

Papur 3 – Cyngor Abertawe

Paper 3 – Swansea Council

National Assembly for Wales

Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee - Consultation on inquiry into empty homes

Response from Swansea Council

In response to the consultation on the inquiry, Swansea Council can provide the following information following the specific queries posed in the Committee Chair's consultation letter.

1 Is enough being done to tackle empty properties in Wales? If not, what needs to change?

1.1 There is a wide range of activity taking place to tackle empty properties, but for local authorities facing ongoing financial pressures, this work has to be assessed and prioritised at a local level. Successes are often only achieved after a long period of time and the work supporting property owners who are often reticent or nervous about selling, refurbishing or letting their properties or taking enforcement action with reluctant or untraceable owners is resource intensive.

2 What impact can empty properties have on a community?

2.1 Long-term and poor condition empty properties can have detrimental effects on neighbouring properties either directly via statutory nuisance type issues (e.g. water ingress, dry rot etc.) or indirectly by creating areas which attract fly-tipping, break-ins and rough sleeping, cannabis factories and unsightly run-down premises. Empties impact the mental health of neighbours, making them feel less secure in their own homes and can blight an area, negatively affecting property prices.

2.2 A large number of empty properties in a community can disrupt community cohesion, breaking down relationships and creating a barrier to a long-term sustainable community. In such situations, viability of local schools, shops and mixed communities may be adversely impacted.

3 How effectively are local authorities using the statutory and non-statutory tools at their disposal to deal with empty properties?

3.1 Housing Renewals and Adaptations: Swansea Council has used the non-statutory Welsh Government Houses into Homes Loan funding (superseded by the Landlord Loan scheme) since 2013 to bring empty properties back into use. To date 60 empty premises have been brought back into use creating 123 units of accommodation. £2,403,445 has been invested locally.

3.2 Local authority capital funding has been used to provide Grants for Nominations to bring empty properties back into use conditional upon the

Council having nomination rights for up to three years at local housing allowance rent levels. £738,534 has been invested, bringing 41 empty properties back into use over an eight-year period. The scheme was however withdrawn at the end of the 2018-19 financial year due to capital funding pressures.

- 3.3 Regeneration: Swansea Council has provided Homes Above Shops Grant assistance within the Welsh Government Vibrant and Viable Places programme to convert empty commercial premises above shops into housing in the city centre. The Targeted Regeneration Investment Programme has now superseded this. The Building for the Future grant programme is available to convert empty premises into housing accommodation in the city centre.

4 Do local authorities need additional statutory powers to deal with empty properties? If yes, what powers do they need?

- 4.1 Powers available under Housing Act 2004 relating to empty dwelling management orders (EDMO) are currently not often used, due to the ongoing management responsibility, which falls to the local authority, and the up-front financial costs, which are often needed to improve the condition of the property to a standard ready for letting. Swansea Council was the first in Wales to use the EDMO powers with an empty property where the owner appears to be in Hong Kong, but cannot be traced further and whom has never responded to any communication. The EDMO has been renewed, but this does pose the dilemma as to what will happen to the property in the longer term.

- 4.2 Whilst there is a call from some quarters for more statutory powers to force owners of empties to sell their properties, this has to be proportionate and balanced against private interests.

5 Are owners of empty properties given the support, information and advice that they need to bring properties back into occupation? If not, what additional help do they need?

- 5.1 Information is available on the Council's website and information leaflets are available. The various funding schemes are regularly advertised on Council's social media sites. Officers provide advice and assistance as part of their wider private sector housing roles. At the beginning of each financial year, targeted information is sent to owners of long-term empty dwellings inviting them to contact a named officer for further advice.

6 Is there sufficient awareness of the practical assistance that local authorities can offer to owners of empty properties? If not, how could this be improved?

- 6.1 As mentioned above, at the beginning of each financial year, targeted information is sent to owners of long-term empty dwellings inviting them to contact a named officer for further advice. Swansea Council is currently reviewing how various parts of the authority work together to present

information to property owners and how far that practical assistance can extend, working with third sector partners such as The Wallich.

7 Are the skills and resources of housing associations and the private sector being fully utilised to tackle empty properties?

7.1 EON has an empty property project management service, however capital funding is required to fund this service. Current capital funding pressures make this difficult. More work could be done with housing associations utilising their management skills to lease and manage long-term empties.

8 Is enough being done to ensure empty properties can be brought back into use as affordable homes? Are there examples of good practice in this area?

8.1 Our previous Grants 4 Nominations scheme ensured accommodation was available at local housing allowance rates. The Welsh Government landlord loans scheme also has this provision, however it is anticipated that take-up will be limited, as the landlord is required to agree to a 10-year nomination condition. For many landlords, this will be too long a period and will affect their future options for their properties.

8.2 There are examples of good practice, which include:
Property A – a long-term empty three storey semi-detached Victorian villa on a busy road in a popular residential area close to a large secondary school and hospital. The property was run-down and detracted from the street scene and had been the subject of complaints.

8.3 Houses to Homes loan funding was provided to convert the property in to two units: a five bedroom (one en-suite) HMO with shared kitchen and living space and a one bedroom garden flat. Extensive work was required to renovate the property to a high specification and the structure is now compliant with modern standards. This previously empty property is now available for six households at affordable rental cost.

8.4 Property B – a long-term empty two-storey property above a commercial unit in a prominent location in the city centre. The landlord benefited from funding from both the Vibrant and Viable Places programme and an interest free Houses into Homes loan to help develop the site as part of the City Centre regeneration plans in Swansea. This was a particularly good example of joint working between Environmental Health, Housing and Regeneration colleagues within the Council and Welsh Government in supporting a private landlord to bring life back in to a very run-down building and providing new flats in the private rented sector.

9 Is the power to charge a council tax premium on long-term empty homes a useful tool and is it being effectively used? If not, how could this tool be made more effective?

9.1 Whilst Swansea Council has not implemented a long-term empty home premium to date we are about to undertake consultation with a view to

introducing a premium from April 2020, hence we agree that it is potentially a useful tool. At present long-term empty home owners receive a 50% council tax discount on their properties so could be subject to a fourfold increase in the amount of council tax payable depending on the local premium the authority determines to impose. This is likely to be unpopular with those affected and may encourage some owners to sell or rent their properties. It will also adversely affect those owners who are already struggling to finance the works required to improve their properties hence it is important to ensure help is available to owners who cannot afford to simply market their properties and possibly avoid a council tax premium charge.

- 9.2 It would be a useful tool to allow some of the additional revenue from the premium to be used to tackle empty properties by way of funding new staff (empty property officer) and grant support.

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