

EP 19

Ymchwiliad i eiddo gwag

Inquiry into empty properties

Ymateb gan: Gwasanaethau Rheoliadol a Rennir

Response from: Shared Regulatory Services



Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee Inquiry into empty homes – May 2019

Shared Regulatory Services (SRS) delivers the Environmental Health, Trading Standards, Animal Health and Licensing functions across the Bridgend, Cardiff and Vale of Glamorgan Council areas. Through its strategic and operational activities, Shared Regulatory Services strives to improve standards of housing across the region. In making this response, the SRS has seen the document submitted by the Public Protection Wales - Private Sector Housing Expert Panel and supports much of that content. What follows below are some observations considered to be salient to the SRS region.

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

The way in which empty properties are recorded continues to be a source of consternation for the Councils, particularly given the large number of properties within the SRS region.

Properties that have been vacant for more than 6 months are included in this calculation. However, we would contend that properties that become vacant are not an immediate source of concern to the Public. For example, the death of a property owner may result in a property being vacant for 6 -9 months while the relatives/ beneficiaries obtain probate/legal control to return the property to use of sell the property. During this period, the property is not normally a concern to the public. What concerns the public, local councillors, etc. are properties that remain vacant over a more significant period of time; 12 months or more.

A change in the indicator to reflect a longer period of time has the potential to better recognise the efforts of the Council in managing vacant properties. These more "difficult" properties should be the focus of the indicator because it here that the actions of the Council can be more effectively assessed and as such the indicator becomes a better measure of performance by the Council and ultimately a way to demonstrate performance against a metric that matters to the public.

By way of example from Cardiff, in 2017, an analysis of properties showed that 1,248 properties were vacant for less than 6 months; 448 properties were been

vacant for more than 6 months but less than one year, and 567 were vacant for more than one year.

These statistics suggest, as indicated above, that many properties are returned to use naturally and that local authorities, and this indicator of performance, would be better focusing on those vacant for more than a year.

While we are generally supportive of the proposal to measure empty dwellings returned to use through direct action. It is a concern that wider strategic work and information services to landlords do not gain any recognition. Councils need to have a range of options available to them to assist empty property owners. This requires significant investment and resources, yet local authorities have had to make difficult decisions about resources and the Private sector housing teams within Environmental Health have faced the brunt of some of those decisions. These services play a key role in the preventative agenda that is at the heart of the approach all public services should be taking; this is a legislative duty placed on them by the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015; a duty that is often overlooked.

There is a wide variety of legislation that can be used to support bringing empty properties back into use, but that legislation needs a review and in doing so a fundamental assessment of the resources needed to deliver the ultimate goal; a goal where empty properties are an unusual feature in the housing landscape. Achieving that goal requires local authorities to be engaged in this discussion right from the start, rather than being the recipients of another consultation document and the interminable process of local authorities responding and pointing out all the faults and missed opportunities. Local authorities are really supportive of taking the empty property agenda forward, but we just need to make sure it's done in the right way.

Dave Holland
Head of Shared Regulatory Services

Shared Regulatory Services
www.grhr.cymru - www.srs.wales
 0300 123 6696