given a low priority in house condition surveys. Inspectors carrying out the survey find it difficult to gain access and so ignore them and move onto occupied houses that are easier to inspect;
- A perception that some of the legislation on empty homes is complicated. The Assembly Government could help address this e.g. through the new guidance it is producing and supporting the delivery of or offering training.
- The Local Government Act 2003 gave Council's discretionary powers to reduce or remove the council tax discount currently awarded in respect of long-term empty properties. Regrettably there is significant additional work associated with collection of such tax but no overall financial benefit to the Council. The proceeds of removing this discount would increase the Council Tax base. However, when

the grant settlement is announced, the Council grant moves up by the increase of Formula Spending Share less the amount the Council "expects" to collect in additional Council Tax. Therefore, the effect of this is that the Assembly Government assumes that local government collects more Council Tax when it allocates the Grant. The Grant will be reduced by the same amount and in effect all proceeds go back to the Assembly Government to be redistributed. One solution could be to retain the additional Council Tax yield, independent of the Government Grant, and "ring fence" such monies for specific empty properties initiatives.

- Empty property officers are given limited opportunity to share information, experiences, knowledge and develop good practice.
- Because of financial pressures, there is a lack of funding for renovation grants to encourage home owners to improve the conditions of their homes or bring empty homes back into use. Our survey revealed that a number of councils have suspended all discretionary loans and grants for private sector housing purposes, with only financial assistance currently being offered is for mandatory Disabled Facilities Grant.



Section 2

Developing the Solutions

There is no single solution that will solve all empty property problems, but there are a wide range of tools available to local authorities – from light intervention, such as advice to owners, through to higher level interventions and enforcement. The ability to offer a broad, flexible range of options to the owners of empty properties achieves a greater level of success than attempting to use the same solution for every property and every property owner.

Preventative Solutions

Understanding the drivers for keeping a property empty is the key issue in tackling empty homes. Reasons for vacancy may vary according to the owner's circumstances. The following components make up the preventative toolkit. These will be the first steps in addressing empty properties before any legal action is commenced.

Managing an up to date and continually improving data base

Data for empty homes is increasingly being stored on a GIS system. This can be useful in indicating "hotspot" areas across a local authority area. Furthermore, photographic evidence of each empty property can be stored on the database along with the type of building, its age, and any other information an authority wishes to store. This can then be displayed through various formats to show the extent of the problem and what results are being achieved. It is important that this baseline of information is accurate and updated to take account of local change. From this register of empty homes efforts can be made to contact owners.

Tracing owners

One of the main problems Empty Property Officers will encounter is establishing the ownership of the property. In some cases, families have remained in the local area and contact is relatively straightforward. However, in more difficult cases other sources can provide the desired information for example:

- The electoral register
- Land registry
- Council tax register
- Parish council
- Statutory undertakers
- Utility companies


If however, the owner cannot be traced and works to the property are necessary, the Council can serve notice of its intention to carry out works in default and to recover the costs of those works. The sale of the property may then be enforced to cover these costs (see page 13, 'Enforcement Solutions').

Proactive advice and assistance

One of the most important measures in ensuring properties do not remain empty is providing good quality advice and assistance. The Empty Property Officer has responsibility for developing information for owners and acting as their first point of contact. Leaflets should be produced for owners detailing their rights and responsibilities, signposting to local letting agents and giving advice on maintenance and repair. Information should also be produced for local residents who may know of an empty property or be suffering from having an empty property neighboring their own. Publicity regarding the council's position on long-term vacancies can also be undertaken using the local media.

Housing options – rent deposit / bond scheme / choice based lettings

Some local authorities have introduced a targeted Rent Deposit Scheme to assist those in greatest housing need in accessing the private rented sector – offering an alternative choice to the social rented sector. Schemes such as these can be used and promoted as an alternative source of potential tenants to owners of currently empty properties. In addition to this, local authorities who are operating a choice based lettings scheme could further develop it to incorporate private rented properties thus providing additional mechanisms of marketing for owners and an alternative method of advertising a property in their area.



Flats over the shops

Flats over commercial premises often remain empty as there is no separate access and owners are therefore reluctant to let them out. Also, the accommodation offered may be in need of modernisation and any money spent may not be recovered in rental income. In terms of local authorities wider objectives, these properties may not be a high priority, as they rarely give rise to neighborhood nuisance and are often small in size. Nevertheless, they have the potential to appeal to some groups.

The authority could adopt a dual approach to addressing this issue. In instances where flats can only be accessed internally from the commercial premises below and are being used as part of the business (such as for storage), the officer could make a case that the entire building be re-classified as being for business use only and the 'flat' be removed from the domestic property empty property list.

In instances where appropriate access to the flat above exists, or the possibility of developing it exists, the Empty Property Officer could inform the owners about the availability of Flat Conversion Allowances. This scheme enables property owners to claim up front tax relief on the whole of their capital spending on the renovation or conversion of empty flats and offer them for rent. This scheme has been set up by central government in recognition of the wasted resource of flats above commercial premises, and operates through the Inland Revenue. There is therefore, no cost to the local authority.

For further information on Flat Conversion Allowances see: <http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/manuals/camanual/CA43000.htm>

Working with private landlords

Professional and private landlords are key players in ensuring private sector properties are reoccupied. They are also likely to provide a major part of the market in the purchase of empty properties returned for sale, while also providing information regarding market conditions.

Maintaining a dialogue with landlords and working in partnership to raise standards in the private rented sector is vitally important.

The local authority's approach to working with private landlords should look to endorse 'good' landlords and promote their services and offer enhancements in return for their adherence to agreed standards of behavior and property maintenance. Accreditation schemes are increasingly being used as a way of engaging landlords and raising standards. Many local authorities also facilitate private landlord forums which offer a mechanism for the more inexperienced landlord to access a network or information services and can be an important component in reducing the number of empty homes.

Empty Property Brokering Service

Owners of empty properties wishing to sell could be put in touch with accredited landlords and agents who have expressed an interest in buying properties of that type, location and value. Alternatively, if owners wish to let their property, they can be referred to the scheme and can be advised about setting up a successful tenancy and the legal requirements they will have to meet.

A further such brokering scheme outside of accreditation could be developed to link owners with local builders and developers, who may be willing to acquire properties for renovation and subsequent rent or sale.

Council Tax

In line with the national agenda some councils have eliminated the discount for empty properties via council tax. This measure is preventive in its nature as it removes a financial incentive to allow properties to remain vacant and sends a clear message to owners.

Environmental Wardens and Neighborhood Renewal Initiatives

Properties that are visibly empty have a negative effect on neighborhoods and are a magnet for fly tipping and criminality, thus undermining actions to create sustainable communities. It is vital therefore that the relevant response is undertaken swiftly to ensure that empty properties do not reinforce a sense of dereliction in neighborhoods. Interventions such as Environmental Wardens can be a key component of this agenda and can help play a role in identifying and addressing empty properties in a local area.

Empty Properties

Making the most of the existing stock



Housing Association Purchase and Renovation

A housing association may, where appropriate, purchase an empty dwelling and undertake the necessary remedial works to bring it to the required standard. The resulting property may then be available for rental as an addition to the Association's housing stock, or be offered for sale as an affordable housing unit.

Raising Awareness

Publicity is particularly important to raise awareness of the opportunities that bringing empty properties back in to use can offer. There are a range of opportunities to publicise empty property work, including:

- Through a range of different networks and housing forums;
- Direct mailing to relevant organisations and property owners;
- Leaflets, posters and other advertising placed in public places such as libraries, health centers etc;
- Highlighting the size of the problem in the district and the wasted housing resource this represents through radio; television, and local press;
- Setting up an empty property 24 hour hot line.

Elected members have strong links with the community and their ability to publicise this issue is invaluable. With their political and civic links, they can promote partnerships within the community, and thus play a major role in maintaining a high profile for the empty property strategy.

Enforcement Solutions and the Legislative Context

Local authorities should aim to bring empty properties back into use by a process of negotiation and support. However the provision of an enforcement toolkit is necessary in some cases where owners refuse to engage or meet their responsibilities. In severe cases, intervention may be necessary where the physical fabric of the building is compromising the safety of others or the structural security of other properties. The impact that empty homes can have demands in a more proactive approach from strategic authorities.

Since the introduction of the Housing Act 2004, the legislative framework has broadened and now provides local authorities with a range of measures to address the issues of empty homes. This section outlines some of the legislative tools that are available to local authorities in bringing empty properties back in to use. It is not intended be detailed or comprehensive guide on how to use the legislation – see the page 25, 'Further Information' for a list of useful resources and guidance on enforcement solutions.

Environmental Protection Act 1990 Sections 78-81

Allows the council to require the abatement of statutory nuisances. The term statutory nuisance applies to a range of problems that might arise from empty homes, including accumulations of rubbish or dampness affecting neighbouring properties. The council can serve an abatement notice on the owner of the premises requiring works to abate the nuisance and if the notice is not complied with can carry out works in default.

Building Act 1984 Section 77

Enables the council to deal with buildings that it considers to be dangerous. It can apply to a Magistrates' Court for an order requiring the owner to make the building safe or demolish it.

Building Act 1984 Section 78

Allows the council to deal with buildings that pose an immediate danger. This emergency measure allows the local authority to carry out remedial works itself without giving the opportunity to deal with it himself. The Council is only entitled to carry out works that remove the danger.

Building Act 1984 section 79

This empowers the council to deal with ruinous and dilapidated buildings or structures and neglected sites and if necessary carry out work in default.

Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982 Section 29

Allows the council to carry out works to an unoccupied building to prevent unauthorised entry or to prevent it from becoming a danger to public health. 48 hours notice is needed unless the works are required immediately.

Housing Act 1985 (S 189, 190, and 192)

This section of the Housing Act enables councils to issue repair notices to require owners to take action to remedy unfitness (This has now been replaced by the Housing Act 2004).

Housing Act 2004

The implementation of the Housing Act 2004 includes the introduction of the Housing Health and Safety Ratings System and the authority to implement Empty Dwelling Management Orders.

Developing an empty property strategy

An empty property strategy should clearly set out what actions and initiatives an organisation plans to take to bring empty properties back into use and create more homes. The Empty Property Strategy should link in with wider organisational and corporate strategies including:

- Housing
- Planning
- Regeneration
- Social Inclusion
- Homelessness
- Economic Development

The purpose of the strategy should be:

- To set out strategic direction for empty property work;
- To set out an action plan with targets and milestones to deliver the strategy;
- To continue to devise solutions though working in partnership that will address the issues that are the root cause of properties becoming empty and remaining underused for long period of time;

- To assist the provision of good quality affordable housing;
- To ensure that Welsh Assembly Government targets relating to empty homes are achieved;
- To bring empty homes back into use!

Suggested template for an empty property strategy

National context	Set out the national picture on empty homes, provide information on the policy agenda, and emphasise the importance of tackling empty properties.
Local context	Set out the specific issues affecting the local area, including the local housing market and the particular challenges facing an area.
Current position	<p>The strategy should outline what empty property action has been taken to date, how successful it was and what lessons were learnt.</p> <p>It should also establish what factors have contributed to empty properties becoming empty. (See individual, property and housing market factors above).</p>
Strategic objectives	The key strategic objectives should be established at the outset – these could be related to some of issue listed under ‘the purpose of the strategy’ above.
Action planning	The strategy should be supported by a clear action plan for implementing the strategy, which should set out the tasks needed to meet the objectives and allocate clear roles and responsibilities.
Resourcing	Consideration should be given to what resources are needed to implement the strategy. It is important to think about resources in the widest sense to include factors such as staffing time, IT packages etc.
Consultation and involvement	The empty property function within local authorities can often be dispersed across many departments – consultation and involvement is a good way of gaining the support of other agencies whose involvement will be fundamental to any success in bringing empty properties back in to use.
Monitoring and Review	It is important that mechanisms are put in place to evaluate the success of the empty property strategy. As well as helping to monitor the strategy, having an effective performance management system in relation to empty homes will also give a clear message that the issue is an important one to the local authority.

Empty Properties

Making the most of the existing stock





Lessons Learned

- ✓ Produce action plans to establish where you are going;
- ✓ Debate the details, examine the causes of empty property in your area, analyse the market before a strategy is devised;
 - Properties described on Council tax returns can often be occupied;
 - Some are beyond economical repair
 - A large number are trapped in the stagnant house-for sale market;
 - The data provides no evidence that empty properties are situated where there is a demand.
- ✓ Conduct an empty property survey (Carmarthshire, Rhondda Cynon Taff and Conwy are examples of local authorities that have done this);
- ✓ When setting up a data base work closely with IT support to get the programme you want;
- ✓ Housing association partners in the strategy should be carefully selected and should be able to demonstrate the same level of commitment as the local authority in order to maintain the integrity of the scheme;
- ✓ Information packs should be well-produced and written in simple, jargon-free language;
- ✓ Much is said of the need of a pro-active approach, but it is necessary to have a re-active programme also in order to deal with the properties which fall outside the pro-actively targeted area;
- ✓ Realise that the task of an Empty Property Officer can be a long slow one: perseverance is an essential quality to be developed;
- ✓ It is important to build a network of contacts with other Empty Property Officers in order to exchange ideas and seek advice and support;
- ✓ Have a working party who visit and learn from other local authorities and 'don't just say it, do it';
- ✓ If a local authority intends to use their enforcement powers (for example Empty Dwelling Management Orders and Compulsory Purchase Orders) they will need a great deal of input from other departments and organisations as this is not a procedure any one isolated department can deal with. In order to be able to respond quickly, it is advisable to establish a forum which should involve representatives from all relevant bodies;
- ✓ Setting targets and monitoring performance is an important component of an empty homes strategy. It enables you to assess your performance, and stops you drifting. What may be a reasonable target at the start of the scheme may have to be revised.

Empty Properties

Making the most of the existing stock



Good Practice Examples – Turning Empty Properties into Homes

Partnership Working

Empty Homes Partnership – Conwy County Borough Council

In July 2008 the Conwy Empty Homes Partnership, made up of Conwy County Borough Council and North Wales Housing Association launched its Empty Homes Pilot Scheme. The pilot scheme focuses on 3 methods of bringing long term empties back into use:

1. Advice
2. Financial Assistance
3. Enforcement

There are a number of options available to owners to bring their empty homes back into use including sale on the open market, letting, leasing, improvement or conversion. The partnership offers comprehensive bespoke advice on this full range of options.

The partnership can also provide further more technical assistance in appropriate circumstances; this assistance can include the preparation of a property condition report along with a schedule of works to assist the owner to bring the property back into use.

Where the owner of a property lacks the financial resources to carry out any works required the

partnership, in appropriate circumstances, can provide financial assistance in the form of an Empty Home Grant in exchange for the property being leased to the partnership for an agreed length of time.

Currently the partnership offers a 100% grant up to £7500 in exchange for the property being leased for a minimum period of 5 years. A higher grant may be considered, up to £20000, if the property is in extremely poor condition, the property is of particular interest to the partnership (for example, because of high levels of anti-social behaviour or multi-agency input and is an area of high housing demand). This higher level of grant assistance is further subject to the property owner match-funding 50% of the excess above £7500.

The partnership's approach is to initially make every effort to work with the owners of Empty Homes. However, if the property remains empty or deteriorates, the partnership will take an increasingly firm line with the owner including appropriate enforcement action.

Contact:
David.lowe@conwy.gov.uk

Empty Homes Working Group – Gwynedd Council

Gwynedd Council has identified the need to bring empty properties back into occupation as one of the priorities within its Strategic Three Year Plan. Although it is regarded as a priority, action to bring such properties back into use will be carried out within existing staffing levels. Bringing such properties back into use will have a positive impact on a number of other stakeholders and it is vital therefore that each of these stakeholders play an active role in such a project.

The creation of an Empty Homes Working Group has enabled the authority to hold regular meetings with such stakeholders, including the Private Sector Housing Service, Homelessness Unit, Affordable Housing

Officer, Snowdonia National Park Planning Authority, Council Tax Unit, Local RSLs, the Rural Housing Enabler and Shelter Cymru. The Working Group is tasked with driving forward the Strategy to ensure that mutual goals are met. This enables everyone to be brought up to speed on progress and any developments which might impact on the project. An example of this is the proposal by Gwynedd Council to withdraw the 50% Council Tax discount for properties that have been empty for over 6 months.

Contact:
Adrian Roberts Policy Officer 01286 679304
AdrianRoberts@gwynedd.gov.uk

Working with an RSL – North Wales Housing Association

Denbighshire County Council and Conwy County Borough Council Empty Homes Projects are up and running with the aim of turning vacant properties into quality, affordable accommodation

Recognising the wasted resource of the 830 estimated properties empty for longer than six months in Denbighshire and 1030 estimated properties in Conwy, both authorities and North Wales Housing Association have joined in an innovative partnership to employ a

full time Empty Homes Officer in Denbighshire and part time Officer in Conwy.

The organisations are committed to making the partnership a success. The plan is that the Empty Homes Initiative will become a long term project and be used as a template for other local authorities to follow.

Contact:
Phil Danson Director of Development
01492 572 727

Getting 'Added Value' out of Empty Properties

Innovation In Working Together – Flintshire County Council

Flintshire County Council has transformed a former Guinness bottling plant in Shotton into a showpiece housing complex for the disabled and a drop-in resource centre for people with dementia. 24 Ryeland Street is now made up of three self-contained flats for young disabled people and a drop-in resource centre for people with dementia.

The project, which included major renovation work and improvements, was carried out under the authority's Empty Homes Scheme. The building has been fully refurbished to provide adapted affordable housing for people who have a physical disability and a resource centre for younger people with dementia, carers and professionals. The centre utilises the latest tableware technology and is the first in Wales.

It will also include an Alzheimer's café where families and carers can call in for ongoing advice and support. The council's services for younger people with dementia team will be based at the resource centre. The team delivers community support and services to young people with dementia and their families and carers.

Clwyd Alyn Housing Association, part of the Penna Housing Group, has assisted in the development of the Old Brewery site by working in partnership with the site owners and Flintshire County Council to manage residential units on the site.

Contact:
Steven Williams on 01352 703398
Steven_J_Williams@flintshire.gov.uk

Up-skilling young homeless people – Canopy Housing Project, Leeds

Canopy is a self-help, community housing project based in inner city Leeds. They renovate derelict houses to create decent homes for people that are homeless. The project involves and supports disadvantaged local people, particularly the young, in the work of the project in order to further their abilities and help them access training and employment.

Their volunteer team and staff work with the new tenant to paint, decorate and furnish their new home. Through practical work they bring together lots of

volunteers from the local community to learn skills, increase confidence, break down barriers and make big improvements to local neighbourhoods

They aim to ensure that those working on their future home participate fully in all aspects of the project's work and gain renewed confidence in their abilities and personal satisfaction in their achievements.

Further information:
www.canopyhousingproject.org

Empty Properties

Making the most of the existing stock



Eco-renovation – Plymouth City Council

Reusing an empty home could make an initial saving of 35 tonnes of carbon dioxide compared to building a new one. In response to this agenda, Plymouth City Council worked in partnership with warmhomes, an environment conscious building partnership to provide support to an eco-friendly conversion of a neglected house. The project, which comprises the refurbishment and conversion of a Victorian terraced house into two self-contained flats, demonstrates how an historic building can be successfully converted in a thermally efficient and architecturally sensitive manner.

The existing building has been completely renovated making use of external insulation, and highly efficient heating and ventilation to create a thermal envelope that exceeds Building Regulation standards. The house has now been converted into two flats which are being managed by Sarsen Housing Association and offered at affordable rents.

Further information:

<http://www.plymouth.gov.uk/emptyhomes>

Gathering the Evidence Base

Empty Homes Data Base – Ceredigion Council

Ceredigion have set up a database which is updated quarterly and allows them to search specifically identified empty properties within, for example, areas and wards. The list is then generated at intervals and information gathering questionnaires are sent to the owners and/or interested parties ensuring the details held are as up-to-date as possible with an idea of owners intentions.

The individual properties then have specific references which identify any relevant information including contact details and data gathered such as proposed or intended uses. The returned questionnaire or any other correspondence is also scanned into the system record/ database and searches can be made based on the information gathered such as properties

for sale or with no intended use. Searches can be made in order to give an indication of what action may be applicable to different properties.

The database and specific aspects of it will be available for information as part of the GIS mapping system over the coming months, in the first instance for use by inspectors and enforcement officers.

Contact: Alan Davies, Environmental Health Officer Housing Standards, Ceredigion County Council

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alandav@ceredigion.gov.uk

Empty Property Survey – Carmarthenshire Council

The first of its kind in Wales, a survey of all owners of empty properties was carried out in-house in 2007, with a return rate of 25%. The results have shown that many empty properties are being actively worked on by owners, who appear to have a clear plan for their reoccupation. However, this is not always the case, and a significant number, many without an existing loan or mortgage are not aware of opportunities that are open to them. The survey has generated 20 clear recommendations for action which include a review of information for empty property owners which highlights the pitfalls of ownership as well as

options. The recommendations fall into the following categories:

- Record keeping
- Support and advice
- Options and choice
- Financial assistance and incentives
- Enforcement and regulation

Contact: Stefan Nurse

Environmental Health / Empty Homes Adviser

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Developing an Empty Property Strategy

Consultation With Partners – Denbighshire Council

Empty homes and the problems associated are dealt with on a daily basis by many different Council departments (Environmental Health, Building Control, Planning, Council Tax etc.) as well as organisations such as the Police and Fire Service. Empty homes may attract anti-social behaviour or vermin, they may be dangerous structures or be listed and they may owe debts for unpaid taxes or works completed in default.

Estate agents, lettings agents and private sector landlords also have some involvement with empty homes and understand their role in the market place, whilst housing associations, affordable and supported housing officers, renewal officers and legal advisors are key to finding solutions for bringing empty homes back into use.

The views of all of these partners were sought when developing the Denbighshire Empty Homes Strategy. A ½ day consultation event was held bringing together 40 professionals who are involved with empty homes in some way, both from Denbighshire and other North Wales Authorities.

The session introduced everyone to the Empty Homes Project and provided a background to the strategy. Those attending were then split into three groups (based on their specialisms) to discuss the following elements of the strategy:

- Making use of Empty Homes for Affordable Housing
- Grant Criteria & Refurbishment Standards
- Linking Enforcement Action with Debt Collection

An interactive activity to prioritise action on empty homes ended the session. Pictures of six very different empty homes (ranging from visible, famous empties to tidy terraces) were stuck on the wall and everyone was given six numbered post-its. The aim of the exercise – which one should the empty homes officer deal with first?

As the post-its were stuck up next to the pictures it became obvious that everyone had a different view of a priority empty home. Housing Officers wanted “quick-hits” that could be brought back into use quickly for affordable housing; Enforcement Officers wanted those in poor condition dealt with first. The conclusion – we should be working with all types of empty home and have a mixture of “quick hits” and “hard nuts” in the Denbighshire top 10.

The success of this session and engagement with partners will be built upon by an annual event to review the strategy and its priorities.

Empty Properties

Making the most of the existing stock



Newport City Council – Empty Homes Strategy

The Newport City Council Empty Homes Strategy was introduced in 2005 with the key aim of bringing empty homes back into use. Previously a range of Council services dealt with the various aspects of empty properties in isolation. Private Sector Housing, Building Control, Planning and Council Tax were all involved with bringing empty homes back into occupation and a great deal of work was done with private owners and landlords. But limited resources and the increasing amount of officer time required to tackle the issues of empty homes meant that the project was pushed to the bottom of the list. Whilst there was no statutory duty on local authorities to produce an Empty Homes Strategy, Newport City Council was under increasing pressure from the Welsh Assembly Government and other external agencies to address the problem of empty properties within the city.

The Empty Homes Strategy was developed in consultation with the Welsh Assembly Government and a local RSL. The strategy fits in with the objectives of the Newport City Council Housing Strategy aimed at 'promoting healthy housing and improving the management and quality of all housing in Newport'. The Strategy focuses on two main elements: the more problematic empty properties that are completely inactive in the housing market and are often the subject of complaints by the public or other organisations; and ways to prevent properties becoming empty and declining. The national context and the extent of the problem within Newport are outlined in the Strategy. Previous successful empty property activity in the City was analysed and provided a detailed framework for further strategic action.

The Empty Homes Strategy aims to ensure that empty properties within the city are duly noted and quantified, and measures are put in place to assist owners to reuse the properties or where necessary use the enforcement powers within the Council's authority. The process of identification was initially achieved using a Geographic Information System. The systems have been developed further and a comprehensive database of empty properties is maintained which tracks all activities undertaken with the property owner. The database allows clear tracking of owners, key dates and actions taken. The database has a 'review date' function which is regularly used to ensure prompt action is taken on each property case.

Newport City Council understands that it cannot address the problem of empty homes on its own and has established an Empty Homes Partnership with a local Housing Association, private landlords and other stakeholders to attract finance and drive the project forward. The introduction of an Empty Homes Strategy has been key to Newport City Council achieving a substantial increase in the number of properties that are brought back into occupation through intervention per year.

Contact:

Gill Lewis Project Support Officer 01633 233 395
Gillian.Lewis@newport.gov.uk

Raising Awareness

Promoting The Empty-Homes Initiative – Carmarthenshire Council

Carmarthenshire Council have developed a comprehensive advice pack for empty property owners. This sets out a wide range of options to help owners to decide the best way to deal with their properties. They have recently updated the information about empty homes on their council's corporate website and many reports about empty properties are received electronically as a result of customers seeing this site.

The authority has provided information about empty properties through the local media, including press releases and their landlord newsletter.

Contact:
Stefan Nurse Empty Homes Officer
01554 742 198
ASNurse@carmenthenshire.gov.uk

Advice To Owners Of Empty Homes – Rhondda Cynon Taf

Empty Property Data 2008 indicated that Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) has 3,000 empty properties, the vast majority of these are empty dwellings that have been vacant for longer than six months.

In order to assist owners a guidance information pack has been produced in partnership with Communities first.

It contains advice on the various options available to owners to bring their properties back into use. Such as:

- Selling empty property;
- Empty Property Purchase;
- Letting / renting property;
- Refurbishment;
- Legal enforcement procedures applicable to Empty Properties;
- Useful contact details

Contact: Ian Lester Vacant Properties Team
Manager 01443 425 777
M.Ian.Lester@rhondda-cynon-taf.gov.uk

Empty homes booklets for owners – Newport City Council

Newport City Council provides a comprehensive range of options to owners of empty properties which include advice and support for the sale of a property through to facilitation of an empty homes grant. These options are explained in detail in the Empty Homes booklets which are available to owners and the general public. The booklets are professionally designed and printed and offer a comprehensive document giving advice to owners on:

- Selling Your Property
- Letting/Renting Your Property
- Refurbishment
- Possible enforcement procedures open to Newport City Council
- Useful Contact Details

Contact:
Gill Lewis Project Support Officer 01633 233 395
Gillian.Lewis@newport.gov.uk

Empty Properties

Making the most of the existing stock



Enforcement Solutions

Swansea City Council

The City & County of Swansea Empty Property team use a variety of different techniques to facilitate the improvement and/or reoccupation of empty properties. These include the service and general enforcement of notices under legislation such as the Building Act 1984, Housing Act 2004, Town & Country Planning Act 1990, (section 215), and Public Health Act 1936. They have also used their powers to enforce sale of empty houses, however, this is a last resort. They often use other more informal routes to secure re-occupation

and improvement of empty homes and have acted as mediators in long term family disputes over probate and offered support for those people unable rather than unwilling to take action.

Contact:

Sally Jones Swansea City Council 01792 636 000
sally.jones3@swansea.gov.uk

No Use Empty – The Kent Empty Property Initiative

This initiative was launched in November 2005 with the aim of helping to bring empty homes in East Kent back into use. No Use Empty is a collaboration between Kent County Council and local authority partners. There are currently around 6,000 empty properties across Kent, depriving people of a much needed home. The objective of the initiative is to raise awareness of the issues surrounding empty housing and the problems they cause to local communities, and to help bring them back into use.

The initiative has been widely praised across the UK as a unique partnership between County and local councils, achieving tangible results by delivering a joined-up

approach. In East Kent, over 620 properties have been brought back into use since the launch of the initiative, with dozens more properties in the pipeline.

The No Use Empty website has lots of useful information, including detailed case studies which illustrate the range of methods employed by the initiative to help bring long term empty properties back into use. These include Building Act 1984 and Enforced Sales Procedure and the use of an Empty Dwelling Management Order under the Housing Act 2004.

www.no-use-empty.org



Offering Incentives

Caerphilly Council Private Sector Leasing Scheme

In October 2007 Caerphilly CBC leased its first privately owned property to a homeless family. The property had been empty and in an uninhabitable condition for over 10 years. With the aid of a Landlord Grant from the Private Sector housing team, the property was completely renovated then redecorated by the owner, who was also asked to provide floor coverings, a new cooker, curtains and lampshades. Since its return to beneficial use the property has provided interim housing accommodation for three unintentionally homeless families whilst they waited for permanent housing with either the authority or housing association partners. Since that first lease became operational they now have 19 formerly long-term empty properties and flats in use. Only long-term empty properties are selected for the scheme and once renovated, are solely used for interim housing of the authority's homeless service users.

The scheme coordinator is a housing environmental health officer with the remit for dealing with private empty properties. The authority has over 1000 long-term empty properties and their return to use is a key priority in the Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy. The full range of enforcement powers are utilised to return properties to beneficial use although the preferred route is to provide good advice and access to information to assist owners to deal with the property themselves. With the changes to the legislation (1) coupled with an acute lack of single unit accommodation within the council's own stock, it was decided to examine the use of the private sector empty properties as an additional housing resource.

The empty property leasing scheme has housed 10 unintentionally homeless families ('families' include single people, couples and lone parents) in the first year (October 2007 to March 2008) and a further 34 families from April 2008 to the present. On average, each tenancy lasts for between 3 and 6 months, which prior to the scheme would have meant that the majority of these families would have been accommodated in bed and breakfast accommodation.

The attractive feature of the leasing scheme is that each property in the scheme is treated as one of the Council's own stock so if there is an urgent repair the local Area Housing Office will respond to the request day or night. Specialist Housing Support Workers assist the homeless service users to obtain furniture and set up the utility accounts. Once the tenant moves on to permanent accommodation, the property is cleaned, safety checked and any necessary repairs are completed before the next homeless service user is allocated the accommodation.

The selection of properties for the scheme has to be carefully considered; good access to local transport and amenities is paramount, along with the consideration of neighbouring properties. The scheme will not be suitable for every empty property within the county borough but it can and has already provided a valuable source of excellent quality accommodation that utilises a once wasted resource.

Contact:
Sue Cousins 01443 864 478
cousis@caerphilly.gov.uk

Empty Properties

Making the most of the existing stock



Flats Over Commercial Buildings – Rhonda Cynon Taf

The aim of the scheme is to bring empty space back into use above commercial premises.

The scheme is primarily targeted to town centres where there is identified housing need. Town centres in the scheme are: Aberdare, Porth, Tonypany and Pontypridd.

How Much Help Do Owners Receive?

The amount of grant available varies depending on the property.

- 60% grant (up to a maximum of £15,000) is available for the conversion of empty space to provide residential accommodation for the first time.

OR

- 80% grant (up to a maximum of £15,000) is available to upgrade an existing property to bring it back into use as residential accommodation (must have been empty for at least 12 consecutive months).

In addition to conversion work and repair costs, the grant may help with the funding towards improvement works such as new central heating systems, provision of kitchens and bathroom facilities, including upgrading any existing facilities, installation of fire detector systems if required and the upgrading of property insulation.

Becoming an Accredited Landlord

The all Wales Landlord Accreditation Scheme aims to promote good standards of property management throughout the principality. RCT is a member of the scheme. Landlords are required to sign a declaration that they are “fit and proper” person, agree to the code of conduct set out by the scheme and successfully complete a one day professional development course.

Payment of Grant

Grant money is paid when the work is completed to the satisfaction of the council. The money is normally paid to the owner, however, it can be paid directly to the contractor.

Benefits

- provide high quality affordable housing;
- improve the appearance of local shopping centres;
- make effective use of wasted resources;
- prevent crime and improve the safety and comfort of residents.

Contact:

Ian Lester, Vacant Properties Team Manager

01443 425 777

M.Ian.Lester@rhondda-cynon-taf.gov.uk

Ynys Môn Empty Homes Grant

To qualify for grant assistance the property owner must enter into a Private Sector Leasing Scheme agreement with the Homelessness Section. The landlord should note that in the event of the Private Sector Leasing Scheme ending, either after the first 12 month agreement or thereafter, he / she agrees to take tenant/s nominated by the Council from its Housing Register for a minimum period of 5 or up to 10 years under a separate agreement known as the Nomination Right Agreement.

The percentage of grant that can be awarded will depend on the number of year's nomination right the owner is prepared to provide.

The current grade levels are:

- 50% of cost up to £15,000 for a 5 year agreement
- 60% of cost up to £16,000 for a 6 year agreement
- 70% of cost up to £17,000 for a 7 year agreement
- 80% of cost up to £18,000 for a 8 year agreement
- 90% of cost up to £19,000 for a 9 year agreement
- 100% or up to £20,000 for a 10 year agreement

The maximum grant the Council will award is up to £20,000 per single unit of accommodation. This will be subject to the property meeting the Welsh Housing Quality Standard together with a Nominations Rights Agreement signed up for 20 years. A reduced grant, as indicated in the table above could be awarded for fewer years.

Qualifying Criteria

The Council can offer grant assistance providing certain criteria is met, as indicated below

- The applicant must own the property to be leased and provide proof of ownership to the council.
- There must be proven housing need in the area.
- The owner must agree to participate in the Council's Private Sector leasing Scheme.
- The owner must agree to give the Council tenant nomination rights in the event that the Private Sector leasing Scheme is not renewed (within the terms of the Nomination Rights Agreement)
- The owner must seek Planning Permission and Building Regulations approval where necessary.

The grant application process

Once the Accommodation officer accepts in principle his intention to enter into an agreement with the property owner; the Housing Grants section will consider a grant application based on the eligible works identified.

Repayment of Grant

In all cases where a grant is awarded and the owner decides to sell the property before the expiry of the agreement period (5-10 years) the Council will demand the repayment of the grant in full plus interest at a rate of 3% above Bank base lending rate.

Under the Empty Homes Scheme the property will revert back to the owner at the end of the Private Sector leasing Scheme but it will remain under the terms and conditions of the Empty Homes Grant and the Nominations Rights Agreement, if the term of the agreement is still valid.

Contact:

**J. Gwynfor Davies Principal Technical Officer,
Isle of Anglesey Council
01248 752 217
jgdp@anglesey.gov.uk**



Further Information and Useful Resources

Websites

Association of Residential Letting Agents	www.arla.co.uk
Canopy Housing Project	www.canopyhousingproject.org
Chartered Institute of Environmental Health	www.cieh.org/
Chartered Institute of Environmental Health	www.cieh-cymruwales.org/
CIH Cymru	www.cih.org/cymru
Community Housing Cymru	www.chcymru.org.uk
Council of Mortgage Lenders	www.cml.org.uk
Department for Communities and Local Government	www.communities.gov.uk
Empty Homes Agency	www.emptyhomes.com
Flat Conversion Allowances	www.hmrc.gov.uk/manuals/camannual/CA43000.htm
Inside Housing – Empty Promise Campaign	www.insidehousing.co.uk/section4.aspx?navCode=189
Kent No Use Empty Initiative	www.no-use-empty.org
National Association of Empty Property Practitioners	www.naepp.org.uk
National Landlords Association	www.landlords.org.uk
Northern Ireland Housing Executive Empty Homes Strategy	www.nihe.gov.uk/empty_homes_strategy.pdf
Royal Institution of Civil Engineers Chartered Surveyors	www.rics.org
Scottish Government Research Findings – Bringing Private Sector Empty Houses into Use	www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/264862/0079319.pdf
Shelter Cymru	www.sheltercymru.org
Welsh Assembly Government	www.wales.gov.uk
Welsh Local Government Association	www.wlga.gov.uk

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The Chartered Institute of Housing is the professional organisation for people who work in housing. Its purpose is to maximise the contribution housing professionals make to the wellbeing of communities. The Chartered Institute has over 19,500 members across the UK and the Asian Pacific working in a range of organisations – including housing associations, local authorities, arms length management organisations, the private sector and educational institutions.



In Wales, the organisation aims to provide a professional and impartial voice for housing, to emphasise the particular context of housing in Wales and to work with organisations to identify housing solutions.

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This CIH Cymru Key Information briefing is the ninth in a series which explores issues faced by housing professionals today. The previous Key Information briefings are available from CIH Cymru.

We would like your input on topics for future briefings. If you have any suggestions, please contact Victoria Hiscocks, Policy & Public Affairs Officer, CIH Cymru on 029 2076 5760, or email victoria.hiscocks@cih.org

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Cadarn Housing Group
Cadwyn Housing Association
Caerphilly County Borough Council
Cardiff City Council
Carmarthenshire County Council
Cartrefi Conwy
Cartrefi Cymru
Ceredigion County Council
Coastal Housing Group
Cymdeithas Tai Cantref
Cymdeithas Ta Clwyd
Cymdeithas Tai Eryri
Cymdeithas Tai Hafan
Cyngor Sir Ynys Môn
Cynon-Taf Housing Group
Denbighshire County Council
Family Housing Association
First Choice Housing Association
Foundation Housing
Grŵp Gwalia
Hendre Housing Association
Linc-Cymru Housing Association
Melin Homes
Merthyr Tydfil Housing Association
Merthyr Valleys Homes
Mid Wales Housing Association
Newport City Homes
North Wales Housing Association
Pembrokeshire Housing Association
Pennaf Housing Group
Powys County Council
Rhondda Housing Association
Swansea City Council
Taff Housing Association
Tai Pawb
United Welsh Housing Association
Vale of Glamorgan Council
Valleys to Coast Housing
Wales and West Housing Association
Wrexham County Borough Council