

Overview of Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council's Empty Property Grant.

Background

Empty private sector homes represent a wasted resource and financial expense both to the owners and Council and in many cases a missed opportunity to provide much needed affordable housing for residents. Not only are they a waste of a valuable housing resource, but they can cause a blight to communities and distress to residents affected by their unsightly appearance to attract crime and social behaviour.

Over the last few years, the Council has developed many tools and approaches to encourage empty homes to be brought back into use which have had a positive impact.

This includes:

- Housing enforcement activity utilising various housing and planning legislation
- Provision of Houses into Homes loans utilising Welsh Government repayable funding
- Provision of grants utilising the Council's own funding - £4.1M since 2016/17
- Affordable housing schemes that bring empty homes back into use
- Advice and assistance
- Provision of homes above retail premises in Aberdare and Pontypridd
- Removing the 50% Council Tax reduction for empty homes (From April 2018 onwards)

A key tool that has had a significant impact on the number of Empty Homes brought back into use is the Council's own Discretionary Empty Property Grant. This grant supports the delivery of the Council's and Welsh Government's investment priority of returning empty properties into use, to help regenerate communities, provide more choice and suitable accommodation for residents.

Eligibility and Conditions of RCT's Empty Property Grant

- Applicants must be potential owner occupiers who plan to live in the property as their main residence for a period of at least 5 years.
- The property must have remained unoccupied for a period of 6 months prior to purchase and at the time of the grant application. Council Tax records will be used to verify this timescale.
- The property must meet the housing needs of the applicant's family who intends to occupy the property.
- Applicants are required to make a 15% maximum contribution to the total cost of grant eligible work.
- The Grant will be available for essential repair works to make the property safe and secure and free from any category one hazard.
- The Grant eligible work will be determined by the Council's Improvement Grant Surveyor.
- Grant cost of work limit £20,000 (inc VAT)

- Ancillary fees can be added to the cost of works limits.
- Minimum cost of work limit of £1000 (exclusive of VAT) not eligible if works below this cost.
- Grant conditions are registered with a Full Legal Charge on the property on completion of the works for a 5 year period. Full repayment will be requested if the property is sold, or not occupied as intended during the 5 year grant condition period.

Compliance Checks

At initial application stage, officers:

- Review and challenge based on name and address and flag for further review/investigation any that raise concerns regarding future occupancy.
- Check date property became empty with Council Tax.

After completion:

- Notify Council Tax of grant completion.
- At the annual anniversary of grant completion, the name of occupant is checked with Council Tax to check occupancy and that property is still occupied.
- On a sample basis (10%) annual verification checks that requires the grant recipient to provide proof of occupation e.g. Water Bill.

Outcomes of Scheme to date

Year	Grant Applications	Grant Total	Sum of applicant contribution	Sum of total cost of works
2016 - 2017	2	£29,718	£4,380	£34,098
2017 - 2018	73	£1,182,513	£295,578	£1,478,091
2018 – 2019 (to Feb 2019)	55	£971,556	£241,627	£1,227,324
Grand Total	130	£2,183,787	£541,585	£2,739,513

As the table demonstrates, since 2016 the grant has brought **130** empty homes back into use.

It also shows that whilst applicants are required to make a 15% contribution to the total cost of grant eligible work, applicants are actually spending in excess of this. The actual percentage based on the above figures is a **24% contribution**.