

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

MUNICIPAL YEAR 2018-2019

HEALTH AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

9th October 2018

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR FOR REGENERATION, PLANNING AND HOUSING

Agenda Item No.

DRAFT EMPTY HOMES
STRATEGY

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Appendices: Draft Empty Homes Strategy (2018-2021)

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to inform members about the Council's proposed approach to tackling empty homes which is set out in the Council's draft Empty Homes Strategy for the period 2018 -2021.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 It is recommended that Members scrutinise and comment on the draft Empty Homes Strategy (2018-2021) and in particular consider
- The Council's performance over the last few years in tackling empty homes
 - The aims of the strategy and whether there are any others that could be considered
 - The factors that affect the number and location of empty homes and whether the Strategy has identified these comprehensively
 - The proposal to proactively target the 684 long term empty private sector homes
 - Whether there are any other interventions or vehicles that the Council should Consider
 - That the feedback of this committee be presented to Cabinet for consideration when determining this matter.

3.0 BACKGROUND

- 3.1 Empty private sector homes represent a wasted resource, financial expense both to the owners and the Council and in many cases a missed opportunity to provide much needed affordable housing for residents. Not only are they a waste of a valuable housing resource, but they can cause blight to communities and distress to residents affected by their unsightly appearance and propensity to attract crime and anti social behaviour.
- 3.2 Council Tax records reveal that there were 3,556 private sector homes that were vacant for six months or more as at 1st April 2017. This equates to 3.8% of Rhondda Cynon Taf's private housing (owner occupied and private rented) stock. The average for Wales is 2.4% with the lowest (Torfaen) having 0.78% of their stock empty.
- 3.3 Whilst there are empty homes throughout the whole of Rhondda Cynon Taf, analysis shows the issue is most acute within several parts of the Rhondda. The percentages are generally not so high in Cynon and only one area, Penrhwceiber has comparable levels to parts of the Rhondda Valleys. Conversely, most of Taf has a particularly low proportion of long term empty homes, with most areas typically containing less than 2% on average. This is perhaps unsurprising with demand for homes being significantly higher in Taf, although equally, empty homes within this area tend to be empty for reasons other than low demand (i.e. inheritance, sentimental reasons, and probate) and are thus more difficult to return to beneficial use. The only area that particularly bucks the trend is Treforest (5% empty), which is due to the lower demand for student accommodation in the private rented sector because of the increase in student rent provided directly by the University in recent years.
- 3.4 However, it is important to note that whilst RCT does have amongst the highest numbers of empty homes in Wales, this is primarily due to level of 'churn' in the housing market, rather than persistent long term empty homes. The annual collation of empty homes data is only a snapshot once a year and whilst at each point in the year the total number of empty homes recorded is quite high; most of the homes counted in each snapshot have only been empty for a relatively short period. For example, in the 1st April 2017 snapshot 59% of homes that were empty had been vacant for less than three years and in total **only 684 homes** (9% of the total) appeared as empty in the last four successive snapshots (i.e. in 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017). Most significantly, 4,463 homes (60% of the total across the four years) appeared on only one of the snapshots. As such, the bulk of homes recorded over the last four years have only been empty for short periods before returning back into use through purchase or rental. Conversely, only a minority of homes (6%) were re-recorded as empty again after being brought back into use over this period.
- 3.5 The 684 empty homes that have been identified as being empty in all four snapshots are likely to be some of the most problematic empty homes in the County Borough, and ones that should be the focus of the Council's enforcement and enabling activity going forward. Appendix 2 in the Strategy shows the location of these properties. The vast majority of the 684 empty homes are in the Rhondda Fach and Fawr. Interestingly, Treorchy has the

second highest number of these properties (43), which is surprising as Treorchy has a high demand for housing.

- 3.6 There are varying reasons why homes both become empty and remain empty for significant periods of time. This includes lack of demand for certain types of housing; absentee landlords who do not invest in their stock; owner inertia where for some owners maximising income from their asset is not a high priority perhaps due to lack of knowledge, legal disputes or sentimental reasons. Homes are also often empty due to their dilapidated condition. Research indicates that many owners are unable to carry out the necessary remedial works required to bring them up to an acceptable standard because of a lack of funds. These homes will remain empty until the essential works have been completed.
- 3.7 Over the last few years, the Council has developed many tools and approaches to encourage empty homes to be brought back into use which have had a positive impact.

This includes:

- Housing enforcement activity utilising various housing and planning legislation
- Provision of Houses into Homes loans utilising Welsh Government repayable funding
- Provision of grants utilising the Council's own funding - £4.1M since 2016/17
- Affordable housing schemes that bring empty homes back into use
- Advice and assistance
- Provision of homes above retail premises in Aberdare and Pontypridd
- Removing the 50% Council Tax reduction for empty homes (From April 2018 onwards)

Appendix 1 in the main strategy document sets out a number of case studies that shows the impact of this work.

- 3.8 Over the last four years, the Council has brought back into use **651** homes through direct action, loan or grant aid. Just under 1500 homes interventions have also taken place over this period to provide advice, serve notices or secure empty homes. When considered as a percentage, in the last year that statistics are available (2017-18), the Council brought 204 (5.7%) of its empty homes back into use. In comparison with other Welsh Local Authorities RCT was 2nd in relation to the number brought back into use, and ranked 8th for percentage

4.0 THE STRATEGY

- 4.1 Whilst it is acknowledged that good progress has been made in bringing empty homes back into use in RCT over the last few years, the scale of the problem still persists and continues to present problems in many

communities. As such, a strong strategic approach is required which has objectives that are clear, deliverable and will make a difference to both the scale of empty homes that are brought back into use as well as having a more fundamental impact on the total number in order to reverse the trend in a sustainable way.

4.2 To achieve this, the strategy sets out a series of strategic objectives that translate directly into a series of projects and actions:

1. To develop partnerships and vehicles that will enable an increase in the scale of empty homes being brought back into use.

This includes:

- Actively engaging with housing associations, private sector partners, community groups and other stakeholders to identifying new funding models and programmes.
- Establishing an Empty Homes Steering Group to co-ordinate delivery of the strategy and associated activity.

2. To maximise the use of current funding and identify further funding models to increase the number of empty homes that are brought back into use.

This includes:

- Identifying new funding that can be levered into the County Borough to bring empty homes back into use.
 - Effective management of the Council's Empty Property Grant and Houses into Homes (landlord) loan schemes.
- 3. To continue to use a range of interventions to ensure all types of empty homes are targeted and enabled to be brought back into use and monitor the outcomes related to these closely.**

This includes:

- Publicising activities through the use of social media and newspaper articles, local radio.
- Sharing information with community groups and partnerships
- The development of promotional literature such as leaflets and a comprehensive empty homes owner information pack and the continued development of a dedicated empty homes web page.
- Targeting enforcement activity on the 684 longer term empty homes. This could involve replicating the Housing and Health Action Area approach (an area based approach) that has been successfully undertaken in Tylorstown over the last few years, in other wards where there are an identified higher than average number of empty homes.

4. To undertake further research in communities and evaluation of existing schemes to understand why there are a high number of empty homes.

This includes:

- Analysis at borough wide and ward level, considering all factors that affect the number of empty homes.
 - Reviewing best practice and effectiveness of current interventions.
- 5. To identify possible solutions that could prevent homes from becoming empty and also develop interventions for different market areas and types.**

This includes:

- Analysis of localised housing market to understand the drivers that result in homes becoming empty, even for short periods.
 - Ensuring that the opportunity to strengthen the housing market and bring private sector empty homes back into use is maximised in the Council's five identified Strategic Opportunity Areas, the Council's Tourism Strategy; and in the context of the Cardiff City Region Deal, the Valleys Task Force, and Metro opportunities.
 - Considering selective demolition
- 4.3 The Empty Homes Strategy will provide a framework for future empty homes activity and will enable the positive work undertaken over recent years to be built on to increase performance in this area overall.
- 4.4 An annual action plan will be produced which will ensure that the strategic aims of the Strategy are delivered and key actions are undertaken.
- 4.5 The Empty Homes Steering group will have responsibility for monitoring and delivering the action plan. This Group will be co-ordinated by the Housing Strategy Team and will include representatives from the following service areas:
- Housing Grants
 - Housing Strategy
 - Housing Standards Team
 - Public Health Team
 - Regeneration and Planning
 - Highways
 - Other partners as required

5.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 An equality and diversity screening exercise has been undertaken and a full impact assessment is not required at this time. Requirements for any specific assessments will be undertaken on an ongoing basis as strategy actions are delivered.

6.0 LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT.

- 6.1 Investment in housing provides an ongoing stimulus to the local economy, by encouraging spending and local supply chains. Making available a supply of

affordable homes also helps to improve the prosperity of residents and helps support a huge range of households in society that may not otherwise be able to meet their needs in the market, thereby promoting independence and positive lives for all.

- 6.2 As such, this Empty Homes Strategy will contribute to the delivery all three of the Council's Corporate Plan priorities of economy, people and place. The Strategy will also assist the Council to contribute to three of the seven wellbeing goals that 'The Well Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015' puts in place as follows:

1. A healthier Wales
2. A prosperous Wales
3. A Wales of cohesive communities

7.0 CONCLUSION

- 7.1 The report and strategy sets out the aims of the Council's Empty Homes Strategy for the period 2018 -2021.
- 7.2 The Council is already taking a proactive approach to bringing empty homes back into use within Rhondda Cynon Taf and has made available significant resources to tackle the issue. However, this Strategy will provide a framework for all empty homes activity and ensure a co-ordinated and ambitious approach going forward to decrease the total number of empty homes in the County Borough overall.



Rhondda Cynon Taf Empty Homes Strategy

2018-2021

1 Introduction

1.1 Background and strategic drivers

The purpose of this Strategy is to provide a framework for all activity in the County Borough aimed at bringing empty homes back into use. It will replace the Cwm Taf Empty Property Strategy that was produced jointly with Merthyr Tydfil Borough Council in 2014. The need to have a distinct strategy for RCT going forward is in recognition of the high numbers of empty homes in the borough, especially in the North and the Council's commitment to addressing the problem. It is also in appreciation of the continued pressure to deliver affordable housing. Whilst most new housing supply will be delivered through new build developments, bringing empty homes back into use can offer an economically viable option which can also contribute to increasing affordable housing supply, whilst at the same time having a positive impact on existing communities by improving environmental and social conditions.

In 2015/16 a Health and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee Working Group reviewed the issue of empty homes and made recommendations to Cabinet. One of the recommendations was to produce a new Empty Homes Strategy reflecting the findings and recommendations of the working group.

In February 2016, the Council approved its Corporate Plan for 2016-2020. The focus of the Corporate Plan is on three priorities:

- **ECONOMY** - Building a strong economy
- **PEOPLE** - Promoting independence and positive lives for everyone
- **PLACE** - Creating neighbourhoods where people are proud to live and work

Bringing empty homes back into use contributes to all three of these priorities as well as assisting the Council to contribute to three of the seven wellbeing goals that 'The Well Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015' puts in place as follows:

1. A healthier Wales
2. A prosperous Wales

3. A Wales of cohesive communities

Investment in housing provides an ongoing stimulus to the local economy, by supporting the construction industry and local supply chains. Making available a supply of affordable homes also helps to improve the prosperity of residents and helps support a huge range of households in society that may not otherwise be able to meet their needs in the market, thereby promoting independence and positive lives for all.

1.2 National Context

According to Welsh Government statistics, there are an estimated 1.4 million dwellings in Wales as of 31st March 2016. During 2016-2017 23,303 of these had been vacant for more than six months. Of these, 255 were brought back into use in 2017-18.¹ Empty homes represent a wasted resource, financial expense and in many cases a missed opportunity to provide much needed affordable housing for people in Wales. Not only are they a waste of a valuable housing resource, but they can cause blight to communities and distress to residents affected by their unsightly appearance and propensity to attract crime, vandals and anti social behaviour. In addition to this, living next door to an empty home can devalue a home by as much as 18% and unsightly homes deter investment in an area and leads to a more general cycle of decline.²

For many years, demand for housing in Wales has outstripped supply. This extra necessity for housing is driven by an increase in households, a growing population and changing demographics. The Welsh Government has an ambitious target of delivery an additional 20,000 new affordable homes by 2021. Whilst this target relates to new build homes, it is acknowledged that better utilisation of the existing housing stock can help ease some of the burden to delivering these new homes whilst also acting as a catalyst for area regeneration and community sustainability. Studies have also shown that the average cost of returning empty homes to a habitable state is between £6,000 and £12,000 per property.³ This supports the statement that “bringing empty homes back into use not only provides much needed

¹ Source: Welsh Government

² Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors

³ Chartered Institute of Housing – Information leaflet

affordable housing, but can also be a more economically viable option to new build”.

⁴ For this reason, the Welsh Government has set an equally ambitious target of 5000 empty homes to be brought back into use across Wales in the same period and RCT is required to contribute to this target.

1.3 Local Context

Rhondda Cynon Taf is the second largest authority in Wales with a population of 234,410 and 105,269 dwellings.⁵ Of these dwellings, 92,197 are in the private sector (either owner occupied or privately rented). As at April 2017, 3.8% of Rhondda Cynon Taf’s private housing stock was empty which equates to 3556 empty homes. The average for Wales is 2.4% with the lowest (Torfaen) having 0.78% of their stock empty.

As shown in Figure 1, 59% of homes that were empty as at 1st April 2017 had been vacant for less than three years, whilst just over 13% had been vacant for over 6 years. However, although this most recent snapshot provides a useful reference point, trend data provides a much more reliable overview of the longer term situation.

An analysis of four annual empty homes snapshots was carried out from 1st April 2014 to 2017. In total, only 684 homes (9% of the total) appeared on all four successive snapshots (i.e. in 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2017) and 1,351 homes (18% of the total) appeared on 2 consecutive snapshots before ceasing to feature on future data collections. Most significantly, 4,463 homes (60% of the total) appeared on one of the snapshots in four years. Whilst many of these homes were empty for longer than a single year, they were not empty for so long as to span two annual data collections and can therefore be considered ‘transactional’. In other words, the bulk of homes recorded over the last four years have only been empty for short periods before returning back into use through purchase or rental. Conversely, only a minority of homes (6%) were re-recorded as empty again after being brought back into use over this period.

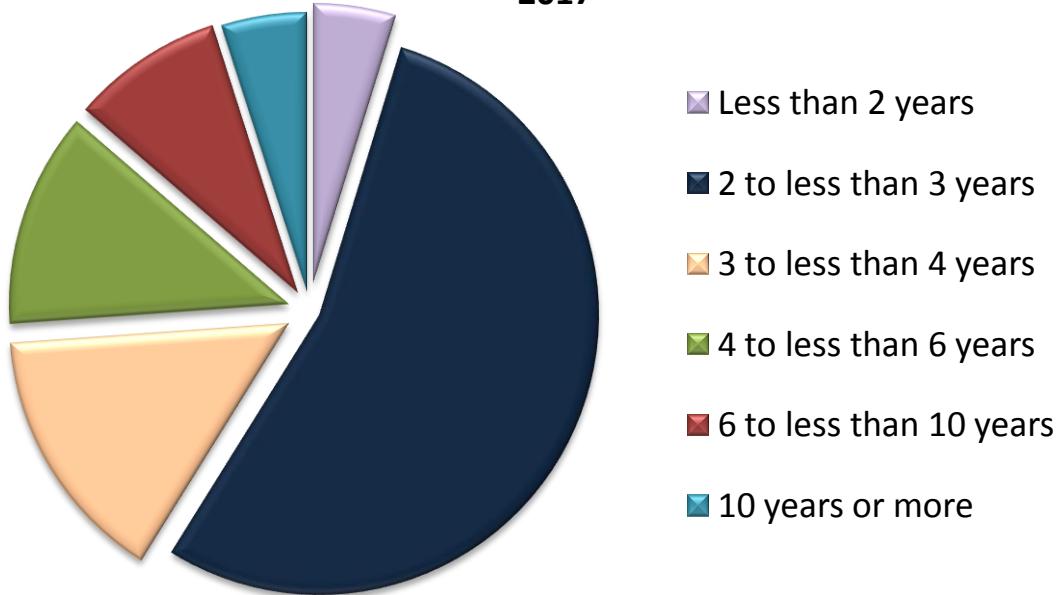
This data reveals some interesting trends to help illuminate the related problems in the County Borough. Firstly, 684 empty homes have now been identified as having

⁴ Empty Homes Agency (2016)

⁵ Source: Welsh Government key statistics

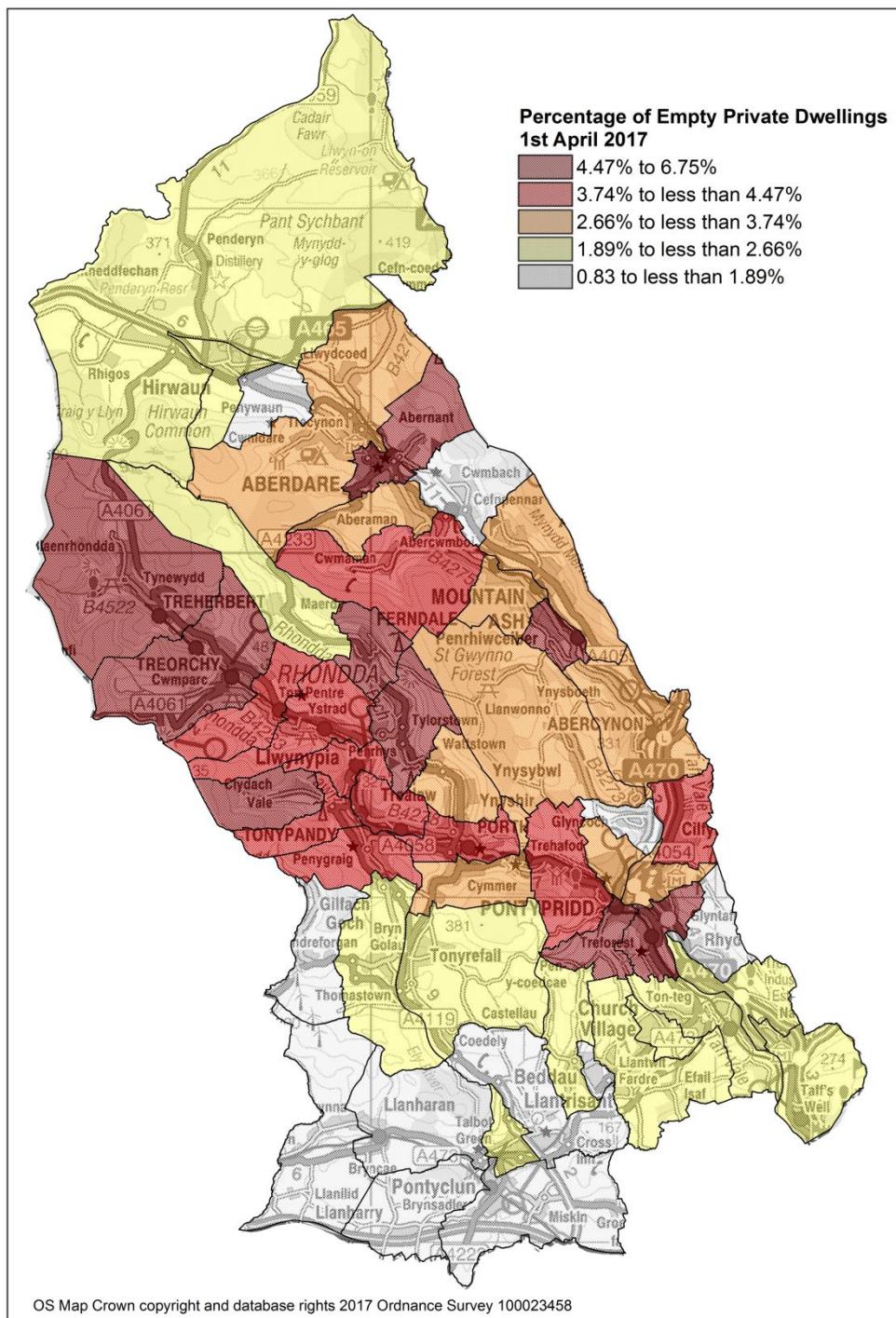
appeared on all four snapshots without returning into beneficial use. These are likely to be some of the most problematic empty homes in the County Borough, although they are a relatively minor element of the overall issue. Appendix 2 shows the location of these 684 ‘long term’ empty homes. Secondly, whilst RCT does have amongst the highest numbers of empty homes in Wales at any given point, this is primarily due to level of ‘churn’ in the housing market, rather than persistent long term empty homes.

Figure 1: Long Term Empty Property Void Time as at 1st April 2017



To consider this information at a more localised level, Figure 2 depicts the percentage of all dwellings that were long term empty homes on 1st April 2017 at ward level. This was enabled by comparing council tax records to housing stock from the Local Land and Property Gazetteer. This provides a useful representative comparison of private sector empty homes between areas, which is not otherwise enabled by looking at the quantity of homes alone.

Figure 2: Percentages of Private Sector Empty Homes by Ward



Looking at the number of empty homes as a percentage of the total housing stock, enables us to pinpoint the areas that are worst affected. Whilst there are empty homes throughout the whole of Rhondda Cynon Taf, analysis shows that in the most recent snapshot, the issue is most acute within several parts of the Rhondda. The

percentages are generally not so high in Cynon and only one area (Penrhiwceiber) displayed comparable levels to parts of the Rhondda Valleys. Conversely, most of Taf has a particularly low proportion of long term empty homes, with most areas typically containing less than 2% on average. This is perhaps unsurprising with demand for properties being significantly higher in Taf, although, equally, empty properties within this area tend to be empty for reasons other than low demand (i.e. inheritance, sentimental reasons, and probate) and are thus more difficult to return to beneficial use. The only area that particularly bucks the trend is Treforest (5%), which is predictable given the lower demand for student accommodation in the private rented sector because of the increase in student rent provided directly by the University.⁶

2. Challenges to bringing empty homes back into use.

There are a number of different and sometimes localised reasons why homes become empty, some of which are:

2.1 Lack of local demand for homes

Although the current housing market has resulted in a decline in the numbers of people being able to buy or rent a property, dwellings still remain empty in areas even where there are potential occupiers. Research shows that this is because there are too many similar homes for sale in the same locality and there is not sufficient variety in the localised housing market.

2.2 Housing market conditions

According to the latest UK housing market survey, eight of the 10 cheapest places to buy a house in the UK are in the South Wales valleys. This has lead to speculative investment purchases in areas where there is little demand or an over supply of similar, usually family, terraced properties. Local knowledge suggests that in areas of low demand many homes are sold via auction and to purchasers who do not know the area or understand the local market. Empty homes are often bought without being viewed because buyers are attracted by the low price. These new owners are

⁶ Local Housing Market Assessment

then unprepared for instances of unseen refurbishment work or low demand and may not have the resources or intentions to invest in the property further and this results in homes remaining empty for longer. It can further lead to a situation where properties are “land banked” and left vacant waiting for an upturn in the housing market which may never materialise.

2.3 Owner inertia

For some owners, maximising income from their asset is not a high priority. Equally, an owner may lack the necessary knowledge or skills to refurbish or manage a property, but still be unwilling to sell. There may also be disputes regarding inheritance which require the outcome of a legal remedy before rent or sale can be considered. Furthermore, a number of homes can remain empty due to personal or sentimental reasons.

2.4 Poor condition of empty homes

High quantities of homes are also empty due to their dilapidated condition. Research indicates that many owners are unable to carry out the necessary remedial works required to bring them up to an acceptable standard because of a lack of funds. These homes will remain empty until the essential works have been completed.

3. Housing Need

3.1 Local Housing Market Assessment

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”.

Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC has identified an overall shortfall in affordable housing units, as well as a predicted future increase in housing need. The most recent Local Housing Market Assessment (LHMA) undertaken in 2017 has identified a need for 738 new affordable homes each year between 2017-18 and 2022-23.

The LHMA also indicated that most people want to live in existing communities. In addition to this, it found that new build activity in many areas of the borough is not sufficient in itself in some areas to meet demand, which reinforces the need for investment in the existing housing stock. It is therefore evident that new build developments alone will not sufficiently meet demand. The LHMA also identified differences in average house prices and affordability in Rhondda Cynon Taf between the Northern and Southern parts of the County Borough, and as previously stated there is also an imbalance in supply and demand.

3.2 Homelessness

Homelessness prevention work has resulted in a significant decrease in homeless applications over the last decade. Prevention is where a local authority takes positive action to provide housing assistance to someone who the authority considers is threatened with homelessness within 56 days. However, despite the general decrease, a large number of people are still presenting themselves as homeless and in the current housing market and economic climate; this trend is set to continue.

In 2016-17 in Rhondda Cynon Taf 567 homelessness presentations were made of which 78 were deemed to be priority cases which the council had a statutory duty to re-house. In addition, 357 households were successfully prevented from homelessness by the authority taking positive preventative action.⁷

Bringing empty homes back into use could contribute to meeting the needs of homelessness households, by increasing the housing supply and also providing the local authority with nomination rights where incentives, such as grant assistance have been provided.

4. The Financial Cost of Empty Homes

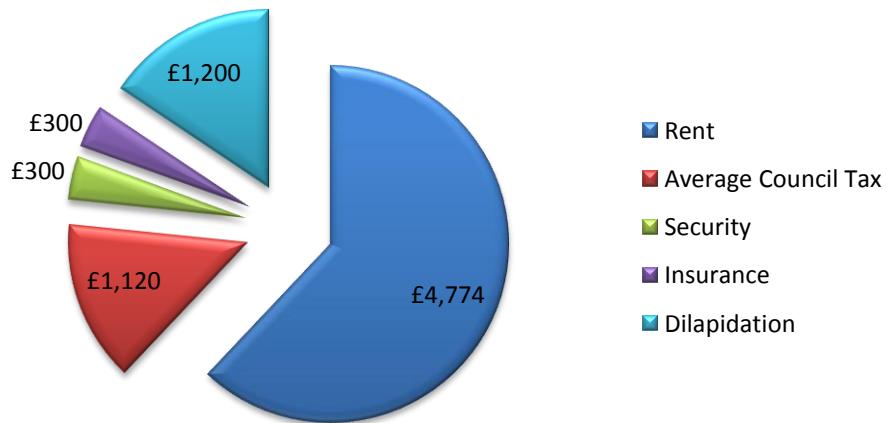
4.1 Cost Implications for Owners of Empty Homes

Not only are long term empty homes a drain on council resources and a wasted resource in a time of meeting housing need, they are a cost burden on the owner of

⁷ Source: Welsh Government

the property. Fig 3 shows that owning an empty dwelling cost the owner an average of £7,100 per annum. The rental loss is based on the Local Housing Allowance of £91.81 for a 3 bed house and the council tax loss equates to the Council Tax rate for a band A property.

Figure 3: Average Annual Cost to Owners of Empty Homes in RCT



5. Enforcement Solutions and Legislative Framework

As already mentioned, invariably, empty homes can be neglected and can fall into disrepair. Where other informal approaches to owners have failed to bring about improvements, service of legal remedies are considered.

The main options that are available to Councils include:

- **Building Act 1984, Sections 77-79**

This legislation allows the Council to require the owner of a building to carry out remedial works or demolish a building or structure if it is considered to be in a dangerous condition. If the owner fails to comply, the Council may carry out the works in default and recover the expenses reasonably incurred. This option is used in instances where the property is in a ruinous or dilapidated condition and is seriously detrimental to the amenities of the neighbourhood. The provision only

addresses the external appearance of the building and therefore can be of limited benefit to the overall regeneration and reuse of the property.

- **Town and Country Planning Act 1990, Section 215**

Requires owners and occupiers to remedy their properties if they fail to maintain them and they are considered seriously detrimental to the amenities of the neighbourhood. The scope of this legislation is wide ranging and it is for the Council to interpret its use.

- **Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982 Section 29**

Where a property is not effectively secured against unauthorised entry or is likely to become a danger to public health and is unoccupied or the occupier is absent from it, the Council can take action. It may secure the property or take steps to prevent it becoming a danger to public health.

- **Environmental Protection Act 1990, Sections 79-81.**

This act allows the Council to require the abatement of statutory nuisance. This may be applied to a range of issues that affect empty homes, including the accumulation of rubbish or ingress of water, affecting neighbouring homes. The Council can serve an abatement notice on the owners requiring works to abate the nuisance, and if necessary carry the work out in default.

- **Housing Act 2004**

The Housing Health and Safety Rating System is a risk based assessment of the potential risks to health and safety from any deficiencies identified in dwellings. Several enforcement options exist, including emergency measures, dependant on the severity of the assessment outcome.

Empty Dwelling Management Orders are also available and could be considered for long-term empty homes as a last resort against un-cooperative property owners. The rental income would 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 would be handed back to the owner. This procedure would only be practical in areas of housing need and would require a housing association

partner to provide the management as the Council does not have any of its own housing stock.

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.

- **Housing Act 1985, Section 17**

If an owner refuses to bring a home back into use and the property is having a degenerative effect on the area, the Council has powers to compulsory purchase. This procedure could be considered where the Council identifies a future purposed use for the building.

- **Law of Property Act 1925, Section 103**

Exercising the power of 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 Policy for the use of this power which highlights the need to ensure appropriate methods for disposal of homes 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 homes for re-use as affordable housing.

6. Recent Activity

6.1 Proactive Approaches

6.1.1 Empty Homes Officers

Over the last few years, the Council has increased its proactive approach to dealing with empty homes and now has two Empty Homes Officers working full time to tackle the issue. A comprehensive database of empty homes is kept, based on Council tax records and any property which has been empty for more than six months as at 1st April is captured on this database, in conjunction with other known long term empty

homes. Part of the remit of the Empty Homes Officer is to identify ownership and legal responsibility of problematic empty homes, and to work with the owners or their estates to bring these back into use. Any direct actions 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 to monitor performance.

The types of interventions that these officers undertake are as follows:

- proactively identifying and surveying empty homes
- serving notices on owners of empty homes where they are having a detrimental impact.
- undertaking works in default (including demolition)
- securing empty homes
- enforced sales where the Council has secured a debt against an empty home
- providing advice and information

6.1.2 Raising Awareness

In order to raise awareness of the empty homes problem within RCT, a number of publicity and educational initiatives have also been employed. It is recognised that increased awareness of the issue can help identify properties of concern to residents and also encourage the owners to come forward and seek advice and guidance. To date, these initiatives have included the following:

- Publicising activities through the use of social media and newspaper articles, local radio and Council and Local Health Authority newsletter articles.
- Presentations and displays to strategic partnership groups, Councillors, Community First Clusters and the general public.
- The development of promotional literature such as leaflets and a comprehensive empty home owner information pack.
- The development of a dedicated empty homes web page.
- The issue of questionnaires to owners of empty homes and residents affected by the issues.

6.2 Funding Options

The Council has a number of funding options available to owners of empty homes to encourage them to be brought back into use. The options recognise that apart from encouraging home owners to utilise their asset, the commercial sector also represents a particular area where properties are underused along with the residential upper floors of retail premises.

6.2.1 Homes above Retail Premises

A recent survey by the Federation of Master Builders estimated that in the UK as a whole, as many as 300,000 to 400,000 new homes could be created by making use of empty spaces above shops. The Council has undertaken a number of approaches to bringing this empty space in town centres back into beneficial use.

The HARPS scheme has been enabled through the Welsh Governments' Vibrant and Viable Places programme. This initiative has focussed on the opportunities provided by the previously untapped housing market in Pontypridd Town Centre. Pontypridd has consistently been identified as one of the areas of high housing demand within the borough and there is a distinct shortage of one and two bedroom units; yet the town centre offers very little scope to develop affordable housing to meet this demand. To date, 24 units of accommodation have been provided through this approach.

There is also provision in the Council's Private Sector Renewal Policy (which identifies the Council's priorities for housing capital investment), to provide Flats over Shops grants to provide residential accommodation in town centre locations.

6.2.2 Empty Property Grant

In 2016 the Council, using its own capital funding launched an Empty Property Grant scheme which provides a grant of up to £20,000 for residents who wish to renovate an empty property they have purchased. To date the Council has invested £4.1million in this scheme. It is estimated that this initiative and total investment will bring back into use in the region of 200 empty homes over the next two to three years.

6.2.3 Houses into Homes Loan

The Houses into Homes Loan is a Welsh Government funded scheme which provides a loan to help return privately owned empty homes into use. The scheme is managed by the Council. These loans are not available for potential owner occupiers and are designed for applicants who want to rent or sell their property on completion of the refurbishment works. The loan must be repaid on sale or within 2 years from the date of loan approval, which ever is sooner, or within 3 years from the date of the loan approval if the property is for rent.

The Houses into Homes Loan has proved to be very popular with landlords and investors with the Council processing over £1.8m of Houses into Homes loans since 2012. This has provided 84 units of accommodation up to December 2017.

6.2.4 Affordable Housing

Affordable housing is classed as housing that is provided for sale or rent at below open market prices and where there are secure mechanisms in place to ensure that it is accessible to those who cannot afford market housing. Recent research has suggested that many people looking for affordable housing 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 and not just new build. Providing low cost homeownership in existing communities can also help to 're-balance' housing markets in areas where this is a high level of rented accommodation.

Initially, Rhondda Cynon Taf was successful in obtaining funding from the Heads of the Valleys initiative to implement an innovative and unique scheme called Homestep Plus. The scheme provided funding for a registered Social Landlord partner (in this instance Cynon Taf Community Housing Group) to purchase a number of empty homes, from owners of existing empty homes, for sale to first time buyers on a 30% shared equity basis. The properties were refurbished before being sold and the equity share in each property was recycled on future sales to facilitate further phases of the scheme. Between 2010 and 2016, 14 empty homes were brought back into use via this initiative.

Since 2015, Rhondda Cynon Taf Council and United Welsh Housing Association have worked together to deliver a new Homestep Plus scheme with funding from the Welsh Government's Vibrant and Viable Places programme. The scheme enables United Welsh to identify and buy empty homes in the CF37 postcode area and to refurbish them before offering them for sale at 70% of the asking price. Alternatively, residents can identify their own property, which United Welsh will purchase on their behalf and sell on at the discounted price. Funding is available to purchase 24 homes up until March 2019, and as with the previous scheme, monies accrued on future sales will be recycled to facilitate additional purchases.

6.2.5 Targeted Community Approaches

It is recognised that there are communities, particularly in the north of the borough, where there are persistently high levels of empty homes. These communities also experience high levels of social deprivation coupled with poor quality housing across all tenures. This situation can often deter people from moving into these areas and also discourages people from staying; thus leading to a high turn over of homes, especially in the private rented sector, and a subsequent increase in the numbers of empty homes.

The implementation of a Housing and Health Action Area was successfully piloted in Tylorstown during February 2015. The over-arching aim was to improve housing, health and prosperity through specific housing interventions.

Within this context, work began to categorise and take action with regards to empty homes in the Tylorstown area according to their condition and need for possible enforcement action. As a result of this 62 empty homes were brought back into use following council contact, intervention or enforcement action. This was despite the very challenging local housing market. However, whilst the initiative brought back into use 62 empty homes, during this time a different 73 became vacant. A targeted housing project has also been undertaken in Treforest over the last two years and has identified similar issues in that despite the project bringing 93 empty homes back into use, Council Tax records show that a further 92 different homes are now empty in the ward.

This reinforces the notion that measures focussed on selective communities, need to be delivered in the context of a wider strategic approach that will improve the overall “outlook” for the communities and tackle some of the more macro issues that these communities are affected by.

6.2.6 Advice, Education and Information

It was acknowledged that there is scope for the Council to proactively assist the market by focussing on the most problematic empty homes as well as those that can be most effectively used for affordable housing in the higher demand areas of the borough. Equally, a number of less problematic empty homes may also be brought back into use through the provision of advice and “education”. This has lead to the production of a comprehensive information pack for owners of empty homes in RCT. The pack contains advice on a multitude of options what are available to owners to enable them to better utilise their asset. The pack covers issues such as selling the empty house, purchase advice, letting or renting the house, advice on how to become a landlord and how to advertise your property, advice on refurbishment, private finance, and tax relief/reductions and outlines the legal enforcement procedures applicable to empty homes.

6.2.7 Dedicated Web Page

In addition to the initiatives outlined above, Rhondda Cynon Taf has also developed a dedicated empty homes web page, which provides information on the Houses into Homes Grant and the Empty Property Grant, plus information on Homestep Plus and general help and guidance to landlords wishing to bring their house back into use. Below is the link to the “Making Homes in RCT” web-page.

<http://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Resident/Housing/Housing.aspx>

6.3 Performance

Over the last four years the Council has brought back into use 651 homes through direct action, loan or grant aid. Just under 1500 interventions on empty homes have taken place over this period to provide advice, serve notices or secure empty homes.

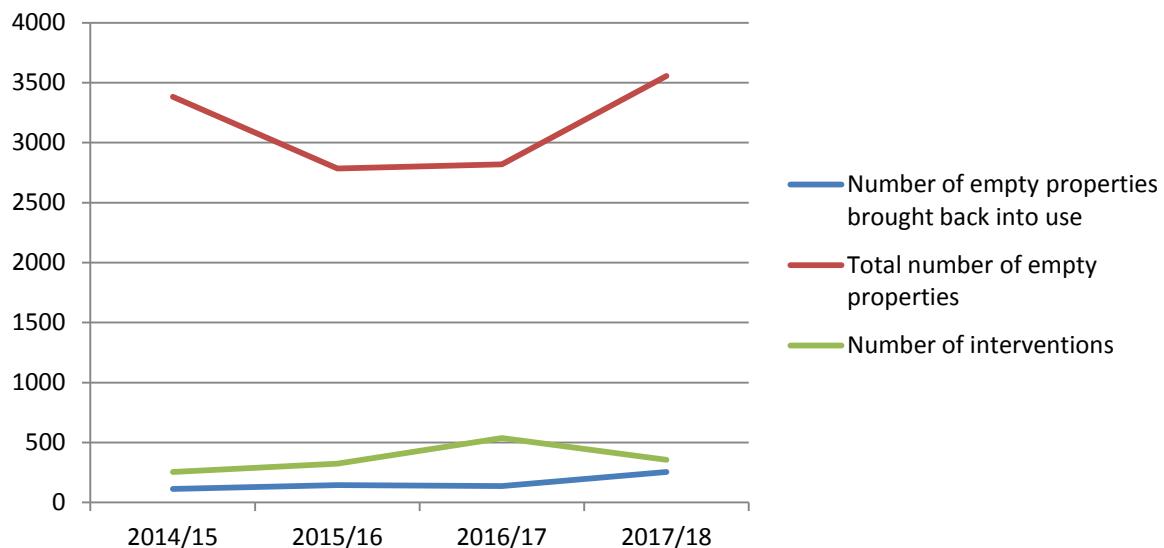
The latest analysis in 2017-18 identified that there are 3556 private sector empty homes in Rhondda Cynon Taf. As per Performance Indicator definition PAM13, this figure consists of the Council Tax exemption classes of, A, C F, G, L and Q but excludes homes under renovation and homes classed as second homes (furnished). It also does not include houses taken out of Council Tax banding because they are deemed to be uninhabitable, or commercial empty properties.

There are two figures which are relevant to the Performance Indicator; the number of empty homes and the number of empty homes returned to use. The Council's performance over the last four years is detailed in the table below.

Figure 4: Council performance in relation to empty homes

	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	Total
% of empty homes brought back into use	3.37%	5.17%	4.9%	5.74%	-
Number of empty homes brought back into use	114	144	138	204	600
Total number of empty homes	3381	2785	2818	3556	-
Number of interventions	255	324	536	356	1471

Figure 5: Comparison of Council Performance by year



It should be noted that Rhondda Cynon Taf only counts empty homes that have been brought back into use as a consequence of direct action by the Council e.g. enforcement or financial assistance in accordance with the national performance indicator definition. This definition was changed for 2017/18 both in terms of the type of empty homes that can be counted and the type of action. This has meant that the council's total number of empty homes appears to have grown significantly between 2016-17 and 2017-18. However, the two data sets are not strictly comparable because of the change in the types of empty home that can be counted. The graph does however demonstrate the gradual improvement each year in the total number of empty homes that have been brought back into use per year both in real terms and as a percentage. Notably, in 2017-18 less interventions resulted in more homes being brought back into use, perhaps evidence of the benefits of a more targeted approach.

7. Strategic Aims

Whilst it is acknowledged that good progress has been made in bringing empty homes back into use in RCT over the last few years, the scale of the problem still persists and continues to present problems in many communities. Despite lots of activity and empty homes being brought back into use, often the overall total number of empty homes in the borough at any one time remains relatively static i.e as one empty home is brought back into use, another falls empty.

As such, a strong strategic approach is required which has objectives that are clear, deliverable and will make a difference to both the scale of empty homes that are brought back into use as well as having a more fundamental impact on the total number in order to reverse the trend in a sustainable way.

The strategic aims are:

1. To develop partnerships and vehicles that will enable an increase in the scale of empty homes being brought back into use

Drawing on best practice elsewhere, the Council will actively engage with housing associations, private sector partners, community groups and other stakeholders in the community, to identify new models and vehicles to increase the scale of empty homes that are brought back into use.

Responsibilities for the various interventions and approaches for empty homes are shared across two departments in the Council. The ‘Housing Grants and Strategy Team’ located with the Regeneration and Planning department is responsible for overall delivery of the strategy, developing an action plan and monitoring outcomes. It is also responsible for developing and delivering funding models and any other vehicles designed to bring empty homes back into use. Meanwhile, the Council’s ‘Housing Standards Team’ located with the Public Health and Protection department is responsible for the provision of advice, assistance and enforcement activity.

Good communication and clarity of roles and responsibilities is vital to ensuring the successful delivery of the aims of this strategy. As such, an Empty Homes Steering Group will be established to co-ordinate delivery of the strategy and associated activity. The Steering Group will include representatives from Housing Grants, Housing Strategy, the Housing Standards Team, Regeneration and Planning and other partners as required

2. To maximise the use of current funding and identify further funding models to increase the number of empty homes that are brought back into use

The Council will continue to make available and ensure effective management of grants and loans schemes to facilitate owners (subject to funding) to bring their empty homes back into beneficial use. The Council will also prioritise identifying further funding opportunities that can be levered into the borough for this purpose.

3. To continue to use a range of interventions to ensure all types of empty home are targeted and enabled to be brought back into use and monitor the outcomes related to these closely.

The Council will continue to encourage or enforce the improvement or conversion of empty homes to increase the supply and choice of housing across RCT. Priority will be given to those properties which have the greatest detriment to the surrounding community and/or those properties which can most effectively be returned to use in terms of contributing usefully to housing supply.

The Council's dedicated web page "Making Homes in RCT" is currently being updated to include all relevant options for owners of empty homes to consider. This will include an option for local residents to "report" an empty home which will allow the Empty Homes Officers to target individual properties and to offer advice and assistance to bring the property back into use as soon as possible.

4. To undertake further research in communities and evaluation of existing schemes to understand why there are a high number of empty homes and identify possible solutions that could prevent homes from becoming empty.

The Council, in its strategic housing role will undertake further research to understand why some areas are blighted by empty homes, taking into consideration both the 'micro' and 'macro' reasons. It is possible that empty homes in some communities are a symptom of other issues, rather than the problem in itself and undertaking in depth research into the housing market and other social economic factors might help to identify more innovative solutions and approaches to the problem. The trend based data will continue to be analysed to assist in the targeting of interventions.

5. To identify possible solutions that could prevent homes from becoming empty and also develop interventions for different market areas and types

The Council will ensure that in its five identified Strategic Opportunity Areas the opportunities to bring private sector empty homes back into use is maximised. In addition, major infrastructure projects are an instrument for kick-starting regeneration with train stations, and their surrounding environments, increasingly seen as the steer for regeneration programmes. The development of the South East Wales Metro, as part of the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal, provides such an opportunity. The Metro will focus on modernising the core valley lines resulting in far more frequent and faster trains into and out of Cardiff from. This could therefore result in renewed and increased demand for housing in some areas where the housing market has been affected by depopulation in recent years which would have a positive impact on the number of empty homes. Increases in tourism could also present an opportunity to encourage the re-use of empty homes.

This approach to prevention will also include an evaluation of existing schemes to ensure the impact of those schemes is effective; development of new schemes and identification of approaches to both prevent homes from becoming empty and manage low demand effectively.

8. Action Plan and Monitoring

An annual action plan will be developed to deliver and drive forward the aims of this Strategy and ensure that the Council's ambitions related to decreasing the number of empty homes in the borough are met. It will be monitored quarterly and performance will be measured against it, and relevant local and national indicators.

Appendix 1: Case Studies

Case Study 1: Houses into Homes Loan

The Forest Hotel, Treforest, Pontypridd:

Houses to Homes loan was awarded in June 2015 for £150,000 for the conversion of a former public house which closed and became empty in November 2010 to 5 self contained 2 bedroom flats and a 3 bedroom residential dwelling. This scheme also attracted additional private sector leverage of £191,250.



Case Study 2: Homestep Plus

Property in CF37 area after refurbishment works. This property had previously remained empty for over 2 years.



Case Study 3: Treforest Targeted Approach

This property was the longest standing empty property in Treforest and had been empty since 2001. Advice was given to the owner regarding condition of property. The property is now refurbished ready for sale and on the market. The Council's intervention helped by encouraging the owner to do something with the property rather than face legal action.



Appendix 2 – Location of 684 ‘Long Term’ Empty Homes

Ward	Number of empty homes appearing in 2014,2015, 2016 and 2017 snapshot	Percentage of Total
Beddau	1	0.15
Llanharan	1	0.15
Pen-y-waun	1	0.15
Rhydfelen Central/Llan	1	0.15
Tyn-y-nant	1	0.15
Llanharry	2	0.29
Llantrisant Town	2	0.29
Talbot Green	2	0.29
Llantwit Fardre	3	0.44
Rhigos	3	0.44
Church Village	4	0.58
Cwmbach	4	0.58
Glyncoch	4	0.58
Llwyn-y-pia	4	0.58
Gilfach Goch	5	0.73
Pont-y-clun	5	0.73
Rhondda	5	0.73
Ton-teg	5	0.73
Brynna	6	0.88
Tonyrefail East	6	0.88
Graig	7	1.02
Hawthorn	7	1.02
Mountain Ash East	8	1.17
Pontypridd Town	9	1.32
Cilfynydd	10	1.46
Tonyrefail West	11	1.61
Hirwaun	12	1.75
Ynysybwl	12	1.75
Trallwng	13	1.90
Ynyshir	13	1.90
Maerdy	15	2.19
Porth	15	2.19
Pen-y-graig	16	2.34
Tonypandy	16	2.34
Trealaw	16	2.34
Treforest	16	2.34
Ystrad	18	2.63

Aberaman North	19	2.78
Aberdare West/Llwydcoed	19	2.78
Cymmer	20	2.92
Mountain Ash West	21	3.07
Abercynon	22	3.22
Aberaman South	26	3.80
Ferndale	27	3.95
Cwm Clydach	29	4.24
Aberdare East	30	4.39
Pentre	33	4.82
Penrhwceiber	36	5.26
Tylorstown	36	5.26
Treorchy	43	6.29
Treherbert	44	6.43
Grand Total	684	100