EVERY HOME COUNTS
Empty Property Strategy
2013 - 2018

A sub strategy of

‘Developing a Housing future together in adversity and beyond’

Torfaen Local Housing Strategy
Foreword

I have great pleasure in introducing Torfaen Council’s new Empty Property Strategy 2013 – 2018 Every Home Counts.

As we look around Torfaen there are empty properties that we can all identify as affecting the appearance and ambience of the communities in which we live. Every Home Counts, in support of the Local Housing Strategy, sets out a clear direction and proposal for tackling empty properties in Torfaen.

Empty homes are a wasted resource, and it has never been more important to utilise all our resources than in these austere times. Welsh Government figures indicate that there are approximately 22,000 empty homes across Wales. This statistic, along with Shelter Cymru’s estimation that 70,000 households are waiting for suitable accommodation, means that leaving properties empty is not an option.

Whilst enforcement action remains an important intervention tool that the Council will use to ensure that neighbourhoods and communities do not suffer as a result of a lack of action by some owners, we aim to develop services to support property owners to overcome the hurdles they may face in bringing their empty properties back in to use. The Council acknowledges that each empty home has its own story to tell and this will be recognised in our approach to tackling problems. Nevertheless, as there is such a need for affordable housing we cannot afford to sit back and do nothing.

The implementation of Every Home Counts will ensure that the Council plays its part in bringing empty homes back into use. This will be done in a way that meets the needs of residents in Torfaen, and I ask all our partners and residents to work with us to help us achieve this aim.

Councillor G R Clark
EXECUTIVE MEMBER OF HOUSING, PLANNING AND PUBLIC PROTECTION
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1.0 Introduction
Throughout our society there are thousands of individuals who are homeless or live in accommodation that does not cater for their needs. There are also thousands of homes spread throughout the country which are vacant or have been empty for a significant period of time. These homes are not only a wasted resource, but have an increasingly negative effect on the communities in which they are situated, often becoming focal points for illegal or anti-social behaviour. By bringing empty properties back into use, more homes will come on to the market, in turn realising benefits for communities, the environment and the economy.

Every Home Counts seeks to:

- Reduce the number of long term empty homes in the borough by establishing positive relationships and partnership working with owners.
- Undertake a firm enforcement approach in cases where owners’ co-operation is not forthcoming, or if owners cannot be found.
- Return empty homes to use by working closely with organisations and partners such as Housing Associations, Welsh Government, private developers and local communities.
- Promote the issues surrounding empty homes to all Torfaen residents in order to enhance awareness.

Torfaen County Borough Council produced the ‘Torfaen Empty Property Strategy and Procedure’ in 2009. This has provided a steer for the Council over the past 3 years, with the ‘Empty Hopes’ initiative facilitating the re-use and re-occupation of long-term empty homes.

This strategy formalises and continues to promote the Council’s commitment to tackling empty homes across the borough, building on our achievements over the last three years. It sets out future actions to reduce the problems associated with empty homes, to enable us to build on our success and move forward in line with government initiatives.
2.0 Our Vision:

“To reduce the number of empty homes in the borough and by doing so promote housing led regeneration which not only improves the surrounding environment but also increases the supply of housing”

2.1 Strategic Context
Every Home Counts is a sub-strategy of the Local Housing Strategy, *Developing a Housing Future Together: In Adversity and Beyond*. Every Home Counts focuses on addressing the problems caused by long term empty homes, which are becoming more apparent as a result of the current economic climate and stalling housing market, in turn making it much more difficult for empty home owners to bring their properties back into use.

2.2 Definition of an Empty Property
The Welsh Government defines empty homes as those properties that were previously used as a residential dwelling and have been unoccupied for more than 6 months. In Torfaen we have broken the empty properties down into two target groups.

- **Short term empty properties** – those properties that have been empty for less than two years. These are often referred to as transitional properties and require limited Local Authority intervention to enable the property to become re-occupied i.e. properties that are currently on the market for sale.
- **Long term empty properties** – Properties that have been empty for over two years and require particular intervention by the Local Authority to bring them back into use.

2.3 National Context
Welsh Government reports that there are over 22,000 long term empty homes in Wales, with this figure expected to rise in coming years. The Welsh Government is committed to tackling empty homes which has recently been highlighted by its inclusion as a key priority within the recent Housing White Paper. The Welsh Government has stated that it will place a strengthened duty on the strategic role of local authorities, requiring them to take action to bring empty properties back into use. (Homes for Wales, Housing White Paper)

To reinforce their commitment the Welsh Government introduced ‘Houses into Homes’ in February 2012. To date £20 million has been allocated to enable Local Authorities to offer interest free loans to empty property owners to renovate empty run down residential or commercial properties and return them to use as homes for sale or rent.

In addition to this, Welsh Government have also laid out proposals to give Local Authorities discretionary powers to levy a higher rate of council tax on properties that have been empty for more than a year. Torfaen Borough Council currently levies a 50% discount on properties that have been empty for over 6 months.
2.4 Regional context
Torfaen County Borough Council actively works in partnership with neighbouring authorities to tackle empty homes, through the South East Wales Empty Property Network and a Gwent wide Empty Property Network.

2.5 Local Context

2.5.1 Empty Homes in Torfaen
At any one time, there are approximately 400 empty homes in Torfaen. On the 1st April 2012, 235 of these were considered to be ‘long term empties’, being empty for at least 6 months. Appendix 1 illustrates the number of homes empty in each of Torfaen ward.

2.5.2 Empty Hopes Initiative
In 2010, Torfaen County Borough Council launched the ‘Empty Hopes’ initiative. Since the launch Housing Services have:

- Worked in partnership with the Council Tax section to create a robust database of all ‘long term’ empty properties and their owners.
- Engaged with over 300 empty property owners and supplied guidance on how to bring them back into use.
- Traced owners as far afield as Ireland, France, Belgium and Japan.
- Used a matrix to score empty properties, resulting in a priority list being developed of the more problematic empty properties.
- Visited and externally inspected the majority of empty properties on the database; photographed and evidenced their condition to determine their priority for further action.
- Formed partnerships with Charter Options and Melin Homes to develop private rented leasing and letting options for empty property owners.
- Worked with private sector builders to identify possible empty properties in the north of the borough, which they could purchase for renovation.
- Increased publicity on empty properties by working with the Council’s communications team, to ensure regular press releases appear in local newspapers, to highlight the problems associated with leaving properties empty.
- Identified funding opportunities to help bring empty homes back into use.

2.5.3 Why homes are left empty
Empty homes remain empty for numerous reasons:
- Disputes over ownership
- Awaiting a sale
- Undertaking renovation work
- Owner hospitalised/in care
- Repossession or bankruptcy
- Deceased estate
- Inability to sell
- Investment holding
- Inheritance holding

As part of the work of the Empty Hopes initiative, empty home owners were consulted on the reasons why their properties were empty.

It is also important to understand the reasons why/how properties were acquired. The two main reasons given were:

- Inherited the property (34%)
- Bought the property to live in myself (32%)

These reasons are consistent with the main reasons for empty properties across Wales.

2.5.4 Housing Need
There is an acute shortage of housing both locally and nationally. At any one time, there are approximately 3000 applicants on the Homeseeker register of the Council’s social housing waiting list. If all long term empty properties were brought back into use to accommodate Homeseeker applicants, the pressure on housing would be reduced.

A breakdown of empty properties by ward is detailed in Appendix 1 and 2. The figures are based on the number of long term empty properties reported to Council Tax as at 1\textsuperscript{st} April 2012. Blaenavon (2.69%), Pontnewynydd (3.05%), and Pontypool (3.15%) have the largest proportion of long-term empty properties in Torfaen.
2.5.5 Problems caused by Empty Homes
The problems caused by empty homes are significant. They can:

- Significantly affect the appearance of a neighbourhood often portraying a sense of decay and decline.
- Attract rubbish dumping and increase the likelihood of vermin.
- Act as a magnet for crime and anti-social behaviour, including squatting, vandalism and arson.
- Place greater demand on the time and resources of the Police, Fire and Rescue Service and the Council.
- Increase the risk of structural damage, which can affect neighbouring properties.
- Act as a magnet for crime and anti-social behaviour, including squatting, vandalism and arson.

“Long term empty properties within Torfaen offer a wasted housing resource and should be brought back into occupation through the powers available to local authorities” Private Sector Stock Condition Survey, Torfaen County Borough Council and CPC 2011

2.5.6 Housing Strategy Consultation
An integral part of the development of the Local Housing Strategy was undertaking consultation with Torfaen residents to ascertain their housing priorities. The results showed that the 3 main issues raised were a need to:

- Bring Empty Properties back into use (49.6%)
- Provide more Affordable Housing (37.9%)
- Provide more assistance for First Time Buyers (31.8%)

These results show that residents recognise bringing empty properties back into use is a key housing priority in Torfaen, proving the need for an effective and coherent empty homes strategy.

2.5.7 Assistance provided to empty home owners
Housing Services provide advice and assistance to owners to help them bring their property back into use. The team contacts all long term empty home owners and provides them with an information pack covering:

- Leasing and Letting Schemes
- Grants and Loans
- VAT reductions- Properties over 2 years old are eligible to benefit from a reduced rate of 5% on renovation works. Properties over 10 years can claim for zero rate VAT on renovations.
- Selling the property, including information on estate agents and auction houses.
2.5.8 ‘Houses into Homes’ Loan

‘Houses into Homes’ loans were introduced to provide financial assistance to empty property owners. It is run by Torfaen County Borough Council, in partnership with the Welsh Government, and is available to all empty property owners within Torfaen. The scheme offers an interest-free loan of up to £25,000 to assist owners bring their property back into use for sale or rent.

The loan is available for both residential and commercial properties; however planning consent will be required for change of use from commercial to residential. Further information on the application process can be obtained from the Empty Homes Officer. To date Torfaen has successfully processed 7 loan applications and is continually promoting the scheme as an option for empty property owners. *Case studies of the loans scheme can be found in section 8.*
3.0 Every Home Counts - Aims and Objectives

1) Reduce the number of long term empty homes in the borough through establishing a positive relationship with owners.

2) To undertake a firm enforcement approach in cases where owners’ co-operation is not forthcoming or if owners cannot be found.

3) To return empty homes to use through working closely with Housing Associations, Welsh Government, and local communities.

4) To promote the issues surrounding empty homes to all Torfaen residents in order to raise awareness.
4.0 Aim 1- Reduce the number of empty homes by establishing positive relationships with owners

The Council monitors the number of empty homes, by maintaining a robust database of properties. It seeks to reduce the number of empty homes in the borough by actively engaging with owners and informing them of the options available to help bring their property back into use. Many owners are unaware of the options available, so properties can lie empty for long periods.

The Council can provide advice to owners on:

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<th>Selling the property</th>
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<td>Estate agents and auctions</td>
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<td>Access to a list of buyers who are interested in purchasing an empty home</td>
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<th>Renting their property</th>
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<td>Becoming a private landlord and accreditation schemes</td>
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<td>Leasing schemes which manage the property on behalf of the owner</td>
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<td>Torfaen’s local landlord forum</td>
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<th>Renovating the property</th>
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<td>Claiming zero or reduced-rate VAT on renovation work</td>
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<td>Grants and loan opportunities</td>
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**What we want to achieve**
- Establish a positive relationship with empty home owners.
- Provide advice to owners on the various options available to assist them.
- Offer incentives to support empty home owners to bring their property back into use.
- Identify unknown owners of long term empty homes.
- Work with owners to reduce the number of empty homes in the borough.

**How we will achieve this**
- Develop a robust database of empty homes.
- Advise all empty home owners that the Council has an empty homes policy and open discussions with owners about their options.
- Provide owners with information on selling, renovating, auctioning, leasing or letting their empty home.
- Promote and encourage uptake of the ‘Houses into Homes’ loan facility.
- Work closely with the community to search for unknown empty home owners.
- Plot empty homes on the Council’s Geographic Information System to identify ‘empty home hot spots’ and create a visual understanding of where empty properties are in the borough.
- Inspect empty properties against risk criteria.
5.0 Aim 2- To undertake a firm enforcement approach in cases where owners’ co-operation is not forthcoming or if owners cannot be found.

Where negotiations with empty home owners stall, the Council will undertake a proactive approach to identify and address the risks and hazards associated with problem empty homes, and make full use of the enforcement tools at the Council’s disposal. Local Authorities have a number of statutory tools available to tackle problem empty homes, a summary of which can be found in Appendix 3.

**Enforced Sale**
Enforced Sales allow local authorities to force the sale of a property to recover debts. Debts may be secured either against a property, or a person.

**Compulsory Purchase Order**
Compulsory Purchase Orders allow local authorities to apply to the Secretary of State, for the purchase of properties that have been empty for a minimum of 6 months.

**Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO)**
Empty Dwelling Management Orders allow local authorities to secure occupation and responsible management of privately owned houses and flats.

These powers include requiring the owner to; remove waste, control vermin, secure dangerous structures, secure the property, and clear litter and graffiti. The Council can request that these works are completed, and if the owner fails to do so, the Council can complete the works ‘in default’ and register a charge on the property. The Council will then seek to recover the debt, possibly through legal action or by applying for an enforced sale of the property. Torfaen Council is in the progress of reviewing the enforced sale trigger point to bring it in line with other Local Authorities.

**What we want to achieve**
- Return problematic empty homes back into use
- Improve the streetscape of neighbourhoods, by eradicating problematic empty homes
- All internal departments with an interest in Empty properties working together to bring back long term empty properties back into use.

**How we will achieve this**
- Where all reasonable voluntary action has failed, the development and implementation of a firm enforcement approach will be instigated for owners who do not cooperate, whose engagement is not forthcoming, where improvement is not evidenced or where the owner cannot be traced.
- Develop procedures for enforcement action including Enforced Sales, Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO) and Compulsory Purchase.
• Ensure all departments within the Council are committed to bringing empty properties back into use including the use of enforcement options.
• Establish a corporate working group to steer and share key information on empty properties and to implement this strategy.
6.0 Aim 3- To return empty homes back into use by working closely with our partners.

Torfaen County Borough Council understands the difficulties faced by empty home owners, who are struggling to fund renovation work and sell their property in the current economic climate. The Council is therefore working closely with its partners to develop options for owners.

The Empty Hopes project aims to return empty homes to use and help tackle the housing shortage, by targeting those properties that meet the criteria to alleviate this demand and encourage owners to let the property through the Council’s housing waiting list. The Council also encourages communities to develop social enterprises, to bring empty homes back into use.

**Housing Associations**
- Housing Associations provide homes at an affordable rent and will sometimes take over the management of a property on behalf of an owner

**Welsh Government**
- The Welsh Government can provide guidance and funding to local authorities in Wales

**Local Communities**
- A local community could form a social enterprise scheme to take over the management of an empty property and return it to use

**What we want to achieve**
- To have an array of options available to assist empty property owners to bring their property back into use.
- To reduce the burden of empty homes on the environment and local community.
- To increase the stock of good quality housing.
- To deliver more affordable housing and reduce homelessness, by increasing the number of private rented and low cost ownership homes.

**How we will achieve this**
- Continue to work with our partners to develop and deliver options.
- Identify funding opportunities to assist owners in renovating empty homes.
- Actively promote available options and publicise them to owners.
- Work with neighbouring authorities through regional forums, to identify and share best practice.
- Encourage the development of community social enterprises and research best practice case studies.
- Increase regeneration and re-investment in communities.
7.0  **Aim 4- To promote knowledge and understanding of the issues surrounding empty homes to all Torfaen residents.**

Local knowledge is highly beneficial in identifying problem empty homes and unknown owners. It is also important for improving awareness of the Empty Hopes scheme, so that residents recognise the significance of the effect of empty properties in their communities, and will be encouraged to report them to the local authority.

The Council, therefore, actively promotes the ‘Empty Hopes’ scheme and encourages owners to report empty homes in their area.

### Marketing
Publicising new schemes and initiatives via websites, newsletters and relevant forums and business events i.e. Landlord Forums, Torfaen Talks, Torfaen Homes.

### Communication
Providing advice and information about all aspects of empty homes, including help, advice and how to report an empty property.

### Consultation
Attending public events and speaking to residents about the problems that empty properties can cause.

**What we want to achieve**
- Increase awareness of the Empty Hopes scheme so that the public are aware of the Council’s policy on empty homes and all opportunities that are available.
- Provide a confidential reporting service so that residents feel secure in reporting problem empty homes.

**How we will achieve this**
- Promote the Empty Hopes scheme through Council websites and social media.
- Advertise ‘success stories’ of the scheme e.g. long term empties brought back into use, owners found, etc.
- Identify new ways of engaging with residents and promoting the Empty Hopes Initiative.
- Link in with current Welsh Government Marketing campaign surrounding the ‘Houses into Homes’ scheme.
8.0 Successful case studies

8.1 Voluntary Acquisition in partnership with United Welsh Housing Association, Woodland Street, Blaenavon

- This two bedroom property was identified through our annual Council Tax monitoring of Empty residential properties.
- The owner was then contacted via our ‘Empty Hopes’ initiative and provided with a range of advice for bringing the property back into use.
- The owner lived in England and had left the property empty as he had relocated with his job and was uncertain of what to do with the property and had therefore left it empty.
- The owner contacted the department for help following our initial contact and we were able to sign post him to a Housing Association who were looking to acquire empty properties to bring them back into use.
- Both parties got a valuation for the property and agreed a sale price.
- The owner was happy as it meant he no longer had to worry about the property or pay 50% council tax on the property.
- Once in UWHA ownership the property was renovated and brought up to Welsh Housing Quarterly Standard.
- Once finished the Home was let out at an affordable rent.
11.2 Houses into Homes Loans scheme

11.2.1 Ashgrove, St Cadocs, Trevethin, Pontypool

- This was one of the first properties that were awarded a ‘Houses into Homes Loan’ in Wales.
- The Property had been left derelict for over 4 years and was uninhabitable and affecting the appearance of the surrounding communities.
- The new owners bought it with the intention of renovating the property into a family home for rent or sale in the future.
- The property also attracted over £100,000 of the owners personal finance.
- Local Labour and materials were used throughout the renovation.
- The development was visited by the Housing Minister for Housing, Heritage and Regeneration, Carl Sergeant who said “This house has been empty for four years, and at a time when our country is crying out for good quality accommodation for everyone, that is a sad state of affairs. “I commend the owners for taking on this project, which will not only breathe new life into this property, but will be employing local people to perform much of the renovation work as well. It’s great to see, first hand, how Houses into Homes is making a real difference to the housing landscape of Wales.”
11.2.2 Ventnor Road, Cwmbran

- This Property had been empty for 1 year
- The property was very dated and needed a lot of modernisation.
- The Owner had purchased it as an investment opportunity and was looking to renovate the property to modern day standards
- A ‘Houses into Homes’ loan was then applied for in order for the property to be renovated and put on the market for rent.
- The renovation has been finished to a high standard. The three bedroom property is awaiting its first tenants.
11.3 Enforced Sale

Woodland Street Blaenavon

- This Property has been empty since April 2000.....13 years.
- The property had been classified as uninhabitable.
- No next of kin could be found
- Property has benefited from a renewal grant to repair the envelope of the property but is very much just a shell on the inside.
- The property was treated for dry rot and made weather tight
- Notice served and registered with Public Trustee
- Draft Sealed Resolution drawn up
- It is anticipated that the property will be sold via auction in spring 2014.
11.4 Partnership Approach to tackling strategic Empty Property sites.

The main strategic priority has been to tackle empty residential properties. Torfaen Council is working in partnership to enable the possible re-development of strategic empty commercial or educational sites within Torfaen. Such partnerships have proved successful on the regeneration of sites such as The Clarence Hotel and Brookfield School. Currently discussion and plans are on-going for the redevelopment of sites such as Hillside School, Broad Street, Forgeside School and empty public houses. Partnership working is fundamental to the success of any regeneration. Torfaen County Borough Council is currently working with private developers, Housing Associations and all internal departments i.e. conservation, legal, regeneration and planning to ensure that strategic commercial sites are brought back into use.
## Appendix

### Appendix 1
Empty properties at ward level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>Number of private residential properties*</th>
<th>Number of empty residential properties**</th>
<th>Percentage of private residential properties that are empty %</th>
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<tr>
<td>Abersychan</td>
<td>1955</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1.38</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blaenavon</td>
<td>1819</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>2.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trevethin</td>
<td>751</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snatchwood</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.66</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pontnewynydd</td>
<td>557</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>St. Cadocs and Penygarn</td>
<td>398</td>
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<td>0.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brynwern</td>
<td>572</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wainfelin</td>
<td>826</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pontypool</td>
<td>604</td>
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<td>New Inn</td>
<td>2319</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cwmynyscoy</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>27636</strong></td>
<td><strong>235</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Hometrack data retrieved in March 2012

**As at 01/04/2012
Appendix 2
Map of empty home hotspots

KEY:
30+
20-30
10-20
5-10
Under 5
# Appendix 3
## Statutory Enforcement Tools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of enforcement</th>
<th>Legislation</th>
<th>Costs</th>
<th>Risks</th>
<th>When to be used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)</strong></td>
<td>Town and Country Planning Act 1990, Housing Act 1985</td>
<td>Potentially very expensive, costs include market value of the property &amp; legal costs</td>
<td>The costs, time and Council reputation are at risk if there is an appeal. Council will take ownership of property to manage, maintain, or dispose of</td>
<td>When negotiated purchase has failed and the ownership of the property needed as part of a larger scheme of regeneration. Usually for demolition purposes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO)</strong></td>
<td>The Housing Act 2004 Part 4 S132 - 138</td>
<td>Council funds any work required and recovers costs through rental income</td>
<td>To apply to the Property Tribunal for Order. EDMO creates the right of possession not ownership. A management organisation needs to be identified. Time consuming to set up. Property may not be suitable to rent.</td>
<td>When property has been left empty and owner refuses to give reasonable explanation. Property not exempt an all other aspects of assistance have been explored.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Enforced Sale</strong></td>
<td>Various legislation can lead to an enforced sale</td>
<td>Cost of work carried out in default of a notice or order. Cost of work, legal and sale costs can be reclaimed from proceeds of sale. For some actions the debt becomes the 1\textsuperscript{st} charge and is therefore paid prior to any other debt on the property.</td>
<td>Relies on the charge of ownership to bring property back into use. Debt to the Council can be paid by owner at any time prior to sale.</td>
<td>Where other assistance has not brought the property back into use and the property is causing a substantial nuisance and there is a reasonably large debt to the Council, secured against the property which is unlikely to be recovered otherwise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demolition or clearance</strong></td>
<td>The Housing Act 1985 S265</td>
<td>Can be time and labour intensive</td>
<td>Building Act 1984 may be more effective</td>
<td>Properties no longer useful where it isn’t economically viable to bring back into use.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Building Act 1984 S79</strong></td>
<td>Costs can be recovered by enforced sale of the land, debt has priority charge</td>
<td>Cost of demolition in default of the notice may not be fully recovered</td>
<td>Properties no longer useful where it isn’t economically viable to bring back into use.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Housing Act 1985 S289</strong></td>
<td>Can be expensive if CPO is required</td>
<td>As CPO above</td>
<td>Clearance areas for regeneration projects.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>