

Senedd Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee Follow-Up Inquiry into Empty Properties



The Bevan Foundation is Wales' most influential think-tank. We create insights, ideas and impact that help to end poverty and inequality. We are grateful for the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee's follow up inquiry into empty properties.

Working with Shelter Cymru and the Lloyds Bank Foundation, we have been looking at how we can get people moved on from temporary accommodation by providing more social homes. It has become clear that the housing crisis cannot be ended in the short term by only focusing on building new homes. Every new social home built has been hard won with land availability, construction costs and consent processes all creating challenges.

We believe that there are real opportunities to boost the supply of social homes in Wales by making use of the existing dwellings which we already have, as well as re-purposing existing, non-residential buildings.

Perhaps the most obvious place to start looking for opportunities within the existing housing stock is with the dwellings currently standing empty. There were 22,528 chargeable empty dwellings in Wales for Council Tax purposes (2025/26) which had been empty for 6 months or more. An estimated 3,600 to 4,500 could be suitable for purchase as social homes.

Our recent report [Tenure change: turning existing dwellings and buildings into social homes](#) evidences the benefits of working with existing dwellings and buildings, but also the barriers which prevent acquisition and conversion for social homes being done at scale. In addition to this report, our briefing [Understanding how taxes on land and property are used in Wales](#) provides analysis of taxation data in relation to empty homes.

We have supplemented our own evidence with discussions with a number of local authorities to hear about the current position in relation to officer capacity and financial assistance schemes.

As requested, and where appropriate, we reflect upon the recommendations made in the initial inquiry report, the then Welsh Government and any policy development which have taken place since.

1. Resourcing empty property officers

The main facilitator of action on empty dwellings and buildings is the local authority as the appropriate body to whom complaints about the impact of individual properties will be made; local authorities also hold the enforcement powers to act.

The key responsibilities to identify and take action to bring them back into would normally sit with an Empty Property or Homes Officer. Where such an officer (or team of officers) sits in a local authority's individual structure will vary. They could be part of the housing team, environmental health department, or planning and regeneration team. This will also differ for residential and commercial empty properties.

The Welsh Government's Affordable Housing Taskforce clearly recognised the importance of working with empty properties. However, it also recognised that the capacity to do so varies considerably across local authority areas.

Some councils have a dedicated empty property team, whereas others are constrained by the lack of trained Empty Housing Officers who have the skills and enforcement powers needed to bring empties back into use. Local Authorities should have at least one dedicated empty homes officer.

Welsh Government's Affordable Housing Taskforce

The Bevan Foundation's own recent snapshot survey confirmed these variations in capacity. We were unable to collect a full picture of the situation in every area, but we did find that whilst some authorities had one or two officers, others had no dedicated resource; often the role was combined within a wider housing or environmental health post. Elsewhere only a part-time officer was in post.

Additionally, it became immediately clear that there was also no clear correlation between the number of chargeable empty homes in a local authority area and the officer resource available to address them.

Empty property officers are funded in a variety of ways across Wales with many authorities now making use of the money generated by their council tax premium on long term empty homes. Other examples of funding sources for empty homes work currently being used by local authorities included their general fund and Welsh Government revenue funding provided for housing support. We also heard about partnership arrangements with housing associations, where the association provided funding for an empty homes officer in return for an allocation of social housing grant to be used for acquisitions.

It was reported to us that with ever stretched resources in local government in Wales, is the real risk that empty property officers get drawn away from empties to the many other demands around housing and environmental health.

We understand that the Welsh Government are currently reviewing the efficacy of current funds and approaches to bringing empty properties back into use. One local Authority recently told us that they were understood that funding for officers would be made available through the Empty Property Enforcement Fund but having submitted a bid had received no further communication.

There was a consistent opinion across local authorities that Welsh Government should be doing more to increase capacity for proactive action on empty dwellings and properties.

Welsh Government should be doing more to support and promote the role of Empty Property Officers throughout Wales, not just insisting local authorities have a local Empty Property Action Plan and providing funding for grant which need resources to promote.

Local authority housing manager in conversation with the Bevan Foundation

A call was made to us for practical support for the often isolated, but wide-ranging role of the empty property officer.

You work across so many teams to try to co-ordinate a response to individual properties ... it can be very isolating. You also need to be a jack of all trades and know about everything from VAT exemptions to compulsory purchase.

Former empty homes officer in conversation with the Bevan Foundation

We need a network of officers across Wales and a central unit supporting local officers that can support the more complex cases, trace heirs, support enforcement, bring bona vacantia and publicly owned assets and land back into use and deal with some of the empty properties that aren't necessarily on the council tax register but have development potential.

Lead member of housing at a local authority in conversation with the Bevan Foundation

This call mirrors the national approach taken by the Scottish Government, where funding is made available to Shelter Scotland and the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership for a support network as well as match funding to increase officer capacity.

2. Reviewing measures

The original Committee inquiry recommended that the Welsh Government should work with the WLGA to update Public Accountability Measure/013 to measure the success of bringing back into use properties that have been empty for 12 months rather than the current 6 months.

Local authorities informed us that this has not been actioned. There is lack of consistency across the empty homes data and interventions. For example, a long-term empty home in the council tax system is one which has been empty for 12 months.

3. Working with the Valuation Office Agency (VOA)

Current performance measures only include properties on the Council Tax register and not those which have been delisted by the VOA follow an assessment that it is uninhabitable or beyond economic repair.

We heard mixed views from local authorities about council tax records being used to prioritise the work of the empty homes officer. One said the expanding the scope of the work to include other categories of property which are not identifiable through council tax records risks diluting the effectiveness of the role given the limited resources currently available.

Another commented that these properties are often the most visible, problematic empty homes and the subject of complaint and community concern. Removal from the rating system means they are no longer subject to Council Tax or long-term empty property premiums. As a result, they can remain vacant for a longer-period with minimal attempts by the owners to bring these properties back into use.

4. Taking enforcement action

The local authorities we talked to welcomed the support and guidance of the Welsh Government appointed legal expert on dealing with empty properties. They did however refer back to their issues - although the expert was incredible supportive, the often extensive work needed to prepare for enforcement action was still a barrier to it being taken forward.

One local authority commented to us *"it can take years to bring a problematic empty property back into use... due to resources, we're often left with the dilemma of doing more easy hits which arguably have less impact at a community level."*

We understand that no further action has been taken on reviewing enforcement powers since the Empty Properties Enforcement Review in 2023, although the previous Welsh Government did commit to a review of compulsory purchase orders. One authority also suggested that the community right to buy could be a useful additional tool if and when implemented.

The key message was that capacity in terms of funding and staffing remains the principal barrier to the use of enforcement powers across Wales rather than the powers themselves.

5. Reviewing financial assistance to owners of empty properties

We understand that uncertainty over the future of financial assistance schemes used to support empty property owners is a growing concern for local authorities.

Leasing scheme Wales has been an important tool for some authorities, enabling sizable grants to owners in return for long term leasing arrangements but we have been told that this is now coming to an end.

The Houses into Homes improvement programme is also under review and could be discontinued. Local authorities are being asked to pay back the principal funding made available by Welsh Government by 2030. This is making the provision of support to new projects more and more challenging as that deadline draws nearer and the period for repayment of the individual loans becomes ever shorter.

Clarification from Welsh Government on the nature, scale and duration of future financial assistance available for Empty Homes is urgently required.

6. Returning empty properties to use as affordable housing.

Our recent report [Tenure change: turning existing dwellings and buildings into social homes](#) evidences the benefits of working with existing dwellings and buildings, but also the barriers which prevent acquisition and conversion for social homes being done at scale.

The report concluded that barriers to tenure change and re-purposing are significant - although we would argue not insurmountable - if viewed with pragmatism and flexibility.

There are clear steps which the next Welsh Government could take to improve both the financial and specialist support required.

A significant barrier to address however, is the policy conflict between aspirational, zero carbon standards for any homes brought into the social housing stock and the need to boost supply. It is right to ensure that tenants have the guarantee of a good quality home, but we must be pragmatic and led by what tenants need and want. Current standards are driving up costs and making many existing dwellings unsuitable for acquisition – including former social homes of the same design and layout as those already owned by social landlords.

Calls for broader flexibility or a lowering of standards for acquisition have been met with a Welsh Government response that they do not want to create two-tiers of accommodation standards. We would counter this argument by making the case that temporary accommodation could itself be regarded as a “second” tier of accommodation. Here, thousands of households may experience accommodation which does not even meet the lowest standards as they wait in hope for a gold standard social home.

Our recommendations included:

- **Ensuring that tenure change opportunities are maximised**
 - The suitability of existing dwellings and conversions for social homes needs to be assessed on a property-by-property basis. The merits of each individual dwelling should be assessed against a set of guiding principles, allowing for balance between physical factors such as room sizes with wider considerations on demand and suitability.
 - The Transitional Accommodation Capital Programme (TACP) funding requirement to sell a dwelling after 10 years if it does not meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard needs greater flexibility.
 - A review of the Welsh Development Quality Requirements (WDQR) and the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS) to establish the elements which prevent tenure change, provide pragmatic flexibility and prioritise the elements which are most important and beneficial to existing and future tenants.
 - In particular, a critical review is needed to assess the merits of requiring all social homes to meet an Energy Performance Certificate rating of A.
- **Enhancing financial support for tenure change**
 - Distinct and enhanced funding is needed for social housing schemes which make use of existing dwellings and buildings. This should clearly recognise the wider benefits and cover additional costs.
 - Land Transaction Tax rules should be amended to ensure that they do not stifle tenure change and re-purposing for social homes by exempting all types of social landlord as well as community groups.
 - The next Welsh Government must call on the UK Government to review VAT rules which favour new build development over working with existing dwellings and buildings.

7. Ring-fencing Council tax premium revenue

The Bevan Foundation's 2025 report [Understanding how taxes on land and property are used in Wales](#) provided more detail on how premiums are used across Wales and the significant variations in approach between authorities.

We concluded that there is clear potential for local authorities to make greater use of these powers if they wish to further boost revenues from council tax. Greater transparency is still needed on how additional income is being spent and a discussion should be had about ringfencing funds for housing-related activities.

We made a similar recommendation in our most recent report [Holidays or homes? The loss of homes for the people of Wales to holiday accommodation](#) in relation to funds accrued through the second homes premium. Our conversations for this research revealed that local authorities have a mixed picture on the motivation for charging a premium and the link to taking strategic housing action in the housing market. While most housing officials talked about strong relationships and discussions with taxation managers, others questioned whether the decision to charge a premium was always housing-led.

In the current financial environment, and particularly the challenges in temporary accommodation budgets, it can feel like it's more about bringing extra money in than taking action on second and empty homes.

Local authority housing manager in conversation with the Bevan Foundation.

If you would like to find out more about our new housing research projects please visit our website - www.bevanfoundation.org/current-projects/

Our Senior Policy and Research Officer, Wendy Dearden can also be contacted about this work by email - wendy.dearden@bevanfoundation.org
