



CAERPHILLY HOMES TASK GROUP – 13TH MARCH 2014

SUBJECT: EMPTY HOMES PUBLIC AND PRIVATE

REPORT BY: INTERIM CHIEF EXECUTIVE

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report has been prepared in response to a Member having made a request for information at the Caerphilly Homes Task Group meeting on 5th December 2013, in respect of the Authority's activities into dealing with empty homes within the county borough. The request sought information in relation to both council and private sector housing.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 This report considers the properties that have been or have become empty for 6 months or more in the Private and Public Sector.
- 2.2 There are currently 10 properties in Public Sector housing that meet this criterion whereas (for 2013/14) 914 properties in the private sector have been identified.
- 2.3 For those properties in the Public Sector, the report highlights the fact that long-term empties are mainly found in 2 areas within the Caerphilly County Borough. These are general needs 2 bed flats in the Upper Rhymney Valley area and sheltered housing units in the Eastern Valleys area.
- 2.4 In relation to empty properties in the private sector the report outlines the extent of the problem and the Authority's activities and performance in respect of any direct action taken to assist in bringing empty homes back into beneficial use.
- 2.5 Plans to address the empty homes in these two areas are referred to in the report.

3. LINKS TO STRATEGY

- 3.1 The contents of this report link to the following key strategic objectives:-

"To meet housing requirements through the provision of a range of good quality, affordable housing options." (*Aim 5: Affordable Housing – Local Housing Strategy*)

"To provide good quality, well-managed homes in communities where people want to live, and offer people housing choices which meet their needs and aspirations." (*Aim 6: Housing Management - Local Housing Strategy*)

"To promote sustainable and mixed communities that are located in safe and attractive environments." (*Aim 11: Community Regeneration - Local Housing Strategy*)

There is a need to increase the number of affordable homes for purchase or rent (*Improving Lives and Communities – Homes in Wales – April 2010*)

“The return to use of long term empty Houses” – (Key Priority 3 – CCBC Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy)

4. THE REPORT

4.1 LONG TERM EMPTY DWELLINGS IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR

4.1.1 Local Authorities’ activities in bringing long term empty dwellings back into beneficial use by direct action are measured via a National Performance Indicator (PSR004) reported upon annually. “Long term” empty is classified as those dwellings empty for 6 months or more with the following exclusions:

- A second or Holiday Home
- A newly completed dwelling awaiting occupation
- An existing dwelling undergoing conversion or modernisation
- A dwelling that is in use but for non-residential purposes

4.1.2 Each year, at 1st April, Authorities must establish the number of empty dwellings within their county borough that fall within the above definition and thereafter set themselves a percentage target in respect of the number of empty dwellings they feel they can return to occupation as a result of direct action. The numbers are collated utilising the Authority’s Council Tax records and “Direct Action” includes:

- Providing Grants or Loans
- Providing Advice such as:
 - Literature on the authority’s empty homes strategy
 - Advice on letting, including legal and housing benefit requirements
 - Advice on grants and other financial assistance including tax concessions available
 - Details of landlord forums or accreditation schemes
 - Advice on repairs, including details on building contractors meeting minimum requirements
- Referral to partner Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) or other intermediary with relevant expertise
- Enforcement action including statutory notices
- Enquiries made to establish ownership of property and follow up action

4.1.3 The following table outlines Caerphilly CBC’s recent years’ activity in respect of the Performance Indicator:

Year	No. Of Empty Dwellings @ 1 st April	Target For Return	Actual Outcome
2013/14	914	33 (3.6%)	To date 26 (2.85%) returned to use (as at Q3 end)
2012/13	944	36 (3.8%)	29 (3.07%)
2011/12	941	32 (3.4%)	36 (3.8%)
2010/11	900	30 (3.3%)	37 (4.0%)

4.1.4 The table below outlines all Wales performance for 2012/13:

Authority	No. Of Empty Dwellings @ 1 st April	No. Brought Back Into Use	% Brought Back Into Use
Anglesey	800	69	8.63%
Gwynedd	1,106	48	4.34%
Conwy	1,090	39	3.58%
Denbigh	879	200	22.75%
Flintshire	554	33	5.96%
Wrexham	206	20	9.71%
Powys	1,495	37	2.47%
Ceredigion	742	9	1.21%
Pembrokeshire	763	5	0.66%
Carmarthenshire	2,142	109	5.09%
Swansea	1,828	46	2.52%
Neath & Port Talbot	739	39	5.28%
Bridgend	1,029	74	7.19%
Vale of Glamorgan	690	14	2.03%
Cardiff	1,476	77	5.22%
Rhondda Cynon Taff	2,480	86	3.47%
Merthyr Tydfil	677	29	4.28%
Caerphilly	944	29	3.07%
Blaenau Gwent	542	19	3.51%
Torfaen	235	72	30.64%
Monmouthshire	-	-	-
Newport	1,134	48	4.23%
Wales Total:	21,551	1,102	5.11%

- 4.1.5 The level of success in respect of bringing long term empty homes back into use is very much dependant on available resources, both in terms of finance to offer pump priming grant/loan assistance and also staff to undertake the extremely time consuming practical element of engagement with owners of empty homes. Far more empty homes are returned to use by way of advice and education than by way of grant/loan assistance. (For CCBC, of the 128 properties returned to use from 1st April 2010 to date, 29 received grant assistance and one had a loan).
- 4.1.6 Finance has been available in the form of both grants and loans to assist owners to refurbish their homes both via the Authority's own Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy and also, more recently, via the National Houses Into Homes Loan Scheme. The Authority deployed some £649,910 in supporting the 29 grants mentioned in para 4.1.5 above whilst the Houses Into Homes scheme supported the only loan to a value of £6,800.
- 4.1.7 As mentioned above, however, staff resources are severely overstretched, with the Authority having no dedicated Empty Property Officer(s). Arrangements for the past 2 years or so are such that the majority of activity in respect of this function has been undertaken by the 3 District Environmental Health Officers based within the Private Sector Housing Team. A recent time disaggregation exercise for the purposes of a Wales Audit Office identified that the actual amount of officer time dedicated to this function equated to 0.5 FTE.
- 4.1.8 Following the failure to hit our 2012/13 targets, staff resources were increased slightly and it is pleasing to report that we now appear to be on course to meet our targets for 2013/14. Realistically, however, any significantly higher performance targets will not be met without the deployment of further staff resources. This issue is currently under active consideration with the aim of realigning existing resources so that extra staff time can be dedicated to Empty

Homes activity as of 1st April 2014.

- 4.1.9 Another issue worthy of mention is our inability to exploit the opportunities presented as a result of landlords and potential homeowners requesting information in respect of empty homes within the county borough.
- 4.1.10 We are regularly asked to provide details of empty property ownership to interested purchasers. Most prospective purchasers are often only interested in a particular property, however, we also receive requests from portfolio landlords genuinely interested in purchasing and refurbishing empty homes in numbers.
- 4.1.11 In either case Data Protection rules prevent us from disclosing even basic information as to the location (addresses) of empty properties and this situation is extremely frustrating when to do so would undoubtedly assist us greatly in raising the numbers of empty homes brought back into beneficial use.
- 4.1.12 Our partnership working with United Welsh Housing Association has had a degree of success in bringing a small number of empty homes back into use as social housing. The partnership recently undertook a “Valentines Day” initiative which saw a flyer being sent to over 200 empty property owners in an effort to raise awareness of the types of assistance that may be available to owners interested in bringing their property back into use. It is too early to gauge the success of this particular initiative but officers will continue to exploit relatively simple exercises such as this if the outcome brings an increase in the numbers of long term empty homes being reused

4.2 LONG TERM EMPTY DWELLINGS IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR

- 4.2.1 Following the same definition used by the Private Sector in paragraph 4.1.1 above, the table below shows the number of dwellings that were empty for 6 months or more during the past 4 years.

Year	No. Of Empty Dwellings @ 1 st April	No. Brought Back To Use	% Brought Back To Use
2013/14	22	12	54.55%
2012/13	14	12	85.71%
2011/12	14	14	100%
2010/11	10	10	100%

- 4.2.2 As can be seen from the table, in 2010/11 and 2011/12 all properties were brought back into use within the year. However, since 2012/13 not all properties have been relet. The properties that are showing as empty for 2013/14 include several properties that became empty and had been empty for longer than 6 months during 2012/13.
- 4.2.3 The properties that have been empty for longer than 6 months are considered ‘low demand’ and include 2 bedroom flats in Rowan Place, Rhymney, and bedsits and one bedroom flats in sheltered housing schemes in the Eastern Valley area.
- 4.2.4 Whilst several Rowan Place empty properties have remained empty for more than one year, the flats and bedsits in sheltered housing have been subject to some turnaround.
- 4.2.5 Low demand properties are listed and advertised on both the Caerphilly County Borough website and the Council Intranet. The list is also sent out with housing application registration letters and is circulated by email to libraries and other internal/external organisations to ensure the properties are advertised as widely possible. By promoting empty properties in this way we have had some success which is evidenced by the turnaround in some sheltered housing units referred to above.

- 4.2.6 In the case of Rowan Place the Caerphilly Homes Task Group has considered a report on plans to carry out major improvements in conjunction with the WHQS programme. This will include establishing a show house in order to generate interest from the local community. If the scheme is successful it could encourage current tenants of 3 bedroom houses to downsize, particularly if they are affected by the social housing size criteria (bedroom tax).
- 4.2.7 The recently completed Sheltered Housing Review identified the need to consider the conversion of some bedsit units into 1-bedroom flats. This recommendation will be progressed in accordance with the Sheltered Housing Review Action Plan and reported on to the Caerphilly Homes Task Group in due course.
- 4.2.8 National Performance Indicators for monitoring Public Sector empty properties and comparing performance between Councils are currently not available, as Welsh Government does not require such data to be collected.
- 4.2.9 All voids are subject to a comprehensive performance management reporting system with annual targets. The targets are set for each property depending on the agreed specification and the estimated cost of the end of tenancy works.

5. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 This report is for information purposes, so the Council's Eqla process does not need to be applied.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are no financial implications. This report is for information purposes only.

7. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are no personnel issues. This report is for information purposes only.

8. CONSULTATIONS

- 8.1 The views of the consultees listed below have been incorporated into the report.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 That Members note the contents of the report.

10. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 To note the contents of the report.

11. STATUTORY POWER

- 11.1 Housing Act 1996 as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002.

Author: Kenyon Williams – Private Sector Housing Manager
(Tel: 01495 235352 – E.mail: willikh@caerphilly.gov.uk)
Graham North – Public Sector Housing Manager
(Tel: 01495 235296 – E.mail: northg@caerphilly.gov.uk)

Consultees: Cllr Gerald Jones, Deputy Leader & Cabinet Member for Housing.
Shaun Couzens, Chief Housing Officer.
Phil Davy, Head of Programme.
Nicole Scammell , Acting Director of Corporate Services.
Suzanne Cousins, Principal Housing Officer (Housing Portfolio).
Fiona Wilkins, Principal Housing Officer (Private Sector).
Allan Elliott, Principal Housing Officer (Agency).
Area/Neighbourhood Housing Managers.
Rhys Lewis, Systems & Performance Manager.
Paul Smythe, Housing Repair Operation Manager.

Background papers:

Empty Property Management Procedures – available on the Caerphilly County Borough Council Intranet