

EP 13

Ymchwiliad i eiddo gwag

Inquiry into empty properties

Ymateb gan: TPAS Cymru

Response from: TPAS Cymru

About us

TPAS Cymru is a non-profit organisation which is proud to work for and with tenants and landlords across the whole of Wales. We work to improve the tenant voice in housing and the community through advising on and promoting good practice in tenant engagement. Our strong and open relationship with Welsh Government and the Regulatory Board for Wales ensures that tenants are helping to shape policy. Our vision is that tenants are empowered to engage in influencing the services they receive in collaboration with landlords to improve the future of housing in Wales.

We have been supporting social housing tenants and landlords in Wales for over 30 years and have a strong track record in developing effective participation. We have an extensive knowledge of social housing with a focus on issues from the tenant perspective and for tenants' benefit. This response is an example of our ongoing work to contribute to policy developments and issues, channeling the experience and needs of tenants and landlords to policy makers.

1. Is enough being done to tackle empty properties in Wales? If not, what needs to change?

- 1.1 TPAS Cymru feel that more could be done to utilise empty properties and increase affordable housing supply which would require a significant shift in priorities. Speaking with developing landlords, we understand that refurbishment projects of this nature are often regarded as too risky or costly. It seems that where schemes are viable, they often do not meet the DQR requirements or it would be too costly to get the property up to WHQs standards. This can often be on issues as minor as an internal step, a garden that is half a metre too small or a sloping ceiling in the bedroom.
- 1.2 TPAS Cymru would like to see more flexibility in standards to enable social landlords to be innovative in re-designing empty homes. Such innovation may relieve pressures on our housing registers as an empty home is no use to anyone.

2. What impact can empty properties have on a community?

- 2.1 It's widely acknowledged that empty properties can become magnets for anti-social behavior, including arson and fly tipping. Renovating these empty homes could reduce the burden on local authorities, police etc.
- 2.2 Then of course there is the link to negative perceptions of the area which may lead to property value decreasing and can therefore have an impact on individuals in the community hoping to sell their property.
- 2.3 Tenants have emphasised that more should be done to renovate old properties as there is the potential of the damp and rot spreading to their properties. It should also be acknowledged that there are potentially health and safety risks relating to overflowing gutters and loose roof tiles.

3 How effectively are local authorities using the statutory and non-statutory tools at their disposal to deal with empty properties?

- 3.1 Due to budgeting cuts within local authorities, we believe that whilst they have many statutory tools, they may not have the capacity and resources to deal with empty properties.

4 Do local authorities need additional statutory powers to deal with empty properties? If yes, what powers do they need?

- 4.1 TPAS Cymru do not feel we are in a position to comment in detail on existing legal powers and their use.

5 Are owners of empty properties given the support, information and advice that they need to bring properties back into occupation? If not, what additional help do they need?

- 5.1 Whilst TPAS Cymru are aware that local authorities put owners of empty properties in touch with potential buyers, we want to re-emphasise that due to facing challenging budget settlements, there may not be the capacity to offer the necessary support.

6 Is there sufficient awareness of the practical assistance that local authorities can offer to owners of empty properties? If not, how could this be improved?

- 6.1 TPAS Cymru believe that schemes such as 'Houses into Homes' should continue, providing there are considerations around the loan offerings. As stated in the terms 'any loan offered will be secured on the property and will take into account the existing mortgage. It can't be more than 80% of the property's value'. We feel that this does not consider the variation of house prices across Wales and the cost of renovation despite of that.

6.2 We feel that Welsh Government could provide financial incentives to social landlords to increase staff capacity to scale up the identification and development of empty homes. The renovation cost is one thing but there needs to be the staff capacity to enable positive outcomes.

7 Are the skills and resources of housing associations and the private sector being fully utilised to tackle empty properties?

7.1 During visits to housing associations, we have been made aware of numerous projects to tackle empty properties and are informed that there is a significant increase in spend in this area. For example, United Welsh have an 'Empty Homes Wales' project which uses a leasing model to enable homeowners to refurbish their property and use the rental income to recover the costs.

8 Is enough being done to ensure empty properties can be brought back into use as affordable homes? Are there examples of good practice in this area?

8.1 Previous examples of empty buildings that had lost their purpose have been transformed into beautiful, characterful and affordable homes. These unusual, quirky homes are loved by their tenants and regenerate redundant corners of our communities. They also sustainably reuse the carbon footprint which has been spent building them in the first instance. These examples demonstrate that this is a feasible and practical opportunity that WG should encourage.

8.2 There are empty spaces in nearly every community, above shops, within redundant heritage buildings or closed schools. We believe that there is much to be done to make use of these opportunities and to develop the links between affordable provision and wider community regeneration.

8.3 Ensuring funding continues to be available is essential for the renovation of empty properties. However, additional funding could be considered where it brings both empty properties into use and helps to regenerate an area. There needs to be funding that will cover the cost of the staff to investigate the need and empower the local communities.

9 Is the power to charge a council tax premium on long-term empty homes a useful tool and is it being effectively used? If not, how could this tool be made more effective?

9.1 TPAS Cymru do not feel we are in a position to comment in detail on this.