



## Report of the Cabinet Members for Corporate Services & Performance and Service Transformation

Scrutiny Working Group – 25<sup>th</sup> March 2025

### Empty Property Information for Scrutiny Working Group 25<sup>th</sup> March 2025.

<b>Purpose</b>	To brief/update the Scrutiny Working Group regarding the work being carried out regarding empty properties.
<b>Content</b>	The report sets out the work to help bring empty properties back into use as part of the housing stock, reduce the impact on neighbours and communities, providing assistance and advice, enforcement work including enforced sales.
<b>Councillors are being asked to</b>	Consider the information provided
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#### 1. Background

- 1.1 As of 1 April 2024, the number of dwellings empty for longer than 6 months within Swansea was 2273 and for longer than 12 months was 1489. This is 2.24% and 1.46% of the overall private housing stock in Swansea.
- 1.2 There are two key performance measures set by Welsh Government: –
- the percentage of long-term (over 6 months) empty dwellings in the private sector brought back in to use in a year as a result of direct intervention by the LA
  - the number of additional homes created as a result of bringing empty properties back in to use.

- 1.3 In addition, The Welsh Assembly have also asked for data on the percentage of long-term empty properties, empty for over 12 months.
- 1.4 Both measures contribute to the wellbeing targets of a More Equal Wales and a Wales of Cohesive Communities by bringing empty properties back into use in the housing stock.

## **2. Actions being taken to bring properties back into use**

- 2.1 The report covers the work undertaken to bring private sector properties back into use, as well as work done to provide grants and loan assistance, council housing and regeneration work.
- 2.2 The number of empty dwellings in the private sector fluctuates each year and work to bring these back into use is resource-intensive, particularly when 'direct intervention' has to be evidenced to Welsh Government. Each year a letter is sent out to empty property owners reminding them of how long their property has been empty and making them aware of assistance available to help bring it back to occupation.
- 2.3 In 2024, 559 letters were sent out resulting in over 60 responses. This enables a conversation to be held with owners on various topics including financial assistance, VAT discounts, recruiting a builder, assistance with letting, selling the property, dealing with difficult probate situations and advice on renting and Rent Smart Wales. It is time-consuming, but effective in reaching many empty property owners and, as it happens every year, acts as an annual reminder of how long their property has been left empty. The contact information obtained is also often useful if enquiries are received about the property in the future.
- 2.4 In addition, from 1 April 2024 to date over 250 service requests have been received and dealt with in relation to empty properties in Swansea. Many are received as a result of either the mail drop or the Swansea Council webpage providing information to the owners of empty properties - [Owners of empty properties - Swansea](#).
- 2.5 In the financial year 2023/2024, 92 properties in Swansea were brought back into occupation after direct intervention by Swansea Council, and the table below shows the figures for the previous years. However, there is only one officer of 0.8 FTE dedicated to dealing with these properties.

Year	21/22	22/23	22/23	23/24	24/25
Total number of privately owned empty properties empty for longer than 6 months	2,034	2,097	2,097	2,052	2,273
Total number of privately owned empty properties empty for longer than 6 months (as a percentage)	2.03%	2.08%	2.08%	2.03%	2.24%
Empties returned to occupation through direct involvement of the LA	96	75	75	92	
Newly Created Dwellings	27	15	15	6	

2.6 In April 2020 Swansea Council introduced a Council Tax for properties that are empty for longer than 12 months. This is charged at 100% of the standard rate therefore taking the total to 200%.

## 2.7 Enforcement Action

2.8 Long-term empty properties can often fall into disrepair and are often poorly maintained. Various statutory powers exist to deal with accumulations of waste and overgrowth if linked to pest activity; disrepair to rainwater goods; dangerous structures; and securing properties which have become unsecured. For cases such as this, formal notices may be served requiring an owner to carry out works.

2.9 For the more extreme cases, where the owner has failed to carry out works, the Council have carried out the work in default, and the owner has failed to pay for these works, the Council can use legal powers to force the sale of the property to recover this debt. These powers have been used successfully on 23 occasions in recent years and a further 3 property owners have settled debts prior to an enforced sale & sold the property privately.

## 2.10 Grants and Loan Assistance

2.11 The Housing Renewals and Adaptations service have provided a variety of grants and loans financial assistance over the years to help owners of empty properties carry out repairs and conversion works to bring them back into use. These schemes have included Grants for Nominations, Welsh Government Landlord Loans, Welsh Government Valleys Taskforce Empty Property Grant, Welsh Government Western Valleys Empty Property grant, Welsh Government Homeless Empty Property Grant and the most recent scheme being that National Empty Homes Grant Scheme. These schemes have resulted in a number of empty properties being brought back into use.

2.12 A number of the schemes have been targeted at private sector landlords to bring empty properties back into use through grant assistance in return for nomination rights for a set period of time using our designated Social Lettings Agent at Local

Housing Allowance Benefit rates. These schemes have assisted vulnerable tenants in obtaining affordable good quality accommodation.

2.13 Currently there are two schemes providing assistance available in Swansea to bring empty homes back into use, the first is the Welsh Government Landlord Loans funding (previously known as the Houses to Homes scheme) that have been provided since 2013, interest free loans of up to £25,000 per unit repayable after 3 or 5 years depending on whether the landlord intends selling or letting the property. The second is the National Empty Homes Grant scheme that started in April 2023 and will come to an end in March 2026, providing owner occupiers with up to £25,000 funding to assist in costs to bring their properties back into use.

2.14 The table below lists the schemes that have been offered to owners of empty properties to bring them back into use. Significant numbers of new units of accommodation have been provided through these schemes, currently at 211 units, with over £4.4 million of investment.

<b>Scheme</b>	<b>Tenure</b>	<b>No. of Empties Brought back into use</b>	<b>Funding allocations</b>	<b>Additional Details</b>
Grants for Nominations	Landlords	44	£761,034	Scheme in place for 8 years, came to an end in 2018-19. Grant funding provided in return for nomination rights for 3 or 5 year period.
WG Landlord Loans	Landlords	75 – creating 131 units.	£3,072,715	Scheme previously known as Houses to Homes, in place for 12 years and still in operation. Loans funding provided to be repaid in 3 or 5 years, funding recycled to bring further empties back into use.
WG Valleys Taskforce Empty Property Grant	Owner Occupiers	8	£119,283	Scheme in operation for 3 years, came to an end in 2023. Scheme available to owners of empties in Valleys taskforce wards of Swansea, on northern fringes of county boundary.
WG Western Valleys Empty Property Grant	Landlords	7	£178,500	Pilot scheme that took place in 2022-23, grant funding provided in return for nomination rights through council's social letting agent for 3 or 5 year period.
WG Homelessness Empty Property Grant	Landlords	4	£60,000	Scheme to bring empty properties back into use for homeless persons following Covid pandemic, nomination rights through council's social letting agent for 3 or 5 year period.

National Empty Homes Grant	Owner Occupiers	17 complete to date	£372,153	Ongoing WG scheme being administered by RCT Council, 17 schemes completed, a further 32 schemes approved with works in progress and further 44 scheme applications being processed. Total funding allocated for the scheme in Swansea is £4.22 million, the scheme scheduled to come to completion in March 2026.
<b>Totals</b>		<b>211 units</b>	<b>£4,463,685</b>	

## 2.15 Council Housing

2.16 The council also has 13,804 units of social rented accommodation across the city. At any point in time generally in the region of 2% of this stock is empty (void). The number fluctuates weekly linked to end of tenancies and lettings as well as through the More Homes programme.

2.17 Each void property must meet a minimum letting standard prior to re-letting. This process includes various safety checks including electrical inspections and gas safety checks. Since December 2024 every void property is fitted with flooring throughout prior to letting as part of a new Welsh Government requirement.

2.18 Every effort is made to ensure the property is returned for letting as quickly as possible. This includes utilising a framework of contractors in addition to the Council's own Building Services workforce.

2.19 For 24/25 the average weekly void figure is 293 (2.1%). This includes a small number of long-term void properties (over 12 months) that are not being actively worked on. The reasons for this are varied but would include:

- Awaiting planned works, such as the programmed refurbishment of high-rise blocks
- Linked to wider redevelopment plans
- Awaiting reconfiguration / refurbishment
- Acquired through More Homes and require extensive works
- Extensive fire / structural damage

2.20 Since 2023, 52 long-term void properties have benefitted from Transitional Accommodation Capital Programme (TACP) grant funding which has meant those properties were made available for letting sooner than they would otherwise have been.

2.21 As at w/c 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2025, 23 properties have been void for over 12 months (not being actively worked on).

## **2.22 More Homes Project**

2.23 Since its introduction the More Homes Delivery Programme has acquired 193 units of accommodation by buying back former council properties sold under Right to Buy. A number of these properties have required significant investment to bring them up to the Welsh Housing Quality Standard. Without this programme a number of these properties might have remained empty. Two Welsh Government funding streams: Social Housing Grant (SHG) and Transitional Accommodation Capital Programme (TACP) have been utilised to achieve this level of acquisitions.

2.24 In the past 18 months the More Homes Delivery Programme has created 10 additional units of accommodation by reconfiguring 2 x former housing offices into much needed permanent and temporary family sized accommodation. More recently, the conversion of the former Sparks centre in Blaenymaes has created 4 additional units of accommodation. It is also exploring funding options to convert two surplus houses, located within independent living schemes, into family homes.

## **2.25 Leasing Scheme Wales**

2.26 The Housing service is currently exploring joining the Leasing Scheme Wales; A Welsh Government funded scheme which provides landlords and owners of empty homes the opportunity to lease their property to the local authority for between 5 and 20 years. The scheme provides property owners with a guaranteed monthly rental income at Local Housing Allowance rate and a full property management service from the local authority, without the need to pay commission. As well as providing owners with a consistent income stream, it also helps local authorities to meet the housing demands in their area and brings back into use properties that might otherwise have been left empty.

## **2.27 Regeneration**

2.28 Since 2019, in utilising Welsh Government grants such as the Homes Above Shops scheme within the Targeted Regeneration Investment Programme and the Placemaking grant within the Transforming Towns regeneration programme, the local authority has been able to deliver 72 new residential units.

2.29 The Placemaking Grant currently available and forming part of the Transforming Towns programme, affords Local Authorities in Wales the broadest and most flexible package of support aimed at revitalising town centres throughout Wales. The residential element of this grant is focussed on the conversion of vacant floor space on upper floors into new residential accommodation. The minimum requirement from each scheme is 1 x 1 bedroom self-contained flat. Schemes are expected to be a mix of one and two bedroom units with ratio determined by layout of building and planning consent. From April 2025, grants of up to £300,000 will be available for this purpose for eligible individual Placemaking projects.

2.30 The local authority is also operating the Transforming Towns Loan scheme with the purpose of reducing the number of vacant, underutilised and redundant sites and premises in town centres and to support the diversification of the town centres by encouraging more sustainable uses for empty sites and premises, such as residential, leisure and key services. Loans of up to £1m are available on terms of up to 7 years with interest levied from 0% to up to 2.15%.

2.31 Welsh Government also made an advice service available around enforcement which was back up by a loan arrangement for local authorities to support the process alongside stepped levels of enforcement to encourage property owners to move projects forward, e.g. Section 215 notices. Following these steps has already avoided the need for Compulsory Purchase Orders. The loan has not so far been utilised and is under review by Welsh Government with a view to creating a more 'fit for purpose' support mechanism.

### **3. Summary**

3.1 The issue of empty properties and the strategies required to bring them back into use spans a number of different Departments within the Councils and a number of external bodies. It is vital that there is close interaction and working between the various parties including Private Sector Housing, Council Tax, Legal, Housing, Regeneration and Council House Buyback Scheme. Close relationships have been formed and are utilised with Welsh Government, West Wales Empty Property Working Group, Auctioneers, genealogists etc.

### **4. Legal implications**

4.1 None

### **5. Finance Implications**

5.1 None

### **6. Integrated Assessment Implications**

6.1 The Council is subject to the Equality Act (Public Sector Equality Duty and the socio-economic duty), the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure, and must in the exercise of their functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Acts.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Deliver better outcomes for those people who experience socio-economic disadvantage.
- Consider opportunities for people to use the Welsh language.
- Treat the Welsh language no less favourably than English.

- Ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
- 6.2 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 mandates that public bodies in Wales must carry out sustainable development. Sustainable development means the process of improving the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales by taking action, in accordance with the sustainable development principle, aimed at achieving the 'well-being goals'.
- 6.3 Our Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) process ensures we have paid due regard to the above. It also takes into account other key issues and priorities, such as poverty and social exclusion, community cohesion, carers, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and Welsh language.
- 6.4 As this is an information report to Scrutiny an IIA is not required.

**Background papers:** None

**Appendices:** None