

Empty Properties: Summary of survey

July 2019

The Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee launched an inquiry into Empty Properties in April 2019. As part of its inquiry, the Committee conducted a survey which was aimed at the general public.

Survey promotion and analysis

The aim of the survey was to hear from as diverse a range of Welsh citizens as possible. The survey was promoted extensively through a variety of channels:-

- Through the networks of key stakeholders;
- On the National Assembly for Wales' website and social media platforms, including focused advertisements which enabled us to target audiences in areas where we tend to get less survey responses;
- People visiting the Senedd during Eisteddfod yr Urdd (27 May – 1 June 2019) were encouraged to complete the survey;
- People taking part in Assembly Education and Youth Engagement visits, outreach sessions and visits to the Senedd and Pierhead, which ensured that a section of those who responded to the survey were not self-selecting.

To compile this summary an in-depth analysis of a complete data set was conducted; all data can be sourced to individual responses and further analysis can be undertaken upon request. Each question in the survey is addressed in turn.

Results are calculated from the number of respondents who answered the specific question and not the overall number of respondents to the survey, of which there were **403 responses** in total.

1. Do you own an empty property/ properties?

95.0% of respondents to this question did not own an empty property/properties.

5.0% of respondents to this question owned an empty property/properties.



2. Do you live near an empty property/ properties?

64.4% of respondents lived near an empty property/properties, whilst **18.7%** of respondents did not live near an empty property/ properties.

16.9% of respondents did not know if they lived near an empty property/ properties.

3. What impact does the empty property/ properties have on your community? (select all that apply)

'Physical appearance of the property is a blight on the community' (60.9%) was the option most commonly selected by respondents to this question, followed by *'Physical appearance of the property is off-putting to potential buyers' (59.6%)* and *'Physical impact on neighbouring property/ properties (for example, broken or blocked guttering causes a damp problem in a neighbouring property)' (54.6%)*.

45.5% of respondents selected *'Environmental health issues (for example, attracting rats or waste)* with **40.5%** of respondents selecting *'Attracts anti-social behaviour (for example, arson, vandalism and/ or squatting)'*.

31.4% of respondents selected *'Value of nearby properties has decreased'* with **30.9%** selecting *'Contributes to the general decline of the area which has meant there's a low demand for housing.'*

8.2% of respondents selected *'No impact.'*

14.6% of respondents selected *'Other (please specify)'*. Some of the answers given were as follows (please note that the following is a sample of the responses received. All responses are available on request):-

"Local sense of sadness"

"Loss of community – it's much nicer to have neighbours!"

"Doesn't help build community spirit"

"Stops local families living in their village and a decline in community for example a school closing"

"Not adding anything to the local economy and there is a local shortage of affordable housing."

4. Why is the property empty? (to your knowledge)

12.7% of respondents said the property is up for sale/ for rent or being repaired, whilst **11.8%** of respondents said the owner inherited the property but doesn't have the resources, time or motivation to deal with the property.

6.3% of survey respondents said the owner is not able to cover the cost of making the property habitable/ saleable, with **3.6%** of respondents saying that the owner has inherited the property but has not yet decided what to do with the property.

3.2% of respondents said the owner is not traceable, with 2.7% of respondents saying that the property is located above commercial premises (for example, a shop) and the owner has decided not to let the premises.

40.3% of respondents selected ‘Don’t know’ with 19.5% selecting ‘Other (please specify)’. For those who selected ‘Other (please specify)’, the following responses were some of the answers given (please note that the following is a sample of the responses received. All responses are available on request):-

“Tenants asked for repairs to be made, left when repairs not carried out. Property not now habitable. Owner has good job but not enough time/ motivation to put right. Has ignored offers to buy.”

“The owner lives in Leicester and has not visited the property for 7 years, property has been empty for nearly 30 years”

“Feuding between rival siblings following the death of family members so it just sits there deteriorating”

“The owner of the properties is in a care home. As I understand it the owner lacks the mental capacity to make decisions regarding the properties”

“The owner has inherited multiple properties over the years and they all lay empty, he’s not bothered – doesn’t need the money, likes to have the assets, doesn’t want the bother of being a landlord”

5. In light of the problems associated with empty properties, and the need to increase housing supply generally, local authorities have been given a range of powers to help bring empty properties in the private sector back into use. They are also able to offer practical help and advice and financial incentives to bring properties back into use.

When you think about the role local authorities hold in relation to empty properties, do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

“I was aware of the range of powers a local authority has, and/or the practical help, advice and financial incentives they are able to offer in order to bring an empty property back into use.”

53.2% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the above statement.

28.4% agreed or strongly agreed with the above statement.

18.5% neither agreed nor disagreed with the above statement.

6. Do you think local authorities need more powers to deal with empty properties and bring them back into use?

70.5% selected ‘Yes’, with 7.3% of respondents selecting ‘No’. 22.2% of respondents selected ‘Don’t know.’

7. If you answered ‘Yes’ to the previous question, what additional powers do you think local authorities need?

Some of the answers given were as follows (please note that the following is a sample of responses received. All responses are available on request):-

“The powers rely on the empty property being a problem in some way such as rats or dangerous or very unsightly, and it is then a very slow process to intervene relying on debts building up as a charge on the property, but councils do not have the money to spend in the first place. The fact the home has been empty for over a year should be enough to justify intervention and CPO. There should be a central WG fund to support this.”

“To overturn decision of ‘not including’ properties under NHS, Crown Estate and Universities and colleges as candidates for reoccupying a property. For example, Trenwydd House on Fairwater Road, Llandaf, Cardiff is an old NHS building, very big and unused. Legislation needs to change.”

“I’m aware the Council powers are in place but appear hugely bureaucratic and take an incredibly long time to complete, extra powers could help escalate the pace of activity.”

“It’s not just about extra powers, it’s also to do with finances. Local authorities are already struggling to provide essential services to vulnerable people. So, until they are properly funded, I think giving extra powers will have minimal impact.”

“Enforcement processes are long and an administrative burden when resources are tight. Local authorities don’t consider the issue of empty homes holistically and the cross service benefits. Often a one empty homes officer is left to manage the issue as best they can with little strategic priority given to the issue.”

The following seven questions were completed by owners of empty properties only

8. Why is the property empty?

26.7% of respondents said they were unable to cover the cost of making the property habitable/saleable, with **20.0%** saying they inherited the property but do not have the resources, time or motivation to deal with the property.

20.0% of respondents said the property is up for sale/ for rent or being repaired.

6.7% of respondents said they inherited the property but have not yet decided what to do with the property.

No respondents said their property/properties is above commercial premises (for example, a shop) and they have decided not to let the premises.

26.7% selected ‘Other (please specify)’ and the following responses were given:-

“Refusal to grant planning for rebuilding derelict property.”

“The house (private) is two doors down from me and belonged to my late mother who died last year. Probate was only obtained late last January. When the house was purchased from my mum, compromises were made on it’s condition. I had undertaken work such as fitting a new kitchen, but much delay was caused by a previous owner, one of six since being built in 1978 having a textured finish to every down stairs wall! My brother in law and I have removed the old bathroom, but need to be careful on employing trustworthy and decent tradesmen when left on their own. I work and cannot be there all the time.”

“A home in the UK whilst I work abroad.”

9. In light of the problems associated with empty properties, and the need to increase housing supply generally, local authorities have been given a range of powers to help bring empty properties in the private sector back into occupation. They are also able to offer practical help and advice and financial incentives to bring properties back into use.

When you think about the role local authorities hold in relation to empty properties, do you agree or disagree with the following statement:-

“I was aware of the range of powers a local authority has, and/or the practical help, advice and financial incentives they are able to offer in order to bring an empty property back into use.”

50.0% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the above statement.

28.5% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the above statement.

21.4% neither agreed nor disagreed with the above statement.

10. Have you been given any support, information and advice to bring your empty property back into use?

14.3% selected ‘Yes’, whilst 57.1% selected ‘No’. 28.6% said they did not need any support, information and/or advice to bring their property back into use.

11. What support or advice were you given by your local authority to bring the property back into use? (please select all that apply)

23.1% selected ‘Grant, loan or other financial assistance’.

23.1% of respondents selected ‘General advice and engagement with the local authority’.

53.6% of respondents selected ‘None’.

No respondents selected *'Worked with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) or other intermediary with relevant expertise in order to seek a suitable tenant for the property'* and/or *'Direct third-party purchases enabled by the local authority'*.

15.4% of respondents selected *'Other (please specify)'*. The following were the answers given:-

"I have only been penalised financially (in terms of paying two lots of council tax) for being unable to sell which is due to no fault of my own. I am desperate to sell the house – I've been trying for 2 years but the chain keeps falling through for various reasons all of which are unrelated to my property."

"The property would not be classed as "old" – damp proofing/dry rot/new roof etc. I have the resources to make it a lovely house, but not the time."

12. What additional support, information and advice would you find useful in order to bring the property back into use?

Some of the answers given were as follows (please note that the following is a sample of responses received. All responses are available on request):-

"None – I need exemption from council tax as I am actively doing my utmost to sell it and get it back into use. Why penalise me?"

"Lots of tenants don't pay rent these days, the law is on their side. Not worth the hassle of getting them out and the damage they cause. Landlords need more rights and assistance. I'd rather now just leave the property empty."

"Any"

"Money for refurbishment"

"A list of council approved tradesmen"

13. Do you think local authorities need additional powers to deal with empty properties and bring them back into use?

28.6% of respondents selected *'Yes'* with **42.9%** selecting *'No'*. **28.6%** of respondents selected *'Don't know.'*

14. If you answered *'Yes'* to the previous question, what additional powers do you think local authorities need?

"Need to take account of the individual circumstances and create exemptions for those actively engaged in responsible selling."

“Detailed information regarding the planning laws as the planning department seems to disregard points raised regarding special considerations they can make.”

“This is private property. I own a private property to minimise council intervention It will be brought back into use as a desirable home, but I refuse to make myself ill in doing so.”

“Double the council tax under the regulations which are available. Take possession of property where owners have failed to pay CT for a set period.”

Demographic of respondents

Location

75.7% of survey respondents came from South Wales, with **7.5%** coming from Mid and West Wales and **16.6%** from North Wales.

Age

5.0% of survey respondents were aged 25 and under, **79.9%** were aged between 26 – 64, with **15.1%** aged 65 and over.