

The Route to Health Improvement

Notable Practice Case Study

This practice relates to one (or more) of the below key features :				
Corporate Culture	Policy Development ✓	Collaboration	Capacity Building	Governance

Background & Context:

Tackling Empty & Derelict Buildings

The quality and attractiveness of neighbourhoods, where we live and work has a direct impact on economic, social and environmental well-being. Research has shown that depression is most prevalent in areas affected by derelict buildings and graffiti. A survey of residents of Rhondda Cynon Taf conducted in 2003 found that only 84% of residents were either very or fairly satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live. It was found that over 31% think that the neighbourhood is getting worse.

Clearly, empty properties have a crosscutting effect on the Community Plan as they affect the health and well-being, safety and economy of our communities. The quality of the built environment within Rhondda Cynon Taf is a key issue for local communities. Abandoned, vacant and unsightly buildings are a significant problem across the County Borough. In addition to their impact on appearance of the neighbourhood, they are targets for anti social behaviour such as graffiti, fly posting and fly tipping. The Council is committed to taking proactive action against ruinous or dilapidated buildings.

Description & Characteristics:

In the later part of 2005, the Council's Public Health & Protection was successful in obtaining funding from the Health, Social Care & Well-being Partnership to fund a Project Officer to deal with ruinous and dilapidated buildings for 6 months. Due to the success of the approach, Public Health & Protection have continued the project.

To date the project has identified 148 derelict buildings across the County Borough. While responsibility for these buildings primarily rests with the owner (s) the main aim of the project was to work in partnership with these owner(s), various external bodies and other local authority departments to provide innovative and long term solutions to problematic properties. A key aspect of this was that the Project Officer supports the priorities of the Area Renewal Partnerships and Communities First groups in respect of ruinous and dilapidated buildings of concern to residents and to target the worst properties in response.

Funding from the Council's Economic Regeneration Team has been used to best advantage by involving the Project Officer to target problem properties, particularly where these have been situated in Town Centres and other areas subject to specific Objective One funding. For

example, £100,000 of grant money is being awarded to businesses in the Mountain Ash ward as a result of visits, discussions and negotiations with owners to highlight the negative impact of their properties on the locality.

Public Health and Protection have continued to make robust use of the existing legislative framework that allows local authorities to require action by owners in respect of eyesore buildings. In particular, where such properties are seriously detrimental to the surrounding amenity of the neighbourhood, legal documents can be served to require owners to repair, renovate or demolish a building. If the owner fails to comply with such requirements, the Council may initiate prosecution proceedings and or initiate the most cost effective remedial action in default; the costs of doing this are recoverable from the owner.

Clearly many buildings fall outside the definition of seriously detrimental, but they nevertheless still have a negative impact on the surrounding community. In recognition of this, the Environmental Services Group has taken action in the past 6 months to ensure all Environmental Health Officers as well as Planning Officers in the Council are authorised to take action under the section 215 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. The whole authority approach to the use of this power increases the options available to deal with problem properties and it has proved very successful to date with 16 legal documents served to date.

In addition, Public Health and Protection are seeking to maximising the benefits that can be brought by using the Enforced Power of Sale available under the Law of Property Act 1925. Local Authorities have the provision to force the sale of a property where money is owed to them, for example as a result of remedial works undertaken in default. Properties that are vacant and derelict and where the reuse of the building will support regeneration of a locality are given a priority and Public Health and Protection have developed a Strategy for the use of this power. The first two properties to be sold are ready to go to the final stage with another 8 potential cases being scrutinised.

Why was/is this initiative/approach successful?

The initiative was successful because:

- It focussed on a key strategic priority with dedicated resources,
- It adopted a partnership approach with clear mutual benefits to the agencies involved,
- It responded to the needs of the local communities directly and in a targeted way, with tangible outcomes.

Measures of Success:

Since the Project started 14 months ago, 30 buildings have been renovated or demolished following the Councils involvement. The project officer is presently dealing with 50 of the remaining worst buildings that have been identified. All these properties are kept under constant review to ensure appropriate and timely action is taken.

Many owners are seeking to comply with the requirements of the legal notice by renovating or applying for planning permission or disposing of the property to a new owner who wishes to renovate or redevelop. However for those persons who do not comply, the presumption will be to initiate legal proceedings against them. To date the Authority has prosecuted five people

in regard to this offence and has one prosecution pending. The most recent case resulted in a substantial fine of £2000 and award of £597 costs against the owner of a dilapidated building located on the main thoroughfare of Treorchy.

Public Health and Protection are presently working in partnership with Community Housing and other key partners, to draft Rhondda Cynon Taf's first Empty Property Strategy. The Strategy aims to reduce the number of empty properties from the communities in which we live and it is hoped that using the valuable experience from the Dilapidated Buildings project will inform how the Authority can tackle all empty properties in partnership to further facilitate the regeneration of Rhondda Cynon Taf.

Finally, it is worthy of note that there has been significant media and community interest in the outcomes of this project, which go some way to illustrating the impact these problem properties have on the communities of Rhondda Cynon Taf. Here is a comment made by a local resident after the demolition of the Great Western Ballroom, Ford Road, Pwllgwaun.

"It is very good to see that the council have taken action in creating a better and safer environment for the children in the area who were getting used to hanging in and around the dangerous building. There were also a lot of children drinking in the lane behind the building too which has now also stopped due to the lane being lit up and visible.

There are many other examples of derelict buildings in the area and houses that need some forced improvements but at least this is a good start."

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