

Vale of Glamorgan Council response to the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee inquiry into empty homes

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

The Vale of Glamorgan Council (the Council) is doing its best to encourage empty properties back into use and is using offers of assistance and positive interventions. However, the Council has limited resource to undertake enforcement both in staff time and the right enforcement tools. It is not illegal to have an empty property and the current enforcement legislation is not sufficient to deal with high numbers of empty properties. It would be helpful if a legislative framework or additional government backing could be put in place that gives powers for interventions solely based on length empty regardless of whether a property owners pay off debts for works done in default. However, if this legislation is put into place it needs to be adequately resourced for local authorities to be able to use it e.g. regional legal specialists.

2. What impact can empty properties have on a community?

As at 1st April 2019 there are circa 800 long-term empty properties (empty over 6 months). Empty properties are a wasted resource. There is a critical need for additional affordable housing in Wales and in the Vale of Glamorgan this continues to increase as evidenced by the Local Housing Market Assessments undertaken in 2017- 2022 which shows that the annual need for affordable housing in the Vale of Glamorgan Council is 576 units per annum. Empty Homes that are not maintained can create a negative social impact on communities and have a detrimental impact on neighbours and the community. Many are in disrepair and very often attract crime and vermin and they deteriorate over time.

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

It is felt that the Council is using non-statutory tools effectively and by only using these tools were able return 111 properties back into use for 2018/19. These tools are very useful when dealing with owners who are willing to bring properties back into use. However, there are a number of properties whose owners refuse to engage with the

Council despite repeated efforts. To our current knowledge (given our lack of staff resource in this area) these properties are not in sufficient disrepair to allow us to consider using existing statutory tools. The Council are exploring the use of Section 215 to a greater degree as this intervention is manageable compared to other enforcement options however, unless works are done in default and the owner refuses to pay off the debt, the action will not directly bring a property back into use (i.e enforced sale or CPO's).

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

It is not illegal to have an empty property therefore the existing tools are not perfect to bring all empty properties back into use. If properties are significantly in disrepair, the Council can use statutory powers to resolve the issue although this does not necessarily bring the property back into use. It would be welcomed if additional statutory powers could be given whereby long term empty property i.e. over 10 years would be targeted for potential enforced sale without the need for a property to be in serious disrepair. However, it is acknowledged that this has to be backed up by staff resource.

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?

In the Vale of Glamorgan, the Council has focused on the guidance and assistance offered to empty home owners. This includes the interest free housing loans, information on reduced VAT on renovations, options for letting and selling as well as general support. A survey is issued periodically and empty property owners are encouraged to engage with the Council. Although this has produced favourable results in the Vale of Glamorgan, this only works with those wishing to engage and enforcement is only looked at as a last resort.

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?

In addition to the mailings and surveys the Council send to all empty home owners periodically, the Council maintain updated Empty Homes and Housing Loans webpages: www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk/emptyhomes
www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk/housingloans

The Council also issue information booklets and present information to landlord groups etc. and on occasion, use social media. There may be an opportunity for Welsh

Government to raise the profile of the empty homes issue at a national level i.e. a national campaign to highlight the assistance that is available across Wales.

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

Local authorities cannot share the data on empty homes with the private sector or housing associations without consent. The number of property owners willing to give this consent in response to this in periodic Empty Homes Surveys is very low meaning it is difficult for skill and resource to be matched and used for a large number of properties. Even when this does take place and there is interest from housing associations to purchase properties to bring them back into use, many owners have an unrealistic expectation of the value of the properties. However, the Council do circulate a number of small lists of properties to the Council's partner housing associations and private landlords where possible and have been successful in matching a property owner's need to a housing association's specialism and resource i.e. leasing scheme whereby the housing association arranges a Schedules of Work and covers the cost of work in exchange for a low cost lease agreement.

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?

Returning empty homes into use does not solve the affordable housing supply issues in the Vale of Glamorgan but it can have a considerable impact. The Council offers interest free housing loans so that large empty properties can be sub-divided into multiple units that are generally more affordable. In addition, the interest free loan is available for a greater length of time (10 years as opposed to 5 years) for applicants that agree to let their properties via the Vale Assisted Tenancy Scheme once the renovation/conversion is complete.

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?

The Vale of Glamorgan Council has removed its empty property discount on council tax rates on both empty homes and second homes with effect from 1st April 2019. It is hoped that this will result in a greater number of properties being brought back into use which will be monitored during the course of the current financial year (2019-2020). The

charging of a premium is something the Vale of Glamorgan Council may consider implementing in the future.