

**RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**MUNICIPAL YEAR 2019-2020**

**HEALTH AND WELLBEING SCRUTINY  
COMMITTEE**

**19<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2019**

**REPORT OF:  
DIRECTOR OF PROSPERITY AND  
DEVELOPMENT**

<b>TACKLING EMPTY HOMES</b>

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Appendices: Empty Homes Strategy (2018-2021)  
Empty Homes Action Plan (2019 – 2020)  
Empty Property Advice Pack (2019)  
Landlord Newsletter (2018)  
Empty Homes Case studies

**1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to update Scrutiny Members on the progress made in implementing the Council's approach to tackling empty homes, which is set out in the Empty Homes Strategy for the period 2018-2021 (**Appendix A**).

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that Members:

- 2.1 Scrutinise and comment on the information contained within this report.
- 2.2 Consider whether they wish to scrutinise in greater depth any matters contained in the report.

**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, from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2017, revealed that there were 3,556 private sector homes that were vacant for six months or more. This equated to 3.8% of Rhondda Cynon Taf's private housing (owner occupied and private rented) stock. The average for Wales in 2017/2018 was 2.4% with the lowest (Torfaen) having 0.78% of their stock empty.
- 3.3 Whilst, RCT was above the Welsh average and did have the highest number of empty homes in Wales, this was primarily due to the level of 'churn' in the housing market, rather than persistent long term empty homes. For example, in the 1<sup>st</sup> April 2017 snapshot 59% of homes that were empty had been vacant for less than three years and in total **only 684 (9%) homes** 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 a 4-year period were only 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.
- 3.4 The 684 empty homes that were identified as being empty, in all four snapshots were identified as a focus for the Council's enforcement and enabling activity.
- 3.5 As a result, in October 4<sup>th</sup> 2018, Cabinet approved an Empty Homes Strategy for the period 2018-2021, which aims to 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.

#### **4.0 THE STRATEGY**

- 4.1 The Strategy (**Appendix A**), sets out 5 objectives that are clear, deliverable and aim to 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 The objectives are:
- 1. To develop partnerships and vehicles that will enable an increase in the scale of empty homes being brought back into use.**
  - 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.**
  - 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.**

4. To undertake further research in communities and evaluation of existing schemes to understand why there are a high number of empty homes.
5. To identify possible solutions that could prevent homes from becoming empty and also develop interventions for different market areas and types.

## 5.0 PROGRESS UPDATE

- 5.1 Since the report to Cabinet, a considerable amount of good work has been undertaken over a short period of time.

### *Strategic direction and governance*

- 5.2 Following the approval of the Empty Homes Strategy by Cabinet, a Multi-Agency Empty Homes Operational Group (EHOG) has been established. The purpose of the EHOG is to ensure that a coherent and structured approach to tackling Empty Homes is implemented. The group oversees and monitors the delivery of the Empty Home Action Plan (**Appendix B**), to ensure the delivery of the objectives set out within the strategy.

### *A targeted approach*

- 5.3 A priority within the Empty Homes Action Plan is to bring long-term empty properties back into use; these are properties that have continued to be vacant over a 4-year period. By analysing the empty properties data, **684** long-term empty properties were identified in RCT. It was agreed that a targeted approach was needed in order to bring these properties back into use by delivering interventions to cohorts of long-term properties. The target set was to deliver interventions within the first year to **171 (25%)** of the long-term empty properties. The interventions include telephone calls to the homeowner, letters sent to the homeowner, visits to the homeowner providing advice and support on opportunities available to bring the property back into use and serving enforcement notices.
- 5.4 Excellent progress has been made with the target being achieved within the first 10 months of the action plan being implemented with **276 (40%)** of the long-term empty properties receiving targeted intervention support. As part of the intervention work, enforcement action has also been undertaken in respect of **11** empty homes, including taking action to deal with accumulations of waste, repairing defects and securing properties to prevent unauthorised access. However, at this stage, it is too early to measure overall impact of these interventions, this will be evidenced in April 2020 when the 2020 council tax data is available. This targeted work will continue to be implemented and monitored by the EHOG.

- 5.5 Furthermore, as of 1st April 2018, the Council has used its discretionary powers to remove the 50% Council Tax discount that was previously applied to long term empty homes. This means that since 1<sup>st</sup> April 2018, all properties which are both vacant and unfurnished for six months or more, and do not qualify for a Council Tax exemption, have been charged 100% Council Tax.
- 5.6 The impact of this has been significant, with the Housing Grants team seeing a significant increase in the number of queries from both landlords and home owners looking for information, support and advice, such as loans and grants, in order to bring their empty home back into use.

### ***Information, advice and assistance***

- 5.7 As part of the first year Empty Homes Action Plan, an Advice Pack (**Appendix C**) has been developed for empty property homeowners. The pack provides information on ways in which to bring their empty properties back into use, such as availability of grants and loan and selling and renting options. The Advice Pack was made available to empty property homeowners in November 2019 and will be promoted through the Council's website and within Council and community buildings. Over the next year, the group will explore further opportunities to improve accessibility of the information provided through the use of social media.
- 5.8 The Housing Strategy Department hosts the RCT Landlord Forum, which is held quarterly and attended by approximately 40 landlords. The Forum enables the Council to engage directly with landlords and potential investors in the County Borough to share information and work together to reduce the number of empty homes in RCT. Since the launch of the Empty Property Strategy, 3 Landlord Forums have taken place; January, May and September 2019. Information shared and discussed in the forum has included the Houses into Homes loan scheme.
- 5.9 The Houses into Homes loan is a Welsh Government funded scheme which provides a loan to help return **privately** owned empty homes back into use. The scheme is 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, whichever is sooner, or within 3 years from the date of the loan approval if the property is for rent. In total, **103** Houses into Homes loans have been approved, which totals **£3.205M** of loans awarded. This scheme alone has helped to bring **148** empty homes back into use (**Appendix D**).
- 5.10 The forum continues to attract 40+ landlords to each meeting, which evidences the need and effectiveness of them. The forum will continue to meet with a focus on sharing good practice, highlighting case studies regarding how empty homes have been brought back into use across RCT.
- 5.11 In addition to this, a Landlord newsletter is published twice a year to provide information, advice and support. One of the schemes that has been promoted through this newsletter is the Council's Homestep Plus scheme. The Homestep

Plus scheme is a partnership between the Council and United Welsh Housing Association where empty homes in the CF37 postcode area are purchased from private Landlords and renovated, utilising Welsh Government funding, and then sold to first time buyers at 70% of the market value (**Appendix E**). To date, a total of **18** empty homes have been purchased, which has resulted in **17** homes being brought back into use. Due to the success of this pilot scheme, the Council is now exploring opportunities to roll it out across additional areas.

- 5.12 The Council's own Empty Homes grant is available to prospective **owner occupiers** who plan to live in the property as their main residence for a period of at least 5 years. The property must have remained unoccupied for a period of 6 months prior to making the grant application. The grant is available for essential repair work to make the property safe and secure and free from any category one hazards. The maximum grant awarded towards the cost of work is £20,000 and applicants are required to make a 15% contribution towards the cost of grant eligible work up to a maximum of £3,000. There is a discretion to waive the 15% contribution in exceptional circumstances such as financial hardship, where the applicant must be in receipt of an income related benefit. Grant conditions are registered with a Full Legal Charge on completion of work for a 5-year period. Full repayment will be required if the property is sold or not occupied as intended during the 5 year grant condition period.
- 5.13 During the financial year 2018/2019 the Housing Grants team received **102** empty home grant applications. All applications were surveyed and **88 (86%) were approved**. By the end of the financial year, **61 (69%)** of cases were complete, the remaining 27 cases are ongoing and have been rolled over into the 2019/2020 programme (**Appendix F**). The total spend against the grant for the financial year 2018/2019 was **£1.24m**, which has brought **61** empty homes back into use.
- 5.14 The Council has recently secured additional Welsh Government funding to provide Interest Free **Owner Occupier** loans. The scheme is being delivered by Robert Owen Community Banking on behalf of the Authority and is designed to help homeowners have safer, warmer and greener homes. Loans are available between £1,000 and £25,000 with repayment terms of up to 10 years. The loans are interest free and there is currently no fees applicable. The loans can be used for building works, including windows, doors, damp-proofing, disabled access, kitchens, bathrooms, stairs, plumbing, electrics, plasterwork, floors, roofing, chimneys and brickwork. The scheme also supports boilers, wood burning stoves and energy efficiency measures such as insulation and some renewable energy installations. The scheme has recently been launched, and is also being directly targeted at empty homes. To date, **50** applications are currently being considered.

### ***A partnership approach***

- 5.15 The Council has been working with Housing Association partners to tackle some of RCT's larger empty homes/properties in town centres. These are complex schemes, which often require a number of interventions. Each key town centre has or is developing a town centre regeneration Strategy. The

Strategy will look at the best development mix to take advantage of opportunities, including residential development within the tenure mix, which is best for the town and location. The aim of this approach is to bring back vacant or derelict floorspace/apartments into use for this purpose.

- 5.16 One of the Town Centre Strategies that has been developed is for Porth. The strategy has identified 5 strategic objectives; objective 4 is to support the development of housing. This includes, identifying key residential opportunities, including vacant properties that need redeveloping or renovating. A number of properties close to the train station and at key locations throughout the town centre have the potential for mixed-use development, with commercial and retail opportunities on the ground floors and the reuse of vacant floor space at upper levels, suitable for residential use.
- 5.17 The Council has been working in partnership with Empty Homes Wales, managed by United Welsh Housing Association, to **promote** and **raise awareness** of a leasing scheme they offer, which supports bringing empty homes back into use. The leasing scheme covers any renovation works required to bring an empty home up to a habitable standard. On completion of the works, Empty Homes Wales, will then lease the property for the homeowner and manage the tenancy. Rental income received during the term of the lease is used to offset the cost of the renovation works. Once the renovation costs have been repaid, Empty Homes Wales can continue to rent the home, in return for a management fee, which is deducted from the rental income.
- 5.18 The Council is developing positive relationships with a number of potential empty home investors who are keen to purchase empty homes across the Authority to bring them back into use. The Council will facilitate this by creating the link between the investors and the homeowner and/or landlord, in order for discussions to take place regarding a potential sale. The Council plans to strengthen this partnership by facilitating a webpage that will offer further opportunities to sell empty homes to potential investors.

## **6.0 IMPACT**

- 6.1 The Council's approach to tackling empty homes is having a significant impact on the number of empty homes across the borough. Council tax records show that between 2017/2018 and 2018/2019, the period the Empty Homes Strategy was implemented, the number of empty homes across the borough has reduced from **3,556 to 2,885**, a **reduction** of **671** properties (please note that this data is based on one snapshot in time).
- 6.2 Furthermore, in 2018-2019, RCT brought a total of **213 (7.4%)** empty homes back into use, directly from Council intervention, performing **2.8% above the National Welsh Average**. This is a 2% increase on the previous year.
- 6.3 National benchmarking data for 2018/2019 also ranks RCT **1<sup>st</sup>** in Wales for the **number** of empty homes brought back into use and **6<sup>th</sup>** in Wales for the **percentage**. This is an **improvement** from the 2017/2018 data that ranked

RCT **2<sup>nd</sup>** place for the **number** of empty homes brought back into use and **8<sup>th</sup>** place for the **percentage**.

- 6.4 In addition to this, our approach to tackling empty homes has been recognised by Welsh Government and in particular the Valley's Taskforce, as sector leading. As such, the Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport, in his capacity as chair of the Valleys Taskforce, has agreed to provide funding of £10M to roll out RCT's Empty Homes grant across all Valley Taskforce authorities. The Valleys Taskforce members have also requested that RCT act as the lead body and therefore co-ordinate the delivery of the grant. This is significant investment which will further support and accelerate the number of empty homes being brought back into use across the borough and the Valley's Taskforce authorities.

## **7.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1 An equality and diversity screening exercise was undertaken prior to the implementation of the Empty Homes Strategy and a full impact assessment was not required. There have been no further assessments completed.

## **8.0 CONSULTATION**

- 8.1 A consultation exercise is not required at this stage but may be required as actions within the strategy are delivered.

## **9.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATION(S)**

- 9.1 There are currently no financial implications aligned to this report. Welsh Government funding has been awarded to the Council for the existing Houses into Homes loan scheme and the Council's current budget for the Empty Property Grant is £2.5M for 2019/20-2020/21
- 9.2 If any additional funding requirements are identified to support the delivery of the strategy, these will be reported to Members for agreement.

## **10.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OR LEGISLATION CONSIDERED**

- 10.1 The delivery of the aims of the strategy will in some cases require the utilisation of existing Housing and Planning legislation where enforcement action in relation to an empty property is required.

## **11.0 LINKS TO THE CORPORATE AND NATIONAL PRIORITIES AND THE WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT.**

- 11.1 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.
- 11.2 As such, the Empty Homes Strategy will continue to contribute to the delivery of all three of the Council's Corporate Plan priorities of economy, people and place. The Strategy will also continue to 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

## **12.0 CONCLUSION**

- 12.1 The Empty Homes Strategy has been implemented for one year and has provided a framework for all empty homes activity, ensuring a co-ordinated approach across the borough.
- 12.2 The strategy enables the positive work undertaken over recent years to be built on in order to decrease the total number of empty homes in the borough overall. The empty homes data for 2018/2019 clearly evidences that the Empty Homes Strategy and working collaboratively with partners, is being successful in having a positive impact on reducing the number of empty homes across RCT.



# **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 31<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> This supports the statement that “bringing empty homes back into use not only provides much needed

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Welsh Government

<sup>2</sup> Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors

<sup>3</sup> Chartered Institute of Housing – Information leaflet

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

<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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

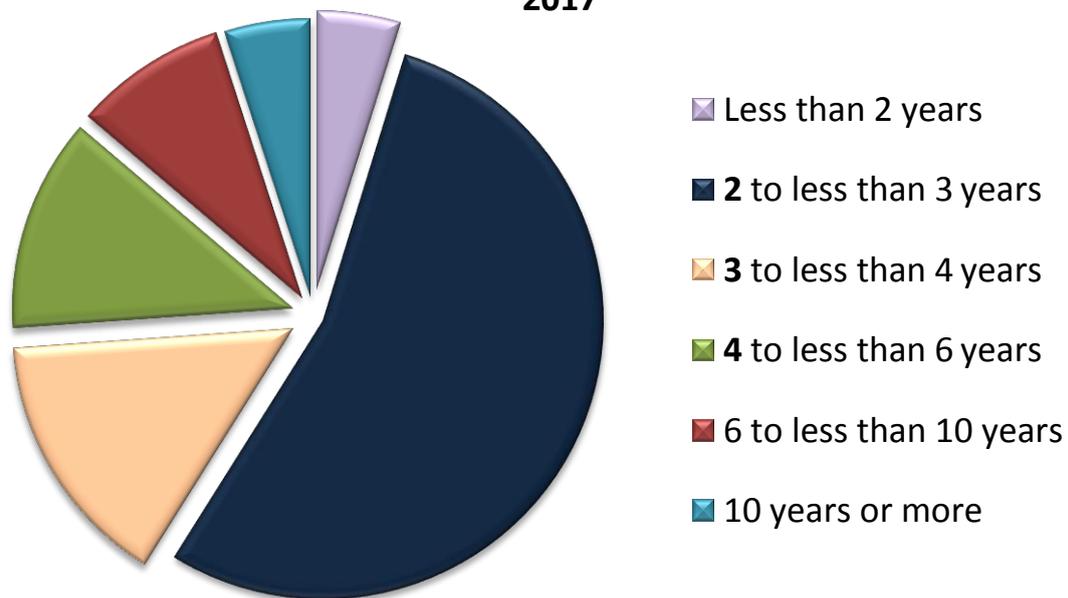
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<sup>4</sup> Empty Homes Agency (2016)

<sup>5</sup> Source: Welsh Government key statistics

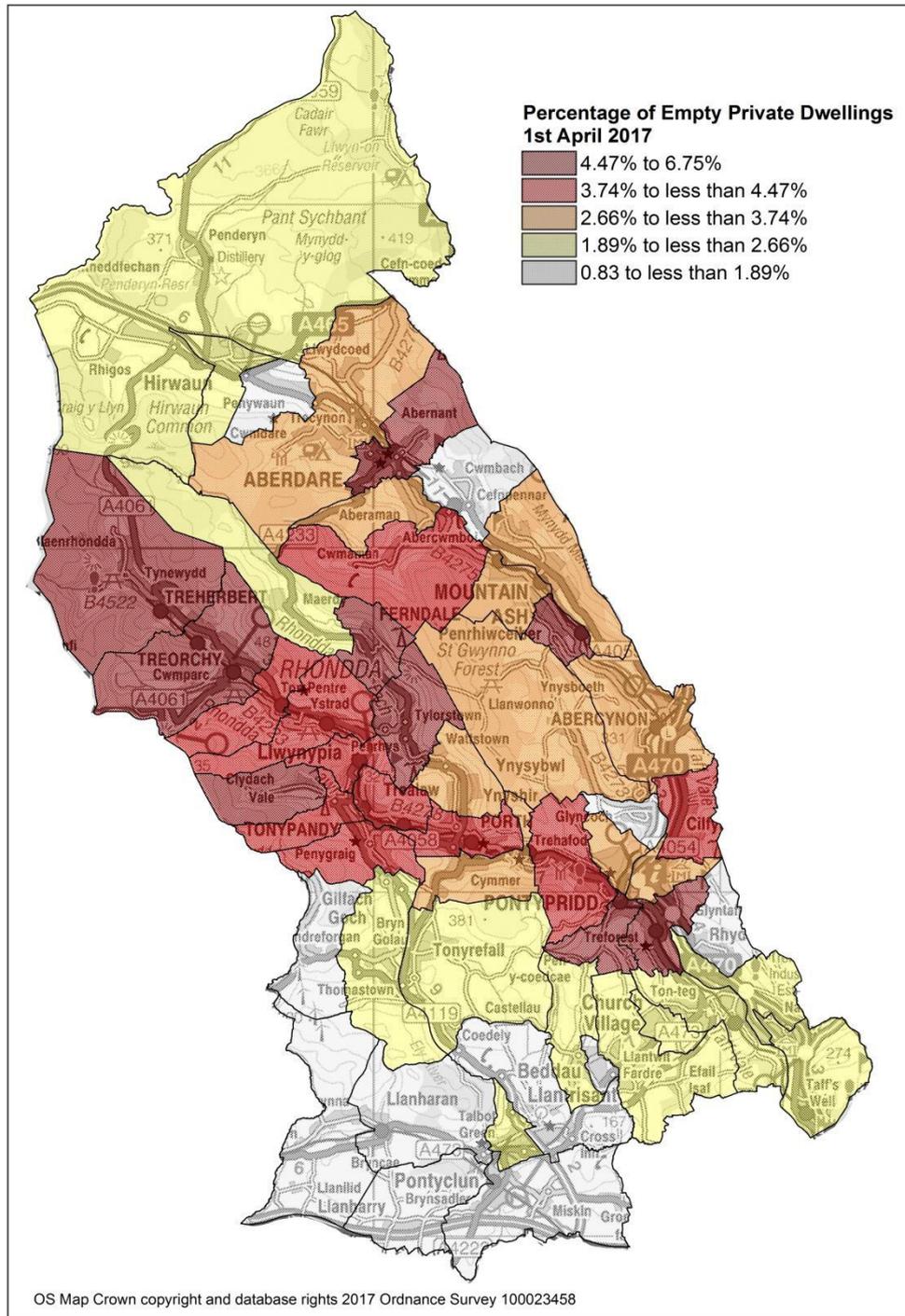
appeared on all four snapshots without returning into beneficial use. These are likely to be some of the most problematic empty homes in the County Borough, although they are a relatively minor element of the overall issue. Appendix 2 shows the location of these 684 'long term' empty homes. Secondly, 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

## **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 led 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

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<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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**

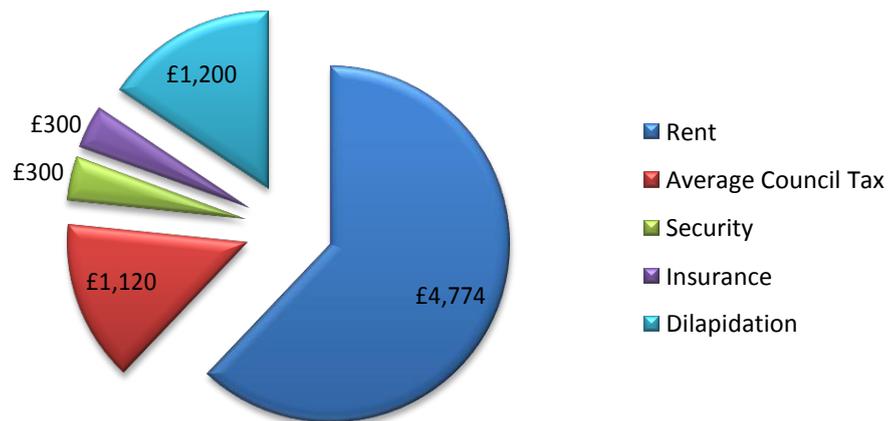
Not only are long term empty homes a drain on council resources and a wasted resource in a time of meeting housing need, they are a cost burden on the owner of

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<sup>7</sup>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 become 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 emergencies 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 1<sup>st</sup> 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, whichever 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 led 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.

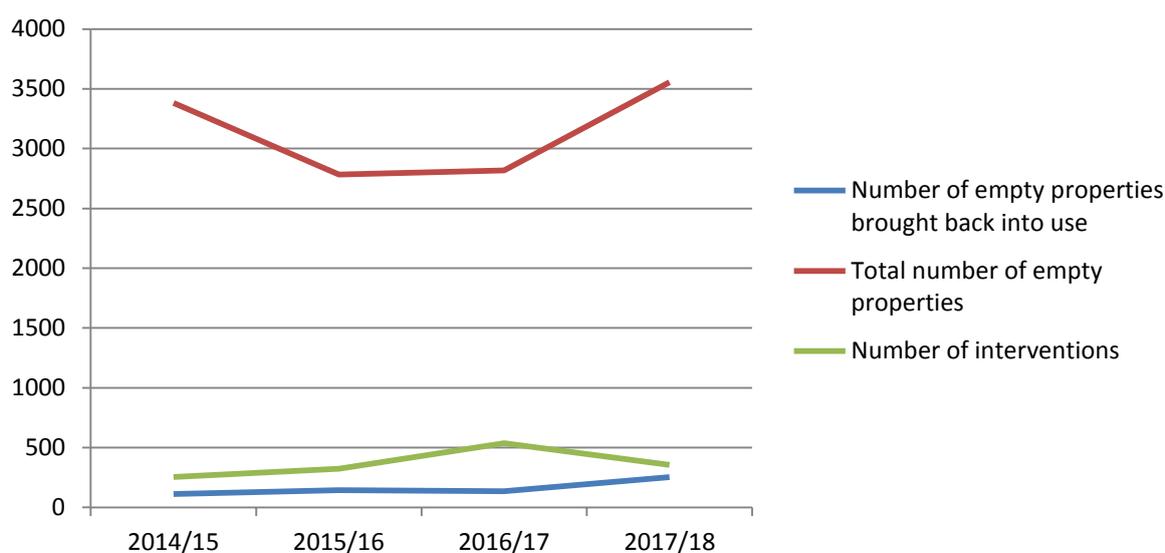
The latest analysis in 2017-18 identified that there are 3556 private sector empty homes in Rhondda Cynon Taf. As per Performance Indicator definition PAM13, this figure consists of the Council Tax exemption classes of, A, C F, G, L and Q but excludes homes under renovation and homes classed as second 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
<b>% of empty homes brought back into use</b>	3.37%	5.17%	4.9%	5.74%	-
<b>Number of empty homes brought back into use</b>	114	144	138	204	600
<b>Total number of empty homes</b>	3381	2785	2818	3556	-
<b>Number of interventions</b>	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.

**Before**



**After**



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

<b>Ward</b>	<b>Number of empty homes appearing in 2014,2015, 2016 and 2017 snapshot</b>	<b>Percentage of Total</b>
Beddau	1	0.15
Llanharan	1	0.15
Pen-y-waun	1	0.15
Rhydfelen Central/Ilan	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

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



**APPENDIX B: Empty Homes Action Plan (January 2019 – March 2020)**

**Empty Homes Action Plan: January 2019 – December 2019**

<b>Strategic Objective 1</b>	<b>To develop partnerships and vehicles that will enable an increase in the scale of empty properties being brought back into use</b>				
<b>Actions that will deliver this objective</b>	<b>Milestones/Sub Actions that will achieve the overarching Action</b>	<b>Measures of Success</b>	<b>Delivery Date</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Progress</b>
Establish an Empty Homes Operational Group (EHOG) to deliver the aims and objectives of the Empty Property Strategy	Seek approval for establishment of group and develop Terms of Reference and membership	Group set up and attended by members	First convened on 15/11/18	Housing Strategy	Empty Homes Operational group set up and chaired by Housing Strategy. Terms of reference and membership complete.
	Coordinate EHOG meetings every quarter in order to implement and monitor the delivery of the first year action plan	Key stakeholders embrace and deliver the strategic aims and objectives	Ongoing	Housing Strategy	5 meetings have taken place to date. The meetings have been a successful method of co-ordinating the aims and objectives of the strategy.
Liaise with speculative investors who wish to acquire properties within RCT to let to members of the public	Continue to organise the RCT Landlord Forum, setting agendas, booking venues for meetings and collating minutes.	The number of members attending the Landlord forums. Feedback from the landlords attending the meetings.	Ongoing	Housing Strategy	3 Forums have taken place with an average of 40 Landlords in attendance.
	Attend RCT Landlord Forum to present Houses into Homes loans scheme	Increase in the number of Houses into Homes loan applications	May 2019	Housing Strategy	104 grants have now been approved. 56 have been approved since April 2018.
	Maintain database of empty property investors	Increase in the number of empty property referrals to investors	Ongoing	Public Health and Protection	The number of referrals is not currently recorded.

Empty Homes Action Plan: January 2019 – December 2019

<b>Strategic Objective 2</b>					
<b>To maximise the use of current funding and identify further funding models to increase the number of empty properties that are brought back into use</b>					
<b>Actions that will deliver this objective</b>	<b>Milestones/Sub Actions that will achieve the overarching Action</b>	<b>Measures of Success</b>	<b>Delivery Date</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Progress</b>
Identify and engage with empty property owners to investigate ways of returning empty homes back into use	To continue to provide Empty Homes Grants to assist owners to renovate long term empty properties by promoting the scheme through posters/fliers and the council website.	Increase in the percentage of empty properties brought back into use	Ongoing	Housing Strategy and Grants	During the financial year 2018/2019 <b>102</b> empty home grant applications were received with <b>88 (86%) approved</b> . By the end of the financial year, <b>61 (69%)</b> of cases were complete, the remaining 27 cases were rolled over into the 2019/2020 programme
Deliver the Homestep Plus Scheme	To continue to work with United Welsh to deliver Homestep Plus scheme in CF37 area	Target of 24 properties purchased and sold under Homestep Plus Scheme	Ongoing	Housing Strategy	17 properties have been purchased and 16 have been sold to first time buyers.
	Explore opportunities to deliver Homestep Plus in other areas of RCT	Areas identified to deliver Homestep Plus	March 2020	Housing Strategy	May need to seek extension of scheme.
Identify suitable empty properties and buildings in town centres and key settlements that could utilise funding	Map empty properties in priority regeneration town centres	Empty properties in regeneration town centres identified	Dec-19	Housing Strategy	Empty properties have been mapped for Porth. All empty properties are mapped on MapInfo however this does not include commercial empty properties.
	Identify suitable funding opportunities for mapped empty properties	Analysis undertaken of potential funding for each empty property	March-20	Housing Strategy	

Empty Homes Action Plan: January 2019 – December 2019

<b>Strategic Objective 3</b>					
<b>To continue to use a range of interventions to ensure all types of empty properties are targeted and enabled to be brought back into use and monitor the outcomes related to these closely</b>					
<b>Actions that will deliver this objective</b>	<b>Milestones/Sub Actions that will achieve the overarching Action</b>	<b>Measures of Success</b>	<b>Delivery Date</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Progress</b>
A commitment to use appropriate enforcement powers where suitable	Develop an enforcement approach to deal with owners of empty properties who do not voluntarily engage in the opportunities available to bring their properties back into use	Increase in the use of enforced sales, compulsory purchase and empty dwelling management orders and a subsequent reduction in the number of problem dwellings within RCT	March-20	EHOOG	11 properties have had enforcement notices served since priority empty property visits have taken place. There are a further possible properties which are being considered.
		Decrease in the number of complaints received regarding empty properties	Ongoing	Public Health and Protection	Report needs to be set up to record this.
	Establish a more proactive and targeted approach to enforcement	Decrease in the number of empty properties	March-20	Public Health and Protection	The target set by the group was to deliver interventions within the first year to <b>171 (25%)</b> of the long-term empty properties. Target has been exceeded with <b>276 (40%)</b> receiving targeted intervention.
Provide up to date advice and assistance to bring empty properties back into use	Establish an Empty Homes webpage to include an empty property market place where sellers can advertise and buyers make direct contact	Number of web page visits	March-20	EPOG	Meeting to be set up with Marketing and Customer Service Teams

Empty Homes Action Plan: January 2019 – December 2019

	Produce an Empty Property Advice Pack for empty property owners	Number of empty properties brought back into use	Nov-19	EPOG	First draft of pack has been produced and is currently with Design and Print for minor amendments.
	Promotion of Empty Property Advice pack	Empty Property Advice pack available on Council's webpage	Dec-19	Housing Strategy	
		Empty Property Advice pack available on Empty Homes webpage	March-20	Housing Strategy	
		Promotion of Empty Property Advice pack on Council's Facebook page	Dec-19	Housing Strategy	
	Develop online reporting of an empty property and a dedicated empty property inbox	Number of empty properties reported on line via Council's website	Marc-20	Housing Strategy	

Empty Homes Action Plan: January 2019 – December 2019

Strategic Objective 4	To undertake further research in communities and evaluation of existing schemes to understand why there are a high number of empty properties and identify possible solutions that could prevent properties from becoming empty				
Actions that will deliver this objective	Milestones/Sub Actions that will achieve the overarching Action	Measures of Success	Delivery Date	Responsibility	Progress
Share best practice with other local authorities/WG	Investigate benchmarking opportunities	Better understanding of empty property problem within RCT and neighbouring authorities	March-20	Housing Strategy	
	Roll out of Empty Homes Grant to Valleys Task Force	Number of empty home brought back into use across the 9 LA's that make up the Valleys Taskforce	October 2019 – launch month	Housing Grants	Announcement made by the Deputy Minister on 30 <sup>th</sup> October to launch the scheme.
Maintain and monitor the Empty Property database	Record and report on the number of empty properties brought back into use through direct action by the Council	Increase in the number of interventions undertaken	Ongoing	Housing Strategy/Public Health and Protection	In 2018/2019 RCT brought a total of <b>213 (7.4%)</b> empty homes back into use, directly from Council intervention, performing <b>2.8% above the National Welsh Average</b> . This is a 2% increase on the previous year.
		Increase in the number of empty properties brought back into use through interventions undertaken	Ongoing	Housing Strategy/Public Health and Protection	National benchmarking data for 2018/2019 also ranks RCT <b>1<sup>st</sup></b> in Wales for the <b>number</b> of empty homes brought back into use and <b>6<sup>th</sup></b> in Wales for the <b>percentage</b> . This is an <b>improvement</b> from the 2017/2018 data that ranked RCT <b>2<sup>nd</sup></b> place for

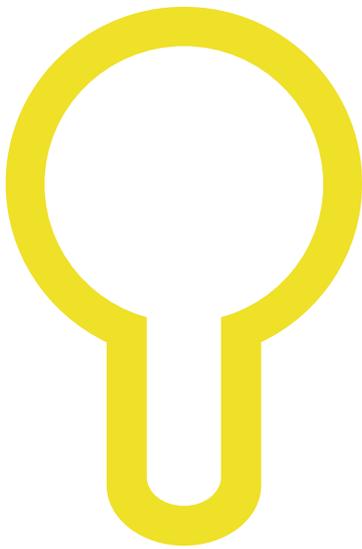
Empty Homes Action Plan: January 2019 – December 2019

					the <b>number</b> of empty homes brought back into use and <b>8<sup>th</sup></b> place for the <b>percentage</b> .
	Report empty property PI to Welsh Government	Benchmark performance at an All Wales level	Ongoing	Housing Strategy	Council tax records show that between 2017/2018 and 2018/2019, the number of empty homes across the borough has reduced from <b>3,556 to 2,885</b> , a <b>reduction of 671</b> properties.
Identify the reason why the number of empty properties remains relatively static in RCT	Undertake research to identify the reasons why the same number of empty properties become empty in certain areas	Solutions identified to target the trend of properties becoming vacant	March-20	Housing Strategy	

Empty Homes Action Plan: January 2019 – December 2019

<b>Strategic Objective 5</b>	<b>To identify possible solutions that could prevent properties from becoming empty and also develop interventions for different market areas and types</b>				
<b>Actions that will deliver this objective</b>	<b>Milestones/Sub Actions that will achieve the overarching Action</b>	<b>Measures of Success</b>	<b>Delivery Date</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Progress</b>
Explore opportunities for Area Based Regeneration	Identify next area to deliver the Health and Housing Action Area scheme	Area identified	March-20	Housing Strategy	





RHONDDA CYNON TAF

# EMPTY PROPERTY

ADVICE PACK



“Realise your empty property’s potential”



RHONDDA CYNON TAF



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# INTRODUCTION

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**Empty properties represent a wasted resource, financial expense and in many cases a missed opportunity to provide much needed affordable housing for people. 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 tendency to attract crime, vandals and anti-social behaviour. In addition to this, they can devalue neighbouring properties and represent a huge cost to the Council, Police, Fire Authority and Community Safety Partnerships due to the time and resources spent in dealing with the problems that they create.**

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council wishes to work with empty property owners to encourage them to bring their properties back into use and where possible, prevent properties from becoming empty in the first instance.

There are a number of initiatives available to help owners bring their empty property back into use and this pack is intended to give you an overview of those initiatives. Contact details are provided for further information.

# GRANTS & LOANS

## Landlord Loan

Interest free loans are available to assist with the renovation and improvement of single empty properties or the conversion of an empty property into a number of units so they are suitable for use as residential accommodation. These loans are only suitable for applicants who want to rent or sell the property upon completion of the works.

The eligibility criteria includes:

- Property must have been empty for a minimum of 6 months
- An application fee is applicable
- Minimum of £1,000 and maximum of £25,000 loan per unit
- Maximum 80% Loan to Value based on the current value of the property and including any other charges, mortgages, loans etc.
- Maximum total loan value of £250,000 per recipient at any time
- Loan secured against the property as first or second charge
- Loan must be repaid within 2 years if the property is for sale (or when sold if sooner) or within 3 years if the property is rented
- Interest at the national standard rate will be charged from the date of the loan agreement in the event of a breach of conditions

**For further information and to request a Landlord Loan application pack, contact Housing Strategy on 01443 281136 or [HousingStrategy@rctcbc.gov.uk](mailto:HousingStrategy@rctcbc.gov.uk).**





## Empty Property Grant

The Empty Property Grant enables prospective owner occupiers to purchase empty properties with the assistance of a grant to fund or contribute towards the cost of work required to bring the property back into use. The eligibility criteria includes:

- Applicants must be prospective owner occupiers who plan to live in the property as their main residence for a period of at least 5 years
- The property must have remained unoccupied for a period of 6 months prior to purchase and at the time of the grant application
- The property must meet the applicants housing needs
- Applicants are required to make a 15% maximum contribution to total cost of grant eligible work
- There will be discretion to waive the 15% contribution in exceptional circumstances such as financial hardship (for example the applicant is in receipt of an income related benefit)
- Maximum of £20,000 grant work limit
- Minimum of £1,000 grant work limit
- Ancillary fees can be added to the cost of works limit
- Registered with a legal charge on completion of the works for a 5 year period. Full repayment will be requested if the property is sold, or not occupied as intended during the 5 year grant condition period

**For further information and to request an Empty Property Grant application pack, contact Housing Grants on 01443 281118 or [HousingGrants@rctcbc.gov.uk](mailto:HousingGrants@rctcbc.gov.uk)**

### Interest Free Owner Occupier Loan

This scheme, supplied by Robert Owen Community Banking, is designed to help home owners have safer, warmer and greener homes. Loans are available between £1,000 and £25,000 (subject to affordability) with repayment terms of up to 10 years. The loans are interest free and there is currently no fees applicable.

The loans can be used for building works including windows, doors, damp-proofing, disabled access, kitchens, bathrooms, stairs, plumbing, electrics, plasterwork, floors, roofing, chimneys and brickwork. The scheme also supports boilers, wood burning stoves and energy efficiency measures such as insulation and some renewable energy installations.

The eligibility criteria includes:

- The property must be below the standard of safe, warm and secure
- You must own the property
- You must be able to afford to repay the loan over a maximum of 10 years
- A legal charge will be registered on the property to secure the loan
- Eligible works must exceed a minimum cost of £1,000

**For further information and to request an application pack, contact Robert Owen Community Banking on 01686 626234 or visit [www.rocbf.co.uk/rct-0-home-improvement-loans](http://www.rocbf.co.uk/rct-0-home-improvement-loans).**





## **Repayable Financial Assistance (Lifetime Loan)**

A lifetime loan is available to applicants who have been assessed and declined for an Owner Occupier Loan due to affordability. The purpose of the product is to provide financial support to applicants whose home is below the standard of safe, warm and secure. The loan is registered as an equity charge on the property and is only repayable upon sale or disposal of the property. The eligibility criteria includes:

- The property must be below the standard of safe, warm and secure
- You must have been assessed and declined for an Owner Occupier Loan due to affordability
- You must own the property
- A legal charge will be registered on the property to secure the loan
- The loan is repayable upon sale or disposal of the property
- Eligible works must exceed a minimum cost of £1,000

**For further information and to request an application pack, contact Housing Grants on 01443 281118 or [HousingGrants@rctcbc.gov.uk](mailto:HousingGrants@rctcbc.gov.uk)**



### Enterprise Investment Fund

The aim of the Enterprise Investment Fund is to support sustainable economic growth across Rhondda Cynon Taf. The grant programme provides financial assistance for Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs), including start-ups as well as existing businesses, for both private and social enterprises.

#### Grant detail:

- Commercial premises – Minimum £1,500 up to a maximum of £10,000
- Home based premises – Minimum £500 up to a maximum of £1,500
- Intervention rate of a maximum of 50% of eligible project costs (excluding VAT)
- Expenditure incurred before grant approval is not eligible for funding

#### Who can apply:

- Are you a SME with fewer than 250 employees?
- Do you have either an annual turnover not exceeding approximately £40 million or an annual balance sheet total not exceeding approximately £34 million?
- Does your organisation operate within the County Borough area of Rhondda Cynon Taf?
- Do you pay either Council Tax or Non Domestic Rates to Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council?
- Do you have or will you have Public Liability Insurance?

**For further information and to request an expression of interest form, contact Prosperity and Development on 01443 281124 or [Regeneration@rctcbc.gov.uk](mailto:Regeneration@rctcbc.gov.uk).**

# SELLING OPTIONS

## Empty Property Investors

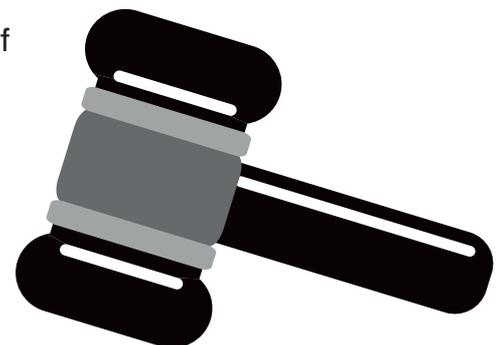
The Council holds a list of empty property investors who have made enquiries with regards to purchasing empty properties within the Authority. With your permission, we can pass on your contact details and details of your empty property for you to further discuss a potential sale. The Council will only assist in the exchange of contact details and it will become a private matter between buyer and seller after this point. It is recommended that you seek legal advice and obtain an independent valuation of your property when negotiating and agreeing the terms of sale.

To refer your property to an empty property investor, contact Public Health Housing on 01443 425565 / 425561 or [PublicHealthHousing@rctcbc.gov.uk](mailto:PublicHealthHousing@rctcbc.gov.uk)

## Auction

Property auctions are increasing in popularity and can often be a quick and effective way of disposing of a property that is difficult to sell and often results in a good price being achieved for dilapidated or unusual properties. They are typically a quicker means of selling a property than via an estate agent as the property is generally listed for auction within 1 month and completion of the sale takes place within 20-30 days of the auction. Demand from multiple buyers can quickly drive up the price of the property, or you may even receive an offer for the property prior to the auction, which if you choose to accept, will avoid the need to go to auction.

For further information about the auction process and to find a local auctioneer, visit [www.propertyauctionaction.co.uk](http://www.propertyauctionaction.co.uk)



## SELLING OPTIONS



**SOLD**

### Estate Agents

Selling your property through an estate agent is likely to be quicker and easier than selling it yourself if you have no previous experience, however, it will cost more. Estate agents will value, market and sell your property, arrange viewings, negotiate a price, liaise with your solicitor and deal with the paperwork. You can expect to pay an estate agent between 0.75% and 3.0% of the selling price plus VAT, so it is advisable to shop around first for the best offer.

To find a local estate agent, visit  
[www.naea.co.uk/find-agent](http://www.naea.co.uk/find-agent)



# 4 RENTING OPTIONS

## Landlord Advice

Renting your property can provide a means of additional income, improve the condition of the property and reduce the likelihood of vandalism and crime that empty properties often attract. If you are thinking of renting your property, the Council can offer you advice on becoming a landlord, including:

- Responsibilities and obligations
- Landlord and tenant law
- Tenancy agreements
- Tenant finding
- Tenancy support
- Local housing market and rental incomes
- Supply and demand
- Future opportunities
- Rent Smart Wales
- Landlord forums & newsletter

The Council's free tenant finder service can also enhance your ability to source prospective tenants. Tenants are matched according to their ability to meet the financial obligations in paying a set level of rent. Landlords are under no obligation to accept households nominated by the Housing Solutions service and are still able to advertise and let the property privately.



# RENTING OPTIONS

## Landlord Advice Continued...

The table below shows the approximate potential income that you could have earned over the period of time that your property has been empty.

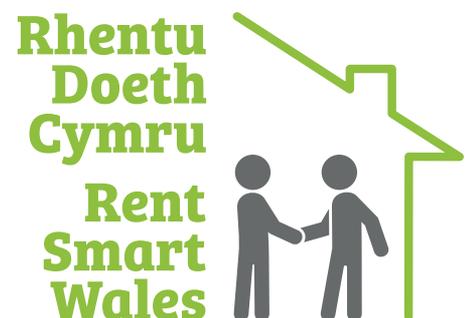
Potential income based on number of years empty (based on Local Housing Allowance 2019-2020)		
	 <b>2 Bed</b>	 <b>3 Bed</b>
<b>1 year</b>	£4,350	£4,681
<b>2 year</b>	£8,700	£9,362
<b>3 year</b>	£13,050	£14,043
<b>4 year</b>	£17,400	£18,724
<b>5 year</b>	£21,750	£23,405
<b>6 year</b>	£26,100	£28,086
<b>7 year</b>	£30,450	£32,767
<b>8 year</b>	£34,800	£37,448
<b>9 year</b>	£39,150	£42,129
<b>10 year</b>	£43,500	£46,810

For further Landlord Advice, contact Housing Strategy on 01443 281136 or [HousingStrategy@rctcbc.gov.uk](mailto:HousingStrategy@rctcbc.gov.uk).

## Rent Smart Wales

The Housing Act (Wales) 2014 introduced a requirement for landlords to be registered, and self-managing landlords who let and manage properties to undertake training and apply for a licence. This requirement is governed by Rent Smart Wales, which aims to drive up standards in the private rented sector to protect tenants and support good landlords and agents.

All private landlords are required to register themselves and their properties. If a landlord wants to manage property themselves, they must be licensed, demonstrate that they are 'fit and proper' to hold a licence and successfully complete approved training. Alternatively, a landlord can appoint a licensed agent to manage their property on their behalf.



For more information on the requirements of Rent Smart Wales, to register, apply for a licence or to book a training course, visit [www.rentsmart.gov.wales](http://www.rentsmart.gov.wales) or contact 03000 133 344.

### Leasing Schemes

Empty Homes Wales, managed by United Welsh Housing Association offers a leasing scheme which includes the renovation works required to bring your empty property up to a habitable standard. They will lease the property from you and manage the tenancy including repairs and maintenance. The rental income received during the term of the lease will be used to offset the cost of the renovation works. Once the work costs have been repaid, they can continue to rent the property on your behalf if you wish, in return for a management fee which is deducted from the rental income.

If no renovation works are required and the property is already habitable, they also offer a tenancy management service.



**For more information on these leasing schemes, contact Empty Homes Wales on 0800 294 0195 or visit [empty.homes@unitedwelsh.com](mailto:empty.homes@unitedwelsh.com)**

### Letting Agents

The advantages of letting your property through a letting agent include effective advertising of your property; knowledge of the local housing market; managing and conducting viewings; tenant finding; rent collection; routine maintenance; safety checks and inspections of the property; and dealing with the relevant paperwork. The extent of the services provided varies between agents and the price you will pay depends on the level of service you require, but will typically be between 10% and 20% of the rental income. For example, you may just want an agent to find you a tenant, or you may want them to manage the rental agreement from start to finish. It is advisable to choose a letting agent that is a member of a professional organisation, such as the Association of Residential Letting Agents.



**To find a local letting agent, visit [www.arla.co.uk/find-agent](http://www.arla.co.uk/find-agent)**



### Property Guardianship

A property guardian is someone who has entered into an agreement to live in a building or part of a building that would normally be otherwise empty, for the primary purpose of securing and safeguarding the property.

The cost of occupying a property under a guardian scheme may be cheaper than renting a similar sized property at market value and may offer an agreement with fewer long term commitments than a typical tenancy agreement. However, the properties that are used are frequently commercial or industrial buildings that were not originally intended to be used as residential accommodation and guardians may be required to leave at short notice.

Guardians usually enter an agreement or licence with the guardian company (not the building owner). This agreement gives the guardian the right to occupy all or part of a building, with the specific purpose to secure the building and comply with any obligations set out in their licence agreement. A guardian has no right to exclusive possession of the property.

**Further information on property guardianship can be found at [www.propertyguardianproviders.com](http://www.propertyguardianproviders.com)**

# HOMESTEP PLUS

Rhondda Cynon Taf Council and United Welsh housing association are working together to deliver the Homestep Plus scheme with funding from the Welsh Governments Vibrant and Viable Places programme.

The scheme enables United Welsh to identify and buy empty properties in the CF37 postcode and to refurbish them before offering them for sale at 70 per cent of the asking price. Alternatively, interested parties can identify their own property, which United Welsh will purchase on their behalf and sell onto them at the discounted price.

The scheme aims to help people get onto the property ladder at a time when it is difficult to do so and also to continue to boost the local housing market and associated economy.

To be able to apply for HomeStep Plus you must:

- Be interested in a property in the CF37 area
- Be a first time buyer
- Be over the age of 18
- Be a UK passport holder or have indefinite leaves to remain in the UK
- Be unable to afford to purchase the property at full market value
- Be able to raise a mortgage with a suitable mortgage lender
- Have access to enough savings to cover the costs of buying a home at 70% of market value, such as solicitors, mortgage and survey fees

**For further information on the HomeStep Plus scheme, contact Housing Strategy on 01443 281136 or [HomeStep@rctcbc.gov.uk](mailto:HomeStep@rctcbc.gov.uk) or visit [www.homefinderrct.org.uk/content/OtherHousingOptions/HomestepPlus](http://www.homefinderrct.org.uk/content/OtherHousingOptions/HomestepPlus)**

# VAT DISCOUNTS

Renovations and alterations to residential properties that have been empty for at least 2 years (10 years if non-residential) are eligible for a reduced VAT rate of 5%. This applies to labour and materials associated with repairs, alterations, construction of associated garages and hard landscaping. Working with a VAT registered builder may significantly reduce the cost of bringing your empty property back into use.

A developer or house owner can claim back all VAT charged on the renovation of a building that has been empty for 10 years or more, once the dwelling is sold.

Reduced rates of VAT also apply to a number of types of building works, such as installing energy efficiency or energy saving measures, adapting a building for a disabled person or works to convert a non-residential building into a home. These discounts may apply to works to bring an empty property back into use.

Upon request, the Council can write an official letter to the property owner confirming how long the property has been empty. This letter may be requested by companies before applying the reduced VAT as it may be required by HM Revenue & Customs.

**Further information on this reduced rate can be found in Section 8 of Public Notice 708 – VAT: Buildings and Construction, available from the National Advice Service on 0845 0109000 or from HM Revenue & Customs at [www.gov.uk/business-tax/vat](http://www.gov.uk/business-tax/vat).**

**To request a letter confirming how long a property has been empty, contact Housing Strategy on 01443 281136 or [HousingStrategy@rctcbc.gov.uk](mailto:HousingStrategy@rctcbc.gov.uk)**



# ENERGY EFFICIENCY



Subject to funding levels and availability with installers, energy companies or their agents, you may be entitled to discounted and/or fully funded energy efficiency measures to help bring your empty property back into use and raise its energy performance and future fuel poverty proof households. Energy measures could include energy efficiency lighting, full heating systems, loft insulation, draught proofing, water efficient taps, and possibly renewables such as solar.

**For further information on current energy efficiency funding and energy efficiency advice, contact the Heat & Save team on 01443 281136 or [HeatAndSave@rctcbc.gov.uk](mailto:HeatAndSave@rctcbc.gov.uk)**

# COUNCIL TAX



As of 1st April 2018, the Council has used its discretionary powers to remove the 50% Council Tax discount that was previously applied to long term empty properties. This means that since 1st April 2018, all properties which are both vacant and unfurnished for six months or more, and do not qualify for a Council Tax exemption, will be charged 100% Council Tax.



# ENFORCEMENT ACTION

Invariably, empty homes can be neglected and fall into disrepair. Properties in this condition can be subject to a number of enforcement options that require owners to take action to secure, repair, renovate or demolish problematic buildings.

The main enforcement options available to the Council include:



- **Undertaking work to deal with an issue**

If your property or land is causing a nuisance or is having an adverse effect on the community, the Council has powers to undertake works if you fail to do so. The costs of doing this are recoverable from you e.g. securing buildings against unauthorised entry; removal of waste; improvements to external appearance; and demolition of buildings

- **Enforced sale**

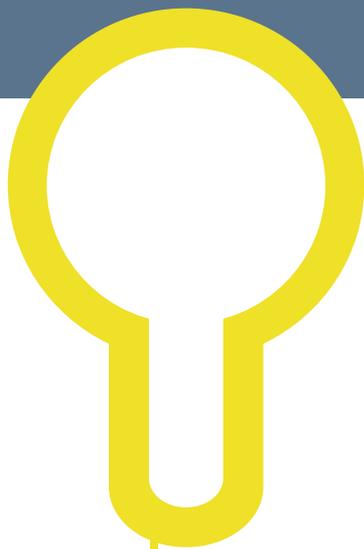
If the Council completes work in default of notices served on your property or land, under Section 103 of the Law of Property Act 1925, we have the power to sell your property or land in order to recover the costs incurred

- **Empty dwelling management orders (EDMOs)**

If you are unwilling to bring your property back into use, the Council can apply to take over the management of the property. An EDMO allows us to carry out work to bring the property up to a habitable standard and then rent and manage your property

- **Compulsory purchase orders (CPOs)**

If we are unable to encourage you to bring your property back into use or you fail to comply with statutory notices to improve your property, the Council may consider a CPO. If there is a strong enough case and it is in the public interest, a CPO will allow us to acquire your property or land.



RHONDDA CYNON TAF

# EMPTY PROPERTY

ADVICE PACK



RHONDDA CYNON TAF



# Christmas Edition

## RCT Landlords Forum Newsletter



**Official Newsletter to the Landlord Forum**



### This Issue

*Season's Greetings*

*Supporting People*

*Energy Efficiency*

*Planning*

*Homestep Plus*

*Public Notice*

*Diary Dates*

*Finding Your Tax Predicament Taxing*



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[richard.read@pinnacle-group.com](mailto:richard.read@pinnacle-group.com)

01443 402400

The Landlord forum would like to thank and are proud to introduce our new sponsors, Pinnacle. Right is a photo of the team.





*from All of Rhondda Cynon Taf's  
Housing Strategy Team.*

I would like to start this newsletter by saying a big **THANK YOU.**

Thank you for supporting the forum over the past 12 months, it really wouldn't have been as successful without you.

Thank you for the great attendance at the forums and the engagement throughout the year. It's been a great year and I hope that we as a forum will be able to develop further in order to make being a landlord in RCT easier.

We are close to 1000 members and are building a real sense of community. The aim for the new year will be to grow the membership base and develop new ways to engage with you, so watch this space !!!

Finally, I hope you enjoy the rest of the Newsletter and would also like to wish you and your family's a very Merry Christmas and A Happy New Year from Rob and all of the Housing Strategy Team.





# ENERGY EFFICIENCY ADVICE

Hi! I am Penny!

I am the face of the Energy Team within Rhondda Cynon Taf Council. I am here today to explain how you, as a landlord can help us achieve a more energy efficient and prosperous RCT. By helping your tenants become more energy efficient, they can save money on their bills, therefore in turn be in a better position financially.

We provide services like RCT Switch, work with Nyth Nest to help make Wales cosy, Dwr Cymru Welsh Water and their community fund and Smart Energy GB for the role out of smart meters plus many more.

We also have grants for improving the energy ratings of homes with in RCT.

If you have any questions about how you can make your properties more efficient please contact us at [heatandsave@rctcbc.gov.uk](mailto:heatandsave@rctcbc.gov.uk) or can call one of the team on 01443 281136.

We also have our own news letter and once you or your tenant have introduced yourself to us, we can add to our mailing list so you can keep updated!

See you soon!!



**RCT Switch**

Helps you save money on your energy bills!

- Impartial advice provided by the Council's Energy Efficiency Service
- Provides advice and assistance on energy bill debts
- No obligation, no fuss, no hassle service
- Other general energy advice also available
- Free of charge for RCT residents

We can help if you are having difficulty paying or would just like to see if there are cheaper deals available please contact us for further information.

Telephone: 01443 281136 or email: [heatandsave@rctcbc.gov.uk](mailto:heatandsave@rctcbc.gov.uk) to register your interest

Making Wales COSY



# Nyth Nest

# Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water

# Planning



## HMO Supplementary Planning Guidance in RCT.



Houses of Multiple Occupation provide a vital option for the accommodation needs of both students and single person households.

In Rhondda Cynon Taf, HMOs are heavily clustered around the University of South Wales campus in Treforest. This high density of HMOs provoked growing concerns in regards to increasing detrimental social and economic pressures and a subsequent breakdown of community cohesion. These negative impacts resulted in an growing imbalance in the local housing market and in-turn increases in incidents of anti-social behaviour and associated crime.



In response to these concerns, the Council determined it necessary to prepare new Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) to specifically control applications for new HMO's in RCT.



The HMO SPG, which was adopted in May 2018, sets out a number of key criteria that planning applications for conversions, or new build HMO's need to accord with. This is for both C4 and larger 'Sui Generis' HMO's (greater than 6 individuals).

Foremost, is the threshold set in the Treforest ward area for the numbers of HMO's allowed in a given area. No more than 20% of all residential properties in a 50 metre radius area of the application address should be an HMO. If the proposed HMO would result in this threshold percentage being exceeded, it would be considered unacceptable in principle, and permission then refused. It should be noted that there is very little, or no scope for new HMO properties or conversions in Treforest that would comply with this element of the SPG, given much of the village already has percentages of HMO greater than 30%.

Prior to the adoption of the SPG, the Council deemed it necessary to refuse applications for HMO's in Treforest throughout 2016 and 2017; however, they were later overturned and allowed through the Planning Appeals process. Since the adoption of the SPG, the Planning Inspectorate, (who determine Planning Appeals), have dismissed appeals determined to date for HMO's in Treforest. The SPG therefore gave considerable weight to these decisions.

We would finally like to emphasise that we continue to welcome investment by landlords in properties in RCT, to provide good quality, affordable rental opportunities. However, we would also like to take this opportunity to remind landlords that they need to ensure that they seek appropriate planning permission for conversions of properties to HMO's, and this in accordance with the SPG.

The SPG may be viewed on our website;

<https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/Resident/PlanningandBuildingControl/LocalDevelopmentPlans/SupplementaryPlanningGuidance.aspx>



# Planning



As of the 16<sup>th</sup> March 2016 the Welsh Government requires all Local Planning Authorities to provide a statutory pre-application service.

As well as offering a statutory pre application advice service Rhondda Cynon Taff Council offers an enhanced pre application advice service

A range of charges will be payable for pre-application advice which will vary depending on the size and scale of the development. These fees are:

	Statutory Advice	Enhanced Advice
Householder	£25	£50
Single Dwelling	N/A	£100
Minor Development (1-9 dwellings or < 0.49 hectare)	£250	£300
Major Development (10-24 dwellings or 0.50 -0.99 hectare)	£600	£700
Large Major Development (Development exceeding 25 dwellings or on a site of 1 hectare or more)	£1000	£1,200

It is worth noting that with every **Enhanced Pre Application Advice** the fee includes a meeting with a case officer. After the first meeting then you can opt to pay for more meetings with the fees for this being laid out below:

	Additional Officer Meeting
Householder	£25
Single Dwelling	£40
Minor Development	£150
Major Development	£300
Large Major Development	£600

Request pre-application advice by completing a pre-application advice form from the councils website at [www.rctcbc.gov.uk](http://www.rctcbc.gov.uk) and emailing to it to [planningservices@rctcbc.gov.uk](mailto:planningservices@rctcbc.gov.uk) or by sending to Regeneration & Planning, Sardis House, Sardis Road, Pontypridd, CF37 1DU. Cheques should be made payable to RCTCBC or the fee can be paid by phoning (01443) 281135





## Are you a landlord of an empty property in the Treforest area?

HomestepPlus are looking for empty properties in the Treforest area.

If you are a Landlord with a property you would like to sell please contact the HomestepPlus Team on the contact details below.



Please contact Peter Lewis, Rhondda Cynon Taf on **01443 281136** for further details

E-mail – [homestep@rctcbc.gov.uk](mailto:homestep@rctcbc.gov.uk)

GWEITHIWN I GYFLWYNO CARTREFI WEDI'U HADDASU I BRYNWYR AM Y TRO CYNTAF  
WORKING TOGETHER TO BRING FIRST TIME BUYERS REFURBISHED PROPERTIES



## 2019 HMO ADDITIONAL LICENSING SCHEME- PUBLIC NOTICE.

### *Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) - Additional Licensing Public Notice*

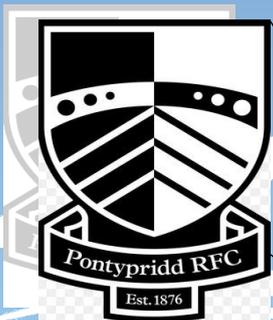
Notice is hereby given that on the 27th November 2018 Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council has confirmed the designation of an additional licensing scheme in respect of Houses in Multiple Occupation covering all electoral wards in Rhondda Cynon Taf. This scheme will be known as Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council Additional Licensing (Houses in Multiple Occupation) Scheme 2019 ("The Scheme"). The confirmation of the designation is in accordance with Section 56 – 60 of The Housing Act 2004 and Regulation 9 of The Licensing and Management of Houses in Multiple Occupation and Other Houses (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Wales) Regulations 2006. The Scheme to which the designation applies has General Approval of the Welsh Assembly Government under the Housing Act 2004 (Additional HMO Licensing Wales) General Approval 2007 that came into force 13th March 2007. The Scheme applies to all Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) within the area described above, except those exempted by the relevant sections of the Act and those licensable under the Orders and Regulations made pursuant to Section 55 (2)(a) of the Housing Act 2004 (Mandatory Licensing). **The Scheme will be effective from 1st April 2019 and unless revoked beforehand or extended will cease to have effect on 31st March 2024.** The Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council Additional Licensing (Houses in Multiple Occupation) Scheme 2014 shall be revoked on the 31st March 2019. All licences issued under this scheme that remain in force at 31st March 2019 shall transfer to the new scheme and remain valid until they expire or are otherwise revoked by the Council or are surrendered. Any landlord, person managing or tenant in Rhondda Cynon Taf should seek advice from the Housing Standards Team of the Public Health and Protection Service of Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council as to whether their property is affected by the designation of this Scheme. A person having control of or managing a licensable HMO in the designated area must apply to Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council for a licence. **Failure to apply for a licence is an offence under Section 72(1) of The Housing Act 2004 for which a person may be fined up to £20,000. An application may also be made to the Residential Property Tribunal to make a Rent Repayment Order requiring the repayment of up to 12 months' rent collected during the time the property was unlicensed.** An application to license a HMO must be in a prescribed format, must contain certain particulars and must be accompanied by the requisite fee. **Information relating to the designation of the new scheme is available on the Council's website [www.rctcbc.gov.uk](http://www.rctcbc.gov.uk) or by contacting The Housing Standards Team, Public Health and Protection, Ty' Elai, Williamstown, CF40 1NY or telephone (01443) 425001 or e-mail [publichealthhousing@rctcbc.gov.uk](mailto:publichealthhousing@rctcbc.gov.uk)**



*“My grandmother started walking five miles a day when she was 60. She’s 97 now and we don’t know where she is.” – Ellen DeGeneres*



<u>Meeting Date</u>	<u>Registration From</u>	<u>Start</u>	<u>Finish</u>
Wednesday 23rd Jan 2019	17:45hrs	18:05hrs	20:00hrs
Wednesday 15th May 2019	17:45hrs	18:05hrs	20:00hrs



**Venue: Pontypridd Rugby Club: Sardis Road, Pontypridd, CF37 1HA (X306797 Y189962)**



PINNACLE<sup>®</sup>  
Letting & Estate Agents

## Finding your tax predicament taxing?



### What is the Section 24 tax relief change?

In 2015 the Government made an announcement: Landlords who were high-rate or additional-rate taxpayers would no longer be able to deduct mortgage interest from their rental income and could only secure relief on the interest at the basic tax rate rather than the higher level they had enjoyed up to this point.

Many landlords are now facing up to the reality of increased tax bills, with the reality that potential changes will create issues for basic-rate taxpayers too in the future.

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### When does this take effect from?

Although this was implemented on 6th April 2017, the loss of relief will not disappear automatically. Relevant tax returns can be submitted any time between then and 31st January 2019, so there is a few years until the force of the changes will be fully felt by the concerned.

How this might affect individual landlords can be seen below with the disallowed costs and their corresponding dates:

- 25% - 2017 to 2018
  - 50% - 2018 to 2019
  - 75% - 2019 to 2020
  - 100% - 2020 to 2021
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## Who will this effect?

Landlords who were high-rate or additional-rate taxpayers would no longer be able to deduct mortgage interest from their rental income and could only secure relief on the interest at the basic tax rate rather than the higher level they had enjoyed up to this point.

This applies to landlords who own personal property as well as those letting property in a partnership, but they have yet to be applied to furnished holiday lets or properties held in a company.

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## Are there any other effects?

Sadly, yes. These may be:

- Losing your personal tax allowance
  - Losing child benefits
  - It could also effect child support payments
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## Who will this not effect?

Landlords who own their properties outright will not see any difference to their tax bills. Additionally, landlords circumstances will only change if they are currently a higher or additional-rate taxpayer.

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## What can you do to be as tax efficient as possible?

By looking at the last year of property accounts, a tax expert will be able to confirm if a landlord will be affected and by how much. You would then be able to look at mitigation and strategic planning to minimize the effects of these tax changes whilst looking at succession planning to provide the right solution for each client.

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## What options may be available to me?

- Creating partnerships
  - Using spouse's tax allocation where they earn less than £45,000 per year
  - Creating trusts
  - Personal pension scheme
  - Add limited company formation
  - Reviewing your exit strategies
  - Capital gains planning
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## What are the benefits of the above?

- Companies are exempt from restrictions on finance cost relief
  - Incorporation can limit or remove capital gains
  - Partnerships can enable you to utilise nil-rate tax payers and basic-rate tax payers
  - Making your exit strategy as tax efficient as possible
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## What should you do?

- Speak to a professional about tax planning and your personal strategy - we can help you with this
- Consider all your options and implications, and act promptly in line with this
- Consider rent increases based on your own personal property/ properties to minimise the impact

## APPENDIX E: Empty Homes Case Studies

### Background

Empty homes represent a wasted resource, financial expense and in many cases a missed opportunity to provide much needed affordable housing for people in Rhondda Cynon Taf. 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 they may attract crime, vandals and anti-social behaviour. In addition to this, living next door to an empty home can devalue a home and deter investment in an area.

The property in question is a 3-bedroom property located in Ynysybwl which had been empty for almost two years. It was purchased by a young family who had 2 children, who without the assistance of an Empty Homes grant would have been unable to purchase an affordable property to meet their family needs. Their application was formally approved in September 2018.

### Support

The Empty Homes grant provides assistance to tackle properties that may have been deemed undesirable and difficult to sell, that would remain unoccupied and fall further into disrepair. In addition, it also contributes towards the local economy market with local contractors undertaking the work and local suppliers providing the materials.

The family were awarded a maximum grant of £20,000, the total cost of work was just short of £45,000, making their contribution £24,000 towards the work. An RCT Grants Officer and Building Control Officer were involved during the execution of work on site, giving advice and guidance to ensure compliance with the Financial Regulations of the Grant Award and Building Regulations.

### Impact

The work entailed a total house gut, including re-plastering, new partitions, concrete floors, full house re-wire, boiler replacement and new bathroom and kitchen facilities, providing a warm, safe and secure home for the owners to occupy. The Grant was completed in June 2019, taking 9 months in total

This is a good example of where Grant assistance has been used in-conjunction with private investment from the home owner and where the work carried out is to a high standard.

## APPENDIX F: Empty Homes Case Studies

<b>Background</b>
<p>The long-term empty property has been vacant since April 2017. It is a substantial 3 bed, family home, located just outside Talbot Green Town Centre and is one of the few long-term empty properties in the South of the Borough. The area has excellent communication links with the A4119 linking it in the south to the M4 Motorway, and to the north to the South Wales Valleys. It is also close to Pontyclun railway station and the town itself. The property is located in an area of high demand, for both rental properties and for sale. Empty homes in the ward are one of the lowest in RCT and average house prices are the second highest in the Borough. Although the property is in a prime location, it is in need of extensive refurbishment, which has made it difficult to sell on the open market.</p>
<b>Support</b>
<p>The property has been targeted by the Empty Homes Operational Group due to the fact it has been vacant for so long. Officers of the Council assisted the home owner with initiating the sale of the property to the buyer via our proactive approach to empty home reduction within the Borough. The new homeowner applied for a Houses into Homes loan in July 2019 and was successful in gaining a sum of £25,000.</p>
<b>Impact</b>
<p>The work to be completed on the property will result in a total renovation and will include; new UPVC windows and doors, new kitchen, new bathroom, new roof, damp proofing, central heating, tiling, plastering, rendering and a new drive and garden. The impact of the targeted approach developed by the Empty Homes Operational Group is that a long term empty property, which is located in a high demand area of the Borough has been brought back into use.</p>