

# Empty Property Strategy

2014 - 2020

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## 1.0 Introduction

We all know empty properties are a waste. They can

## 2.0 Background to this Revision

This updated strategy is written when the public sector is still very much in a time of limited resources and general austerity. It attempts to strike a balance between using the very limited public sector resources available and the use of enforcement powers to require private sector investment. Whilst the housing market nationally is starting to make a distinct recovery in some areas, house prices in Blaenau Gwent are still amongst the lowest in the UK. This means that many empty property owners own an asset that is of low value and there is the perception that they will simply hold onto the property in its current state until the market improves. However, given the low prices and the good return on investment in terms of rental income, Blaenau Gwent is still very popular with buy to let investors, who mainly acquire empty properties through auction.

### Why Bother with Empty Homes?

Empty properties are a blight on the community, deter investment, attract vandals and frequently are the focus for more extreme forms of anti-social activity. Empty properties, even on a limited basis, affect neighbouring properties by causing dampness, structural problems and adversely affecting the value of the neighbouring property. Overall, the housing stock deteriorates at a higher degree if it is empty.

Empty homes, as well as their detrimental impact on neighbourhoods and adjacent properties, represent a major financial loss to owners, both in terms of lost income and other expenses. Research has shown that it costs around £7,000 to keep a property empty for a year. The bulk of which is rent loss but nearly a third are the costs of dilapidation, security, insurance and the Council Tax liability.

Empty properties increase the local Council Tax burden. Bringing back all private sector properties into use would bring in additional revenue to the Council that could be used to extend essential housing support and enabling services.

The commercial sector represents a particular area where properties are underused along with the 'residential' upper floors of retail premises. Both areas are difficult to negotiate back into use but the Council has recognised that this is an area that could be exploited and used to improve the availability of housing stock – especially for first time occupiers or single people.

### **3.0 What has been achieved so far?**

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council has achieved much since the first Empty Property Strategy was published in 2009. Since the first strategy was introduced we have

- Through direct actions of the Council we have brought 87 units of accommodation back into use;
- Developed a risk assessment method to rank all properties in order of priority for intervention;
- Developed a comprehensive database of all problematic empty properties;4
- Successfully introduced the Welsh Government Houses into Homes Empty Property Loan Scheme;
- Provided Empty Property Loans to the value of £865

## 4.0 Aims and Objectives of the Strategy

### Aim of the Strategy

The aim is to bring vacant properties back into use. To consider all the options available for tackling the problem of empty properties and to ensure that where vacant properties are identified every effort is made to renovate them to a good standard and bring them back into use.

### Key Objectives.

- To reduce the number of long-term vacant properties;
- To minimise the impact of empty properties on the communities in which they are located;
- To offer advice and assistance to the owners of private empty properties, those who are looking to develop empty properties and those who are experiencing problems living in the vicinity of an empty property;
- monitor and target empty properties using the Council Tax database;
- To raise the awareness of empty property issues and promote a partnership approach to deal with the issues;
- To work in partnership across the Authority and with external partners to drive forward the implementation of this strategy;
- To publicise and utilise the Welsh Government Houses into Homes Empty Property Loan Scheme to bring properties back into use;
- To use enforcement powers contained in the enforcement toolkit to bring empty properties back into use on a worst first basis where the informal advice and assistance approach has failed.

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provides a definition for each indicator and all councils submit their data at the end of the year. The framework includes an indicator on empty homes:



## **7.0 Tackling the Problem**

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council recognises that each and every empty property presents different problems and challenges. That is why no one specific procedure will be created to deal with empty properties. The Authority will use the “toolkit of powers” approach when it comes to dealing with empty properties. The tools available are discussed in more details in the following paragraphs, but range from short term solutions to reduce the impac



## 8.0 Implementation and Operation

Through the period covered by this strategy the Council intends to build upon the work that has already been undertaken. Given that the public sector is operating with limited resources this strategy does not set out grand plans to strive for betterment at every opportunity. This Council is already successful in returning empty properties back into use and this strategy will ensure that this good work continues.

We will

- Offer informal advice and assistance to owners of long term opportunities to bring empty homes back into use;
- Target empty properties for enforcement action on a worst first basis, using the Council's risk assessment matrix;
- Promote the Houses into Homes Empty Property Loan Scheme;
- Process applications for Houses into Homes Loans in accordance with the scheme conditions, including maintaining a waiting list when finance is not available;
- Enforce the sale of long term empty properties where there is a financial debt owing to the Council;
- Work in partnership with colleagues from within the Council to support the implementation of wider regeneration schemes ensuring that empty homes have a high priority within these regeneration initiatives;
- Build on existing partnerships with Housing Associations to bring empty properties back into use;
- Respond to empty properties which are open to access or otherwise pose a danger to public health.



Problem	Legislation	Power Granted	Section
Unsecured properties (if it poses the risk that it may be entered or suffer vandalism, arson or similar)	Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, Section 29		