

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2014-15

**ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

DATE: 8th September 2014

**REPORT OF THE GROUP DIRECTOR
ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES**

Agenda Item 5

**EMPTY PROPERTIES IN
RHONDDA CYNON TAF**

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1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

This report is provided to inform Members about the nature of the empty property issue within Rhondda Cynon Taf and the measures available to the Council to reduce the impact of long term vacant properties on communities and bring them back into occupation.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Note the content of the report.
- 2.2 Scrutinise and comment on the content of the report.
- 2.3 Consider establishing a Members Scrutiny Working Group to explore the issues highlighted in this report concerning long term vacant properties and subsequently advise the Cabinet on any future policy matters arising.

3. EMPTY PROPERTIES IN RCT

- 3.1 In April 2013, there were approximately 3083 properties that had been empty for 6 months or longer. 53% of these had been empty for less than two years and comprise a significant number of properties classified as transactional empty houses that were being offered for sale but had been affected by the down turn in the housing market. 16% of properties had been vacant for over 5 years with 9% of these vacant for over 10 years. Of those properties empty for longer than 5 years, almost 21% had been inherited.
- 3.2 In April 2014, there were approximately 3375 properties in the County, an increase of 9.5% on the previous year. The increase is largely attributable to transactional empties that owners remain unable to sell in the current market.
- 3.3 Baseline data on empty properties in the County is derived from the list of properties exempt from Council Tax or otherwise eligible for a

discounted rate by virtue of being unoccupied. Vacant properties owned by Registered Social Landlords are excluded from the list used for performance monitoring as social landlords are subject to separate requirements related to the management of voids, imposed by Welsh Government.

- 3.4 Research was undertaken in 2013-14 to understand the reasons why properties are left empty. 37.5% of properties require extensive refurbishment to make them suitable for habitation but 16% of the owners responding to the survey said they could not afford to carry out the work. A significant number of property owners also said they would like to sell their house but had a mortgage and negative equity and therefore could not afford to.
- 3.5 Empty properties are located in all wards although higher concentrations exist in wards in the north of RCT, of particular note being Tylorstown, Abercynon, Penrhiwceiber, Maerdy and Aberaman. Areas of high concentrations of empty properties often correspond to areas of lower housing demand making it more challenging to bring properties back into use.
- 3.6 The Housing Needs Assessment for RCT (2012) identified that almost 167 new properties are required annually to meet emerging housing need and some of this need may be met by existing vacant properties.

4. **THE COUNCIL ROLE IN TACKLING EMPTY PROPERTIES**

- 4.1 The Single Integrated Plan for Rhondda Cynon Taf “*Delivering Change*” (2013) has identified tackling long term vacant properties as a key strategic priority under the theme of ‘Prosperity’. The Council undertakes a range of activities aimed at returning properties to occupation and in support of the Single Integrated Plan aim, the Council has worked with Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council to produce a Regional Empty Property Strategy (2013). This Cwm Taf Empty Property Strategy is attached as Appendix 1. The Strategy underpins the Strategic Approach taken to understanding the issue of long term vacant properties and ensuring the options and approaches used are deployed effectively to maximise impact.
- 4.2 The key actions undertaken to address long term vacant properties are outlined in the Empty Property Strategy but an overview summary is provided below.

4.3 **Enabling Reoccupation through Financial Incentives**

- 4.3.1 On the 1st April 2012, the Welsh Government launched a £5 million fund to support initiatives to bring long term empty houses back into use. This was subsequently increased to £10 million. To qualify for the funding, local authorities worked collaboratively utilising the six regions model and the fund has been allocated on the basis of the private sector housing in each region. The allocation for Cwm Taf is £965,792 based on a private housing stock of 118,477 and the fund is being utilised to provide **interest free renovation loans** in Cwm Taf.

4.3.2 The Council Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy 2014 makes available three **specific grants** (subject to budget availability) to bring long term empty property back into use;

- Empty Property Grant – Owner Occupier
- Empty Property Grant – Private Rented Sector
- Flats over Shop Grant – Private Rented Sector

Each grant is subject to eligibility criteria, grant limits and legal grant conditions. Empty property grants are only available Borough wide for prospective owner occupiers. Grant limit is set at £10,000 cost of works, but increases to £20,000 in areas where there is housing need or where there is a long term problematic vacant property. Areas of housing need are determined by the Local Market Housing Assessment which maps areas of priority investment to meet affordable housing need, or any other strategic area the Council may determine.

4.3.3 During the Heads of the Valleys initiative, the Council was successful in obtaining funding to implement a unique and innovative home ownership scheme called '**Homestep Plus**'. This scheme was only available in communities in the north of the County but through funding obtained through the Welsh Government 'Vibrant and Viable Places Regeneration Initiative, funding is now available for Pontypridd. The scheme funds a Registered Social Landlord to purchase an existing empty property and then renovate it before selling it to a first time buyer via a 30% equity loan. The VVP funding for Pontypridd is also available to return space above retail premises to occupation as housing ('**HARP Scheme**') and funding is being made available to Social Landlords that identify viable premises to renovate and offer for rent at market, intermediate or social rent levels.

4.4 Enforcement Powers

4.4.1 The majority of long term empty properties are in reasonable external condition and do not adversely affect the amenity of communities. However, where abandoned houses fall into disrepair and dilapidation, they can become targets for anti social behaviour such as graffiti, fly posting and fly tipping. They give an impression that an area is run down and neglected, and communities perceive that areas with a high number of empty and dilapidated buildings suffer an increased incidence of crime. In these circumstances, the Council has a range of **enforcement powers** available to reduce the impact of the property and ensure it is secured. The main power available for ruinous and dilapidated buildings is under the Building Act 1984 and enables the local authority to require the owner of a dilapidated building to either improve its external appearance or demolish it and clear the site. A similar provision exists under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and is available for buildings and sites that though not seriously detrimental to an area, are considered to be in a dilapidated condition. In response to a large number of dilapidated buildings identified in 2005, a specific project team was established between 2007 and 2009 to proactively deal with them. In that time, 190 properties were brought back into use, 84 of the most dilapidated buildings were subject to

enforcement with a number being demolished and a significant number undergoing full renovation and reoccupation.

- 4.4.2 Failure to comply with a legal document within the time period stated may constitute an offence and the Authority may carry out **works in default** of the responsible person and or initiate prosecution proceedings. The cost of any work undertaken by the Council is recoverable from the owner/ occupier. None of the enforcement powers available enable the Council to require a property to be reoccupied.
- 4.4.3 Local Authorities have the provision to **enforce the sale** of a property where money is owed to them, for example as a result of remedial works undertaken in default. A number of dilapidated properties and derelict parcels of land in the County Borough have been subject to work carried out by the Authority in default of the owners. Properties are targeted for enforced sale in a manner that prioritises ruinous and dilapidated properties followed by vacant properties and those that area regeneration partnerships and members have identified as having a detrimental impact on a locality. A similar power is available to take possession of properties owing a Council Tax debt.

4.5 Education, Advice and Information

- 4.5.1 Within the Public Health and Protection Department, a specific role of **Empty Property Officer** was created in 2012 to ensure a dedicated resource was available to advise and support empty property owners in dealing with their empty property and also to ensure robust enforcement action is taken where problem properties are identified.
- 4.5.2 The Council has established a **Social Lettings Agency** with a local housing association that aims to increase the quantity of private rented accommodation available to people on low incomes, to make better use of the sector and where possible identifying long term vacant properties whose owners can be supported to return the property to use for rent. The agency is supported in its work by the Private Sector Housing Liaison Officer based in the Housing Advice Centre who actively works with landlords looking for tenants and people in housing need to secure long term, viable accommodation.
- 4.5.3 A comprehensive **Empty Property Handbook** has been produced that offers information on all aspects of returning a property to use from securing funding for renovations; how to sell a property and the requirements of landlords should they choose to offer the house for rent. This Handbook is supported by information on the Council website, through the landlord forum and specific mailings to landlords in targeted areas.

5. PERFORMANCE MONITORING

- 5.1 The Council is required to report to Welsh Government annually on its activity to return long term vacant properties to use. This is a National Strategic Indicator (NSI PSR/004) and is defined as follows:

“The percentage of private sector dwellings that had vacant for more than 6 months at the 1st of April that were returned to occupation during the year through direct action by the local authority.”

- 5.2 In the last three years, the Council’s reported performance has been as follows:

	Total Vacant Properties (private)	Total returned to occupation in the year	% performance
2011-12	3046	36	1.2%
2012-13	2480*	86	3.47%
2013-14	3083	95	3.05%

** revised guidance from WG led to some categories of property being excluded for this year only, but were reinstated for inclusion in the subsequent year.*

- 5.3 In addition, since 2013-14, the Council reports performance against a local measure included in the Corporate Improvement Plan under the theme of *“Public Health and Protection- Protecting People from Harm”*. This monitors the number long term vacant properties subject to intervention during the year. This enables us to monitor the number of properties that are targeted using one of the approaches available to the Council in addition to the proportion that return to use. In 2012-13, 479 properties were subject to some form of targeted intervention and in 2013-14, the number was 212.

6. CONCLUSION

- 6.1 Returning long term vacant properties to use is a key strategic priority for the Council and our partners as set out in the Single integrated Plan. Local Authority also has a key role in ensuring that private property owners fulfil their legal obligations to ensure the condition of properties within their control does not blight the communities of Rhondda Cynon Taf. A range of approaches are currently available to achieve the Council’s aim although challenging housing markets and areas of low housing demand can adversely impact on the ability of the Council to secure sustainable re-occupation of properties.



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Cwm Taf Empty Homes Strategy

Cwm Taf

Empty Homes Strategy

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1 Introduction

The Cwm Taf region comprises of the administrative areas of Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council and Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council. Reducing the number of empty properties across the Cwm Taf region is a priority and as such, the Cwm Taf Regional Collaboration Board and both Council's respective Local Service Boards and Single Integrated Plans identify tackling empty properties as a key outcome.

The production of an Empty Homes Strategy supports the delivery of Single Integrated Plans and also the National Housing Strategy for Wales; 'Improving Lives and Communities: Homes in Wales'.

Both Local Authorities are committed to reducing the number of long term empty properties within the Cwm Taf region to increase housing options to those in housing need.

The Cwm Taf Regional Empty Property Strategy will be strategically monitored by the Cwm Taf Regional Steering Group, however each Local Authority will retain and deliver its own action plan relating to the targeting of empty properties. The outcomes achieved by the action plans will be reported back to the appropriate partnerships designated by the Single Integrated Plan.

2 Purpose of the Empty Homes Strategy

The purpose of this strategy is to identify the aims, objectives and actions to tackle the problem of empty properties in the Cwm Taf region. The delivery of this strategy and associated action plans will work towards reducing the number of vacant homes in the Cwm Taf region

The need to have a distinct regional Empty Homes Strategy is in recognition of the high number of empty properties in both Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council and Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council, and the pressures associated with ensuring delivery of affordable housing. Whilst there will be a continued need to build new homes, bringing empty properties back into use also provides much needed, affordable housing and can be more economically viable than new build.

Tackling empty properties can also have a positive impact on the community by improving environmental and social conditions and reducing the level of crime, anti-social behaviour and blight associated with them.



3 Strategic Aims

Strategic Aim 1: Research and Review

To ensure that we have a good understanding of the local housing market and the reasons why properties are empty across Cwm Taf.

To have an up to date record of our empty properties, to be maintained and monitored.

To record and report on the number of empty properties brought back into use through the intervention of both Local Authorities.

To use this evidence base to inform action plans and support policy development.

Strategic Aim 2: Improvement

To encourage or enforce the improvement or conversion of empty properties to increase the supply and choice of housing across Cwm Taf. Prioritising those which are most detrimental to the surrounding community and those which can be most efficiently returned into use, resulting in a decrease in the number of empty properties in the boroughs year-on-year.

To review both the Strategy and the service delivered on an ongoing basis to enable continuous improvement.

Strategic Aim 3: Partnerships

To work in partnership with the private sector and housing associations to encourage the occupation of empty properties and increase the supply of affordable housing.

To identify and engage with 'empty-home partners' to investigate ways of returning empty properties to occupation, for the benefit of communities, tenants, property owners and the local authority.

To work in partnership to identify and develop bespoke funding models to provide assistance for houses to be brought back into homes.



4 Empty Properties

4.1 Types of Empty Properties

Research highlights that there are two main types of vacant property which can be defined by the length of time that they are empty:

❖ TRANSACTIONAL VACANCIES

These properties are only empty for a short period of time (Smith and Felder 1996) and are necessary for the mobility of the housing market. Transactional vacancies include properties that are actively marketed or are being prepared for occupation.

❖ PROBLEMATIC AND LOW DEMAND VACANCIES

These properties are inactive in the housing market and have been for a long period of time often due to their poor condition thus preventing their occupation. Problematic vacancies are not actively marketed or being prepared for occupation. They attract anti-social behaviour including crime and vandalism and are a source of nuisance and annoyance and often highlighted by the public as a blight on the neighbourhood.

This strategy will concentrate on problematic and low demand vacancies, prioritising those which are most detrimental to the surrounding community and those which can be most efficiently returned into use.

4.2 Why do Properties Become Empty?

Properties become empty for a number of different reasons, some of which are outlined below:

❖ **Poor Condition of Empty Property**

A number of properties are empty due to their severe poor conditions. These properties will remain empty until the necessary works have been addressed. However research indicates that a number of owners are unable to carry out these works due to lack of funds.

❖ **Housing Market Conditions**

A number of properties are acquired as a speculative/investment purchase by owners who may plan to renovate the property and either sell it on to realise a profit or rent it out. These properties remain empty due to the lack of money available to bring them up to standard but also the current housing market conditions means that there is a shortage of people who are able to obtain mortgages or afford the rent.

❖ **Lack of demand for properties**

Although the current housing market has resulted in a decline in the numbers of people being able to buy or rent a property, dwellings also remain empty in areas even where there are purchasers. Research shows that often properties are empty as a result of too many similar properties being available.

❖ **Inheritance**

Properties are often inherited and remain empty for long periods of time whilst awaiting the outcome of legal disputes. Such properties also remain empty due to sentimental/personal reasons.

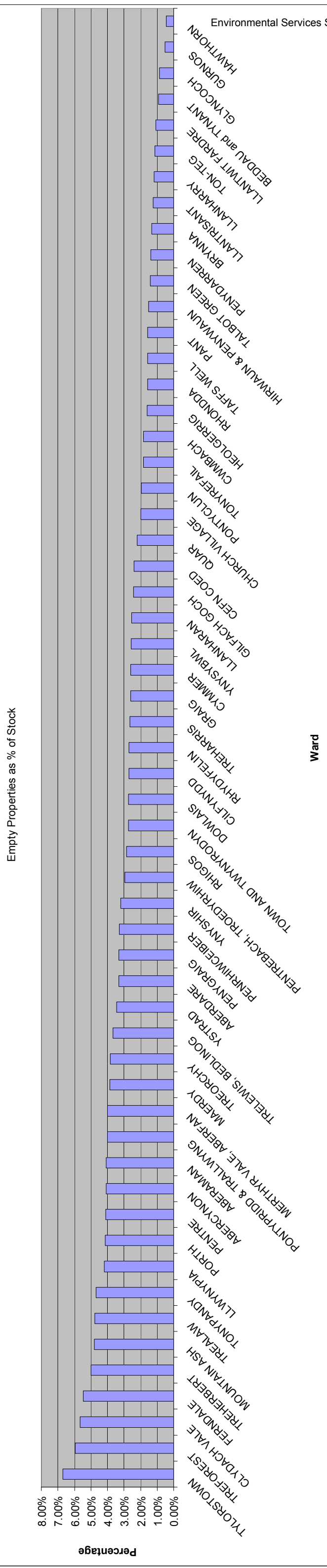
4.3 Numbers of Empty Properties

In 2011/12 there were 3672 empty properties in the Cwm Taf region. To put this into context to build this number of new homes would require approximately 122 hectares of land. The Local Development Plans of Merthyr Tydfil and RCT aim to deliver 17,964 new homes over the life of the plans. This means that the number of empty homes in the region represents almost

a quarter of the region's land allocation reinforcing the notion that empty properties must be utilised to address housing need. The LHMA in RCT in 2010 identified a requirement for between 507 and 578 new affordable homes each year in RCT. The LHMA in Merthyr Tydfil in 2010 has identified a need for 510 new affordable homes between 2006 and 2021.



Looking at the number of empty properties as a percentage of the total housing stock, enables us to pinpoint the areas that are worst affected:



4.4 Cost of Empty Properties

Dealing with empty properties within the Boroughs has a significant impact on each Local Authorities human and financial resources, but there are also significant costs to the community and owners of the properties.

4.4.1 Costs to Communities

❖ Healthy Environment

Empty properties can have a detrimental impact on the local environment. Not only can they be unsightly and damage the value of neighbouring properties, they can affect how people feel about living in an area. This can lead to feelings of anxiety and stress that can impact on the health and well-being of those living nearby.

❖ Anti-social Behaviour

Empty properties often attract crime, vandalism and anti-social behaviour and can therefore have an impact on the resources of the police and fire service. In addition they represent a cost to the Local Authority due to the time and resources spent by different officers in managing the problems caused by such properties.

❖ Affordable Housing

With a shortage of good quality affordable housing, empty properties must be considered as an option of provision of accommodation where new build will not always meet identified need.

❖ Homelessness

Despite a general decline in homelessness applications over the last decade, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr still have a large number of homeless households. Bringing empty properties back into use will contribute to meeting the needs of homelessness people.

❖ **Regeneration**

Bringing empty properties back into use can have a positive impact in the regeneration of deprived areas. Tackling problematic empty properties in particular can potentially increase the value of neighbouring properties.

Unsightly long term properties which have blighted a community for some time can have a serious negative impact on an area and therefore in some cases clearance may be the only option. Removing empty properties in poor condition and low demand areas can help reduce the risk of crime and anti-social behaviour.

❖ **Tenanted Properties**

With continuous changes in housing market conditions, with more households finding it difficult to get onto the property ladder and increasing pressure on social housing, a number of people are opting for the rented sector. Assisting owners of empty properties to consider renting their properties can contribute to improving the choice and quality of available properties in the private rented sector.

❖ **Blight on Communities**

Empty properties, especially cases of multiple empty properties, can cause a blight on communities and often create a stigma for others living in the surrounding area.

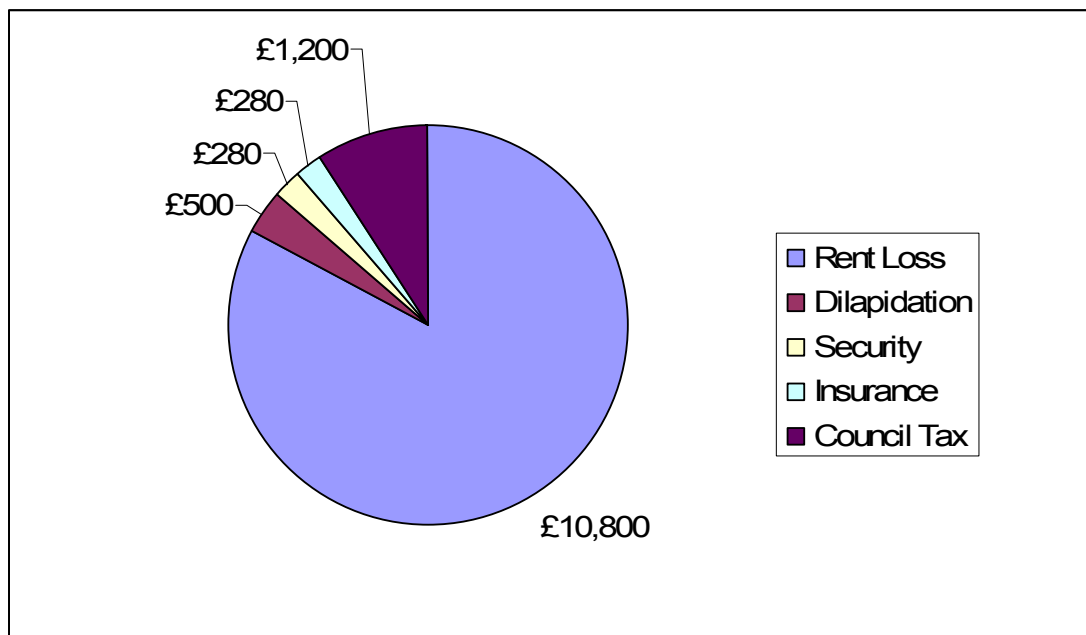
“Empty homes are not just a wasted resource. They can also cause nuisance and environmental problems. Empty homes can be a focus for increased levels of crime, vandalism, anti-social behaviour and drug-abuse.”

Empty Homes Best Practice Guide, Welsh Government, 2010

In 2011/12, Rhondda Cynon Taf received 143 complaints regarding empty properties, while Merthyr received 44.

4.4.2 Costs to Owners

Not only are long term empty properties a drain on Council resources but they are a cost burden to the owner of the property. The graph illustrated below shows that, in 2013, owning an empty dwelling cost the owner an average of £13,060 per annum.



5 Housing Need

The Welsh Government defines 'housing need' as:

“Households lacking their own housing or living in housing which is inadequate or unsuitable, who are unlikely to be able to meet their housing needs in the housing market without assistance”

Both Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC and Merthyr Tydfil CBC have identified an overall shortfall in affordable housing units, as well as a predicted future increase in housing need.

Privately-owned empty properties are a wasted resource and can provide additional accommodation to help address housing need.

5.1 Affordable Housing Need

Two sub-areas. Merthyr and Taf have an overall shortage of affordable housing. The shortfall figure is highest in Merthyr, followed by Taf. Even within the sub-areas Rhondda and Cynon, which display a surplus, there is a mismatch between the supply and demand of housing, with private sector empty properties being a consistent problem in both higher and lower demand areas.

<u>Net need for affordable housing units by sub-area</u>				
Rhondda	Cynon	Taff	Merthyr	Total
-4.16	-91.67	262.22	510	676.39

Bringing existing empty properties back into use will contribute towards meeting the current and future affordable housing needs in the County Boroughs.

5.2 Homelessness

Homelessness prevention work has resulted in a significant decrease in homeless applications over the last decade. However despite the general decrease, a large number of people are still presenting themselves as homeless and the current housing market conditions could see an increase in presentations.

Since 2012 local authorities have been allowed to discharge their homelessness duty towards households deemed to be in priority need by providing them with accommodation in the private rented sector. Since the demand for social housing far exceeds the supply local authorities have begun to consider how they can increase the number of private rented properties available to this group.

In 2010/11, in Rhondda Cynon Taf 428 homelessness presentations were made, 210 of which were priority cases that the council had a statutory duty to house, this increased to 546 in 2011/12, of which 245 were priority cases.

In 2010/11, in Merthyr Tydfil, 459 homeless presentations were made, 125 of which were priority cases that the council had a statutory duty to house, this decreased to 329 in 2011/12, of which 75 were priority cases.

This means that across the Cwm Taf region a total of 1762 homelessness presentations were made in 2010/11 and 2011/12, with 655 priority need cases.

Bringing empty properties back into use could contribute to meeting the needs of homelessness households in the Cwm Taf region, by increasing availability of housing supply and also providing the Council with nomination rights

(wherever possible) when incentives, such as grant assistance have been provided.

6 Progress to Date

Over the last few years In Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Councils have taken a number of approaches to deal with the issue of empty properties, these approaches are outlined below.

6.1 The Empty Properties Project

In 2007, Rhondda Cynon Taf's Public Health and Protection team completed upon an 18 month project to deal with empty, private sector properties in Community First Areas of the County Borough.

The project team focused on the various issues associated with empty properties and undertook a study of the areas suffering greatest detriment as a result of empty properties. This included conducting neighbourhood audits to gather quantitative information on the scale of the problem and the reasons why empty properties are left vacant, engaging with the local community in appraising local needs, taking an active part in Local Community First Partnership Forums and liaising with local and strategic partners.

By the end of the Empty Property Project, a number of significant outcomes were achieved:

- 190 properties were brought back into use as residential accommodation as direct result of the project teams intervention;
- Legal documents were served in respect of 84 dilapidated and unsightly empty properties

- As a result, the external appearance of 39 properties was improved and the remainder continue to be the target of enforcement action by officers from Public Health and Protection at the end of the project;
- 20 successful prosecutions have been taken against owners of dilapidated buildings who have failed to improve their properties; with more defendants awaiting court hearings.

These outcomes demonstrate the successful outcomes from targeted, area based action to tackle problem empty properties.

Merthyr Tydfil CBC also declared two Renewal Areas within the County Borough. The additional funding that both areas attract from the Welsh Government has allowed the Council to offer significant financial assistance to owners of long term empty properties through Group Repair Schemes to assist with the renovation and reoccupation of 35 long term empty properties.

6.2 Empty Property Research

Both Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council and Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council have undertaken similar types of research projects to help identify and understand the reasons that properties become empty, as well as gathering residents' perceptions of empty properties. Previous research identified that large empty public buildings such as old halls and clubs were seen by the public as a visible problem. In particular if they were situated on a main thoroughfare.

A research project on empty properties carried out in RCTCBC during 2013 looked at the reasons why properties are left empty and the challenges facing owners in bringing them back into use. The research concluded that there was a wide range of difficulties facing empty property owners in RCTCBC and that a variety of approaches are necessary to address the problems of empty

homes. These conclusions are likely to be relevant across the Cwm Taf region.

Whilst some properties are vacant for personal or sentimental reasons, many more are empty due to the poor state of the housing market in general or the acute lack of demand for properties in certain areas of the borough. Other reasons for properties remaining empty include not being able to afford renovation work; crime and anti social behaviour and bad experiences with tenants.

There is scope for the local authorities to proactively assist by focussing on the most problematic empty properties as well as those that can be most effectively used for affordable housing in the higher demand areas of the borough.

A number of the less problematic empty properties may be brought into use through the provision of advice, incentives, and the Welsh Governments Houses into Homes loan scheme.

Effective partnership and regional working should help to increase the number of options and initiatives available to assist empty property owners and improve the viability of these options.

6.3 Empty Property Database

Council Tax records are reviewed annually in respect of properties empty for 6 months or more on 1st April. The listed properties are captured onto a database in conjunction with other known long term empty properties, such as those which have been de-registered from the Council Tax list. Any direct action taken by the Council or its partners on its behalf which can lead to individual dwellings being returned to occupation is recorded and the database is used to provide yearly performance indicator statistics and monitor performance.

6.4 Education Activities

With the recognition that properties are often left empty due to financial or ownership difficulties, a comprehensive information pack has been produced

for owners of empty properties in Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC, while Merthyr Tydfil CBC plan to produce a similar pack in the near future.

The pack contains advice on various options available to owners to bring their properties back into use. The advice covers issues such as selling the property, empty property purchase, letting/renting the property (advice on how to become a landlord and how to advertise the property), refurbishment (advice on private finance, tax relief/reductions), legal enforcement procedures applicable to Empty Properties and useful contact details.

In order to raise awareness of the empty property problem in Rhondda Cynon Taf, a number of publicity and education initiatives have been employed. It is recognised that increased awareness of the issues can help identify properties of concern to residents and encourage owners to come forward for assistance. To date, these initiatives have included the following methods:-

- Publicity of activities via the media e.g. newspaper articles, local radio broadcasts, Council and Local Health Authority newsletter articles.
- Presentations and displays to Strategic Partnership Groups, Councillors, Community First Groups and public generally.
- The development of promotional literature such as leaflets, comprehensive empty property owner information packs.
- Development of a dedicated Empty Properties Web page.
- The issue of questionnaires to owners of empty properties and residents.

7 Empty Property Grants

Rhondda Cynon Taf is currently reviewing its grants policy 2012/13 and hopes to have a new policy in place by January 2014. The council hopes to continue

to work with empty property owners subject to the availability of funding for discretionary grants.

Merthyr Tydfil also offers Empty Homes Grants of up to £10k for owners of long term vacant dwellings to allow them to carry out extensive works to renovate or repair a property, improving choice within the private rented sector market.

8 Houses into Homes Loan Scheme

The 'Houses into Homes' loan scheme is currently being implemented collaboratively across the Cwm Taf region, utilising funding available from Welsh Government to offer interest free loans for the renovation of properties that have been empty for 6 months or more. The project will enable property owners and private sector landlords to bring empty properties back to the market, making them available for sale or rent.



9 Affordable Housing

Empty properties are a wasted resource and returning empty homes into use increases the the supply of affordable housing, especially as second-hand properties are generally cheaper than the equivalent new build and can carry the additional benefit of regenerating existing communities and making neighbourhoods more sustainable. The 2012 Local Housing Market Assessment in Rhondda Cynon Taf suggested most people want to live in existing communities; this is evidenced by the Council's 'Homestep' low cost home ownership register and historical demand for assistance to purchase existing properties not just new builds homes.

In addition to this new build housing is stagnant in many areas in Cwm Taf even though there is a shortfall of affordable housing in these areas, reinforcing the need for investment in existing housing stock as new build developments alone would not be sufficient.

Rhondda Cynon Taf has been successful in obtaining funding from the Heads of the Valleys initiative to implement an innovative and unique scheme called 'Homestep Plus'. The scheme provides funding for a Registered Social Landlord partner (in this instance Cynon Taf Community Housing Group) to purchase a number of empty properties from owners of existing empty homes for second hand sale. The properties are refurbished and then made available as intermediate market housing for sale to first time buyers via a 30% equity loan. Homestep Plus complements the existing 'Homestep' Scheme and provides another option for existing homes and not just new build homes. The equity share in each property will be recycled on future sales to facilitate future phases of the scheme.

10 Working with the Private Rented Sector

The Council recognises the important role that private sector landlords can play in meeting the housing needs of local people and in recognition of this has established a Social Lettings Agency in the borough in conjunction with a local housing association. The aim of a social lettings agency is to increase the quantity of housing available to people on low incomes by improving the level of assistance and support available to private landlords and tenants. The housing association is responsible for the management of the property on behalf of the landlord although the tenancy agreement exists between the landlord and the tenant.

A key aim of the Social Lettings Agency is to improve access to private rented accommodation for people who may otherwise not have seen it as a viable housing option and as a consequence make better use of the private rented sector, including the identification of empty properties that can be brought back into use through the agency. Through the agency, the Council can also provide tenants with a Bond Guarantee Certificate in lieu of the financial bond which is required by most landlords. Bonds are available to homeless or potentially homeless persons who are deemed to have a priority need for housing assistance from the Council.

9 Enforcement

Invariably empty properties are neglected and can fall into disrepair. Where other informal approaches to owners have failed to bring about improvements, service of legal remedies will be considered. Properties in poor condition can be subject to a number of enforcement options that require owners to take action to repair, renovate or remove problem buildings. Many enforcement options allow the Council to act and do necessary works where an owner fails in their duties. The costs of doing this are recoverable from the owner.

The main options that are available to Councils include:

- Requiring the owner or person having control of a building to improve its external appearance or demolish it and clear the site. This option will be used in instances where the property is having a serious, detrimental impact on the general community. The provision only addresses the external appearance of the building. This legislation does not address the internal condition of the building and therefore may be of limited benefit to the overall regeneration and reuse of a building.
- Requiring owners of other properties in poor condition but which are less of a blight on the community to undertake repairs or proper maintenance of land. The Council will extend use of this power to maintenance of gardens and boundary walls if necessary if it appears that the area is adversely affected by its condition.
- Using the power to force the sale of an empty property where money is owed to the Council, for example as a result of the Council having to step in to undertake remedial works in default of an owner. The Council has a separate policy for the use of this power which highlights the need to ensure appropriate methods for disposal of properties so that local people are encouraged and able to buy them at market value, or

otherwise that a housing association partner is able to purchase the properties for re-use as affordable housing.

- Empty Homes Management Orders are available and will be considered for long-term empty properties as a last resort against uncooperative property owners. The rental income will repay the Council costs associated with enforcing the order and managing the property for a period of up to 7 years. At the end of the lease the habitable property will be handed back to the owner. This procedure would only be practical in areas of housing need.
- If an owner refuses to bring a property back into use and the property is having a degenerative effect on the area, the Council has powers to compulsory purchase. This procedure may be considered where the Council identifies a future purposed use for the building.
- Demolition orders can be made on houses that are not suitable for habitation. Where a number of poor houses are identified in one area and where it is considered that such action will assist in the wider regeneration of an area, the Council has powers to clear a number at once. These powers can be used for empty houses. In 2005, for example, Merthyr Tydfil CBC undertook a large clearance project where 54 properties in the Merthyr Vale area were acquired and demolished, twelve of which were long term vacant and thirty-two considered 'unfit for human habitation'.
- Buildings that are in a dangerous condition and or which pose a risk to public safety for example by being unsecured will be acted on. Action may be taken either to require the owner to make a structure safe or if it is considered that the risk is immediate, the Authority may exercise emergency powers to remove the hazard.
- Provisions to deal with listed buildings include the power to compulsory purchase a property; serve repair notices or notices requiring urgent works.

10 Moving Forward

Both Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC and Merthyr Tydfil CBC are committed to building on the progress made to date, and ensuring maximum benefits to communities across the Cwm Taf region through the implementation of this Empty Homes Strategy.

While both authorities will work in partnership to deliver the Strategy, each will retain individual action plans to ensure that needs specific to local communities can be addressed.

The Strategy will continue to focus on partnership working and co-ordination of services across the Cwm Taf region through the creation of the Cwm Taf Empty Property Steering Group and 'Virtual' Working Group. The purpose of the Virtual Working Group is to bring together collaborative working while co-ordinating delivery of the individual action plans for each local authority. These actions include identifying resources, commission research and monitoring delivery of the Empty Property Strategy. The working group includes representatives from Housing Strategy, The Housing Enforcement Team and Private Sector Housing from both local authorities.

The Action Plan for the Cwm Taf region will continue to be monitored and reviewed by the Virtual Working Group and reported to the Steering Group, to ensure that it remains significant and relevant to local communities. It is a dynamic document that will be updated and modified to reflect changing needs and priorities.

Building on the success of the previous empty property project, it is proposed to develop a combination of both borough wide and area based strategies to ensure maximum outcomes in chosen areas that are characterised by low housing demand and high levels of empty properties. The approach is preferred to having activity scattered and diffused across the Cwm Taf region..

Where appropriate areas will be selected for action in consultation with local communities and based on evidence of the local housing market and housing needs. Specific activities in each area will be prioritised according to the timing of proposed interventions, the level of dilapidation and blight caused by the property and the concentration of vacant homes in a particular street or locality.



Before and after photographs of the interior refurbishment of an empty property

