

Bridgend Empty Homes Strategy Consultation Report

September 2024

1. Methodology:

- 1.1. Bridgend Council's previous Empty Homes Strategy expired at the end of 2023. Although not a statutory requirement for local authorities, the Welsh Government recommends that councils adopt and implement such strategies as best practice. The new strategy will shape the council's approach to tackling empty homes over the next five years.
- 1.2. In collaboration with the consultation team, it was decided that two separate consultations would be conducted to enable a more targeted questioning approach.
- 1.3. As part of the empty property owner's consultation, bilingual Welsh and English letters were sent to 650 empty property owners, inviting them to complete an online survey. The consultation took place over a twelve-week period and concluded on the 9th September 2024.

The consultation targeted empty property owners whose homes had been vacant for 12 months or more. This approach aimed to gather insights on why these properties remain vacant and explore ways to prevent long-term empties in the future.

- 1.4. The residents' consultation was made available online in both English and Welsh through Bridgend Council's website. To maximise participation, the consultation was promoted via the social media and newsletters. The consultation took place over a six-week period and concluded on the 16th September 2024.
- 1.5. A written submission on the proposal was received from a representative body of estate agents. This submission is considered within a separate Schedule of Consultation Responses and is not included within the scope of this report.

2. Findings of the Empty Property Owners Consultation

- 2.1. A total of 40 online responses were collected from the survey, producing a response rate of 6.5%.
- 2.2. Empty property owners were asked if they owned a long-term empty property¹ in Bridgend. The majority, 35 respondents (87.5%), indicated that they did own such property, while 5 respondents (12.5%) reported they did not.

¹A dwelling is a long-term empty home if it has been unoccupied for 6 months or longer.

- 2.3. To gain a better insight into the profile of empty property ownership in Bridgend, respondents were asked how they acquired their property. The majority, 52.5% had purchased the property, while 27.5% inherited. A significant proportion of respondents chose 'other', citing reasons such as 'divorce', 'self-build' and 'acting as an executor.
- 2.4. It is important that the strategy is tailored to accommodate the needs of all empty property owners, whether they own a single property or multiple. To further understand the profile of empty property owners, respondents were asked how many properties they owned. The majority, 85%, reported owning between one and three properties, while 2.5% owned between four and nine. Lastly 7.5% indicated they owned more than 10 properties.
- 2.5. To understand why properties in Bridgend remain vacant, we asked empty property owners to provide their reasons for the unoccupied status of their properties. The responses, shown in Figure 1, will inform how best to support owners in the development of the new strategy.

The most common reason stated, by 35% of respondents, was that the property was undergoing repairs or renovations. Similarly, 13% indicated the property required repairs or renovations, while 14% reported a lack of financial resource to address the issues. Additionally, 11% of respondents selected 'other, citing reasons such as;

'The annexe if not suitable for renting out to non a family member. All utilities are provided by the adjoining farmhouse.'

'Money is owed as my father had a grant on the house, we can't afford to pay what is owed so we have been advised to wait 2 years until the money is paid off to sell it'.

'Lack of support from authorities and the weighting in favour of the tenant makes me reluctant to place it on the rental market. The last tenant cost me £5000 to remove from the property and that does not include the non-payment of rent'.

Notable reasons also included lack of experience (6%), Building Control (2%) and Planning (3%).

The reasons given by property owners for keeping their properties vacant.

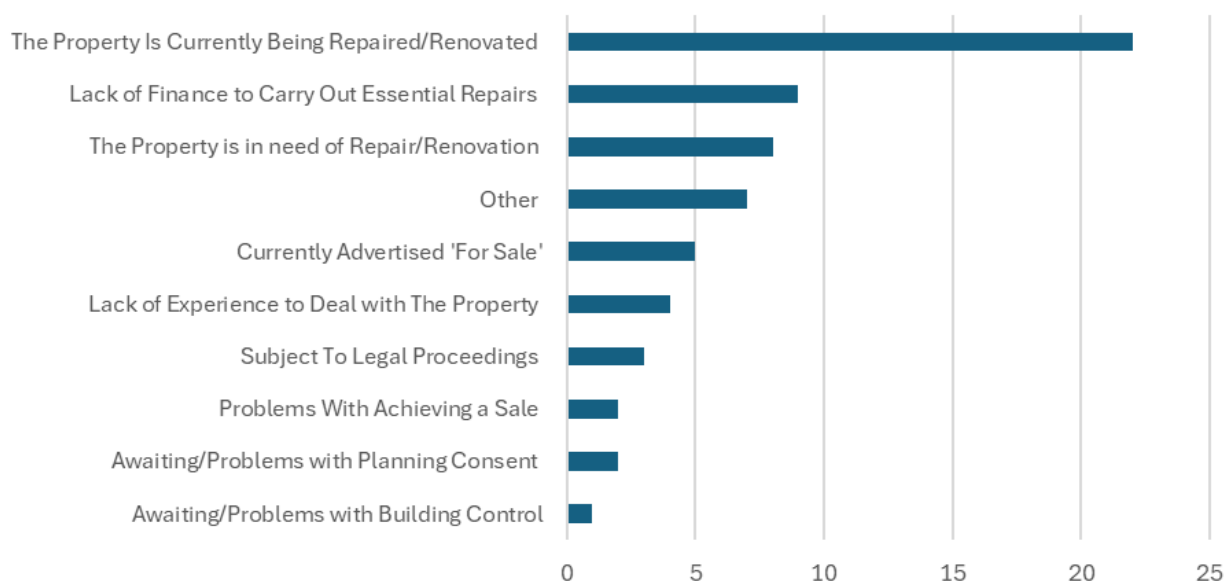


Figure 1: Reasons for Empty Properties: Consultation Responses Highlighting Key Factors

- 2.6. To better understand how we can support empty property owners in bringing their properties back into use, we asked them to rate the importance of various methods used by the council. Respondents ranked each method on a scale from 'extremely important' to 'not important at all'.

The method with the strongest support was the provision of empty property grants, with 72% of respondents rating it as important, of which 50% marked it as extremely important. Following this, 35% of respondents rated empty homes loans as extremely important and 32% considered assistance with finding contractors to be extremely important.

Enforcement action received the least support as a method for the council to implement. However, a deeper analysis of the responses shows more diverse views. While 23% of respondents rated enforcement action as extremely unimportant, when combined with those who rated it as somewhat unimportant, the overall figure rose to 30%. Additionally, 30% of respondents remained neutral on the issue and another 30% viewed enforcement action as important.

- 2.7. As part of the previous strategy, an empty property webpage was created. To evaluate its success and effectiveness, we asked empty property owners if they were aware of Bridgend Council's webpage for empty homes. A significant majority, 87.5%, responded that they were not aware, while 12.5% indicated they knew about the webpage.

Among those who were aware, 80% had used the webpage.

- 2.8. To assess the effectiveness of our current communication with empty property owners, we asked if they felt the Council keeps them informed about updates on financial assistance, legislation or policy changes related to empty properties. A majority of 72.5% responded 'No', while 27.5% felt the Council did provide regular updates.

One of Bridgend's current communication tools is an empty property (residential) information pack. We asked empty property owners whether they would find this resource useful, a majority, 82.5%, said 'Yes', while 17.5% said 'No'.

Among those who would find the information pack useful, 51.5% preferred to receive this information by post, 36.4% chose email and 12.1% opted to access the pack via the website.

- 2.9. To explore potential avenues for additional support, we asked empty property owners about their participation in landlord forums. The first question we asked was whether they attended a landlord forum² prior to the pandemic. The results showed that 92.5% had not attended, while only 7.5% had.

When asked whether a landlord forum should be reintroduced by Bridgend Council, the responses were mixed. While 42.5% of empty property owners expressed support for the idea, a significant portion, 55% remained unsure, and only 2.5% were opposed.

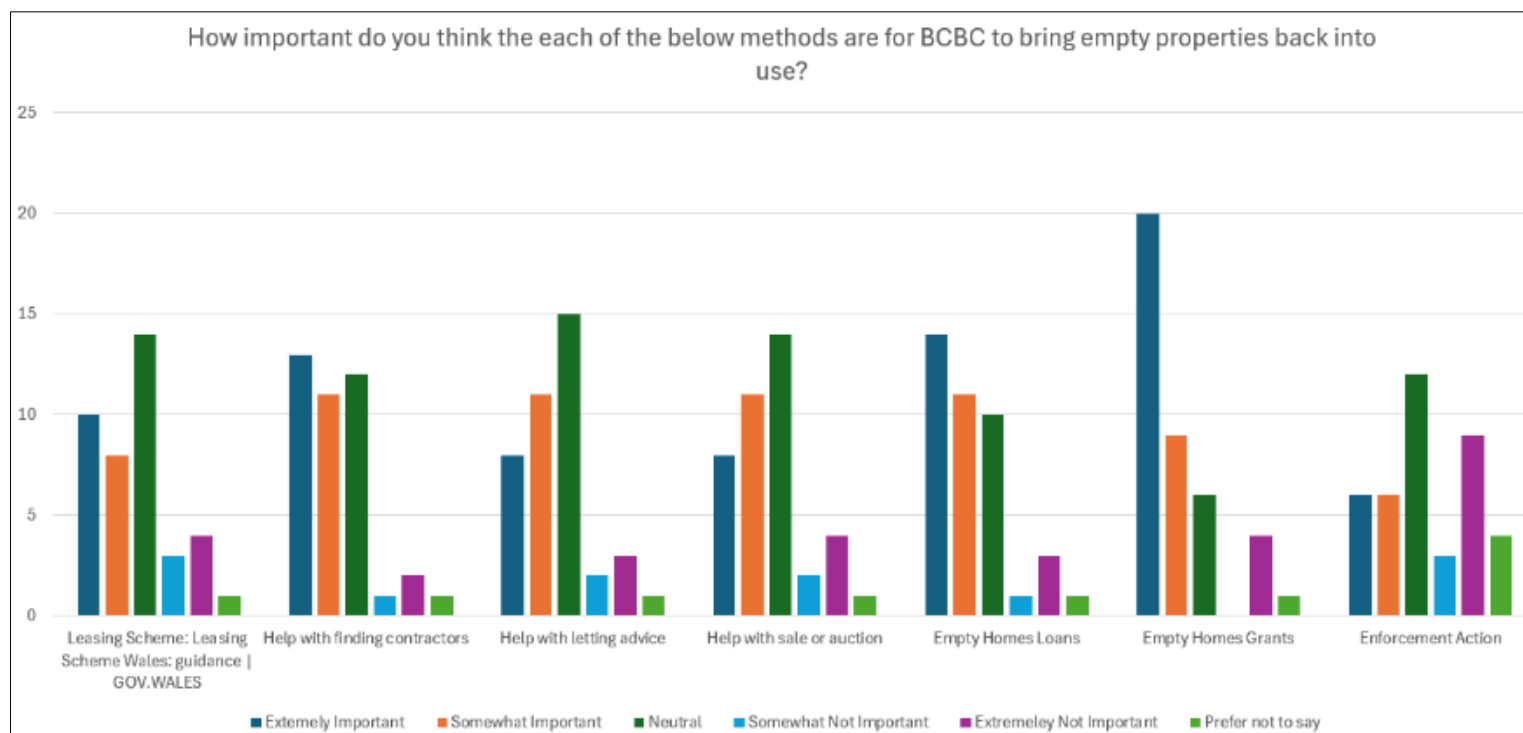


Figure 2: Empty property owners' perception on the importance of methods available to Bridgend Council to bring empty properties back into use.

² Landlord forum: An opportunity for the landlords to share thoughts, opinions, and experiences and to keep up to date with the local private rented sector scene around Bridgend.

For those who supported reintroducing the forum, we explored preferences for its frequency. Many respondents (44.4%) favoured holding the forum quarterly. Another 27.8% preferred monthly meetings while 16.7% suggested the forums should be held biannually. Meanwhile 11.1% felt an annual forum would suffice.

- 2.10. The previous empty property strategy focused on identifying and sharing success stories through the empty property webpage and social media platforms. To assess the interest in these case studies, we asked empty property owners if they would like to see more of this content. Of those who responded, only 35% expressed a desire to see more case studies, while 40% indicated they were not interested. The remaining 25% of respondents were unsure.
- 2.11. As part of assessing awareness of available support, we asked property owners if they knew, before receiving the consultation letter, that Bridgend Council provides financial assistance to help bring properties back into use. The results showed that 65% were unaware of this support, while 35% indicated they were aware.
- 2.12. To evaluate awareness of available support, we asked empty property owners if they knew that properties vacant for two years or more may qualify a reduced 5% VAT rate on renovation costs. The findings revealed that 82.5% were unaware of this benefit, while 17.5% indicated they were.
- 2.13. We asked empty property owners, whether they would consider implementing energy-efficient measures, such as an air source heat pump, when bringing a property back into use. Among the respondents, 40% said they would, 35% were unsure and 25% said they would not. However, when asked about their awareness of available financial packages for energy efficiency improvements, the majority (82.5%) were unaware, while only 17.5% were informed.
- 2.14. To determine public opinion on a collaborative approach to deliver the next empty property strategy, we asked whether they agreed that working closely with internal and external partners is necessary. Half of the respondents (50%) agreed that such collaboration is essential, while 35% were unsure and 15% disagreed.
- 2.15. Empty property owners were asked how the Council could help bring their properties back into use. The most popular approaches were for the Council to offer larger loans for repairs (21%), aid in finding contractors (19%), and 'Other' (20%) where respondents were able to input their own suggestions.

Many responses were centred around Council Tax. Some of the key comments have been highlighted below.

'Premium council tax rates should be assessed case by case not as a general rule. Although a reprieve from paying the council tax for up to 18 months is very helpful and beneficial to landlords when renovating a property. However, if repairs take longer the premium rate is debilitating to landlords and slows them

down with renovations. Especially landlords who don't own several properties and aren't builders themselves.'

'Start by listening to why the property is empty. Stop charging double council tax. Do you think this will help?'

Stop charging extra council tax - it is unfair and unhelpful to those of us trying to renovate property and bring them back to market.'

'Increase the 12 months council tax exemption to 24 months when extensive'.

'Incentivise it! What do you think would make me let an empty property? Some financial incentive or guarantee'

'Improve the speed of the planning process.'

'Meeting the owners to discuss the actual problems their having not just fining and emailing them, face to face meetings real support and help'.

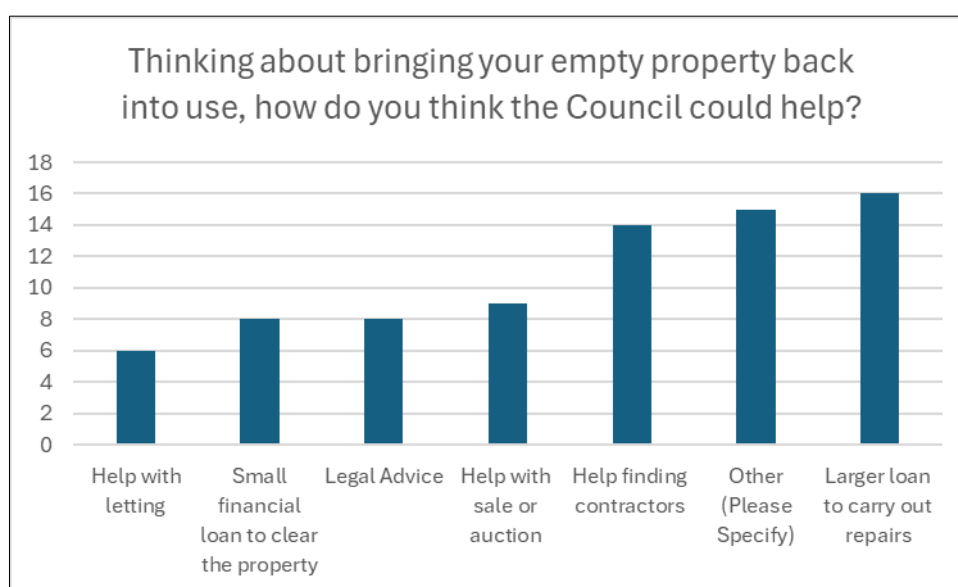


Figure 3: Empty property owners' response on how the Council can assist in bringing empty properties back into use.

- 2.16. Lastly, empty property owners were asked if they had any other suggestions on how Bridgend Council can help bring empty properties back into use.

A variety of responses were received, and they mainly related to the following themes: Council Functions, Council Tax, Enforcement Action, Housing (Local Housing Allowance), No Council Involvement, Raising Awareness/Signposting and Further Support.

A full list of the responses can be found in Appendix A.

3. Findings of the Empty Property Public Consultation

- 3.1 A total of 170 online responses and one written response were collected from the survey. The results showed that the majority, 87.1%, identified as local residents, 4.1% private landlords, 2.4% business owners, 2.4% empty property owners and 1.8% councillors. The remaining classified as 'other'.
- 3.2 We sought to understand the impact of empty homes on daily life in Bridgend. When asked if they were aware of empty homes in the borough, 66.5% of respondents answered, 'Yes' while 33.5% said 'No'.
- 3.3 As part of the previous empty property strategy, a confidential online reporting service was introduced for the public to report empty properties and related issues. To assess awareness of this service, we asked if the public knew about this platform. The results showed that the vast majority, 88.8%, of people were unaware, while only 11.2% were.

We then asked those who were aware how they had heard about the service. The majority, 48%, heard about this service through Bridgend Council's website, 26% through word of mouth, 21% from a Local Authority officer and 5% via social media.

- 3.4 Under the previous strategy to improve communication, an empty property webpage was created. To evaluate its success and effectiveness, we asked the public if they were aware of Bridgend Council's webpage for empty homes. A significant majority, 91.2%, responded that they were not aware, while only 8.8% indicated they knew about the webpage.

Among those who were aware, only 20% had used the webpage.

- 3.5 To assess public awareness of available support, we asked respondents whether they knew that Bridgend Council offers financial assistance to help bring empty properties back into use. The findings revealed that 78.2% were unaware of this support, while 21.8% indicated they were aware.

We also inquired if public was aware that properties vacant for two or more years may be eligible for a reduced VAT rate of 5% on renovation costs. The findings revealed that 90% of respondents were unaware of this benefit, while 10% indicated they were.

Additionally, we explored awareness of financial packages available for energy efficiency improvements. The results showed that the majority, 89.4%, were unaware of the incentives available, while just 10.6% were informed.

- 3.6 The previous empty property strategy focused on identifying and sharing success stories through the empty property webpage and social media platforms. To assess the interest in these case studies, we asked the public if they would like to see more of this content. Of those who responded, a majority

of 68.2%, expressed a desire to see more case studies, while 23% indicated they were not interested. The remaining 8.8% of respondents were unsure.

3.7 To determine public opinion on a collaborative approach to deliver the next empty property strategy, we asked whether they agreed that working closely with internal and external partners is necessary. The majority 79.4% agreed that such collaboration is essential, while 7.6% disagreed, and 13% were unsure.

3.8 To ensure the new strategy meets public needs and expectations, we asked the public to rate the importance of potential different methods Bridgend Council could use to help bring empty properties back into use. Respondents ranked each method on a scale from definitely agree to definitely disagree.

The most supported approach was for the Council to take enforcement action against empty property owners, with 77% of respondents deeming it as important. There was also strong support for the Council to help with lettings, sales, and auction advice. The leasing scheme received the highest neutral response, with 31% of respondents expressing now clear opinion on its importance.

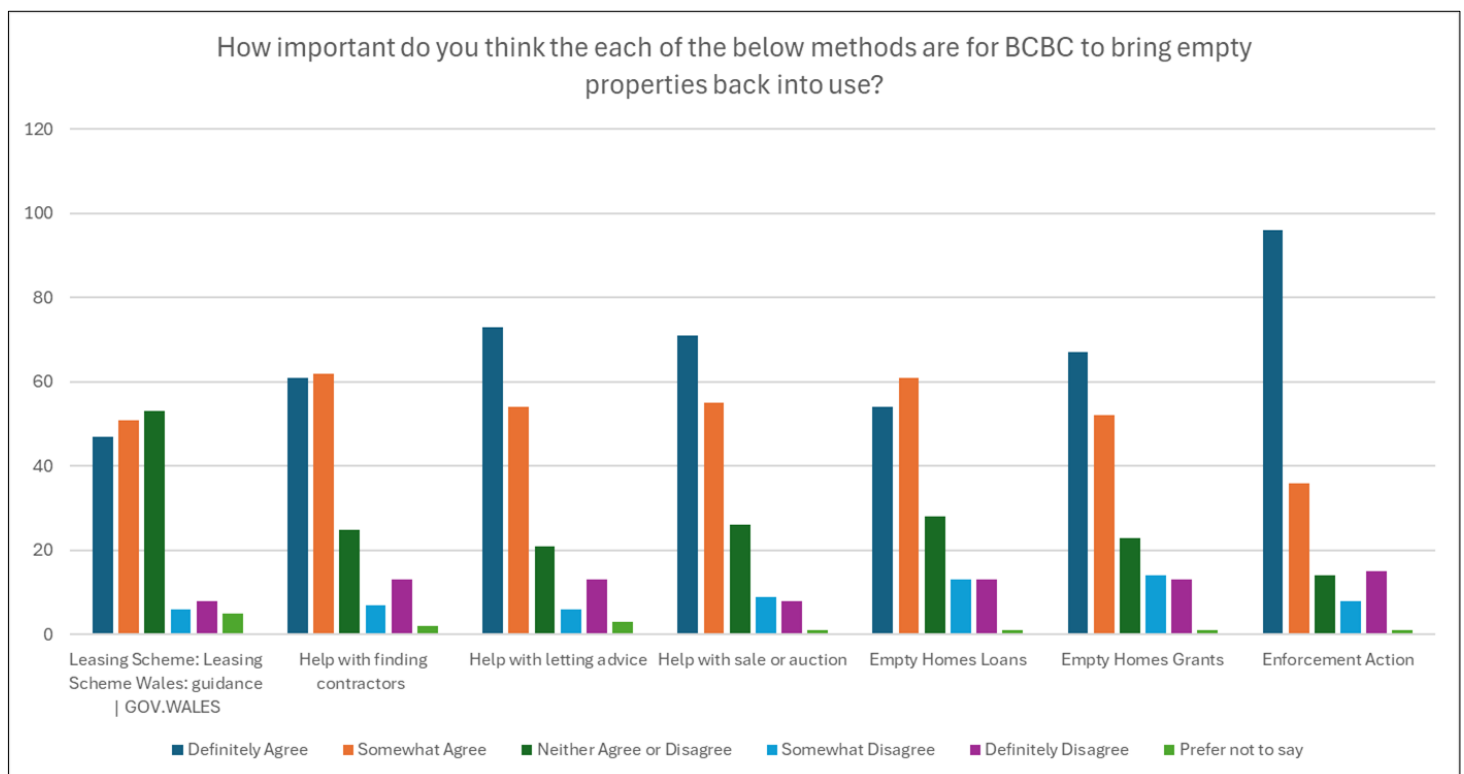


Figure 4: Public perception on the importance of methods available to Bridgend Council to bring empty properties back into use.

- 3.9 Lastly, respondents were asked if they had any other suggestions on how Bridgend Council can help bring empty properties back into use.

A variety of responses were received, and they mainly related to the following themes: Buy Back Schemes, Council Functions, Council Tax, Developer, Enforcement Action, Financial Assistance, Housing, No Council Involvement, Raising Awareness/Signposting, Training Schemes and Further Support.

Notably, some responses also addressed issues relating to Bridgend's commercial properties.

A full list of the responses can be found in Appendix A.

4. Consultation Results Combined: Key Aims

- 4.1 Both empty property owners and the public were surveyed regarding their perceptions of Bridgend Council's approach to managing empty properties. A series of four questions were posed, each receiving majority support from respondents, as outlined below.

- 86% of respondents agreed that bringing empty homes back into use should be a priority for the Council.
- 67% of respondents agreed that enforcement action should be used to bring an empty property back into use.
- 79% of respondents agreed that the Council should prioritise action on long-term empty properties over short-term empty properties.
- 76% of respondents think the Council should target its enforcement action on the most problematic of empty properties.

However, the opinions varied significantly on the issue of enforcement action. Nearly a quarter (24%) of respondents expressed disagreement with using enforcement measures to bring empty properties back into use.

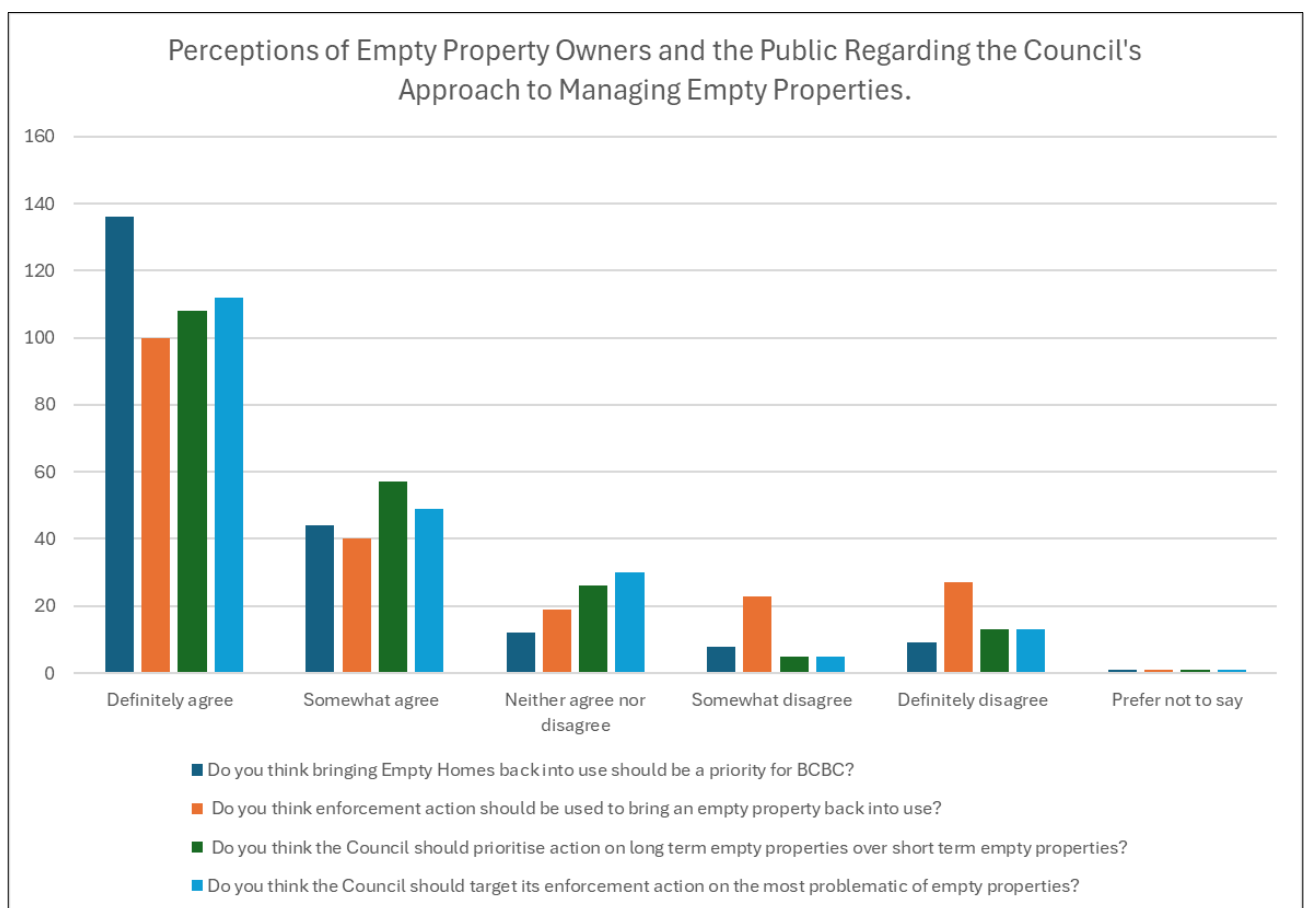


Figure 5: Consultation opinions on the Council's approach to dealing with empty properties.

4.2 Both empty property owners and the public were asked about the impact they believe empty homes have on the local community of Bridgend. A significant 91% of respondents agreed that empty properties have a negative or very negative effect.

Notably, the 2% who viewed the impact as positive or very positive were mostly empty property owners.

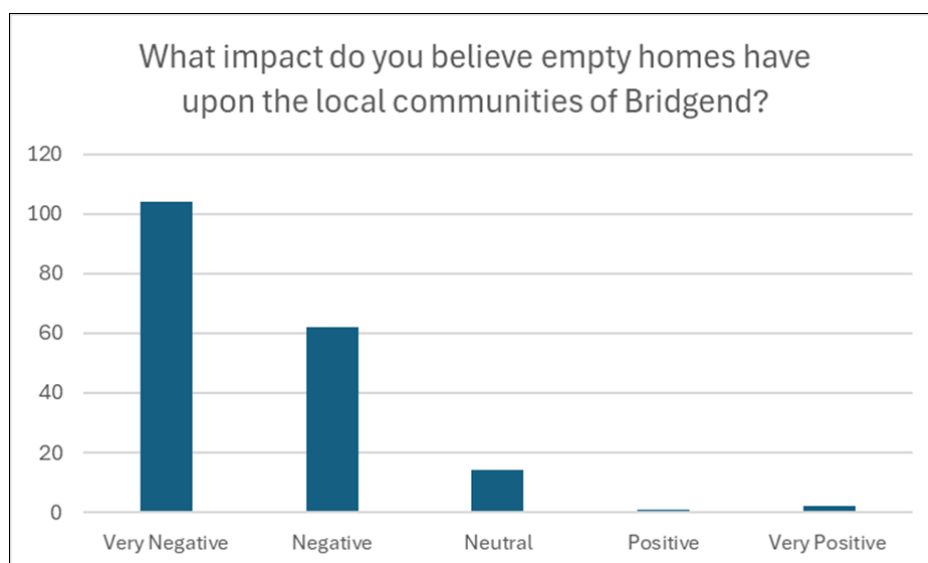


Figure 6: Consultation response to the impact of empty homes upon the community.