

HB 7  
National Assembly for Wales  
Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee  
Housing (Wales) Bill: Stage 1  
Response from: Josie Henley – Einion



24/12/13

Sarah Beasley  
Committee Clerk  
Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee  
National Assembly for Wales  
Cardiff Bay, CF99 1NA.

Dear Ms Beasley

I write with regard to the Housing (Wales) Bill and the consultation process that has been advertised on the Sennedd website.

While I am generally in support of these reforms, and welcome the proposals to increase accountability for councils in regards to homelessness, regulation of private landlords, support for travellers and co-operative housing schemes, I am concerned about the potential raising of council tax on empty properties. I work for a housing charity so I am quite informed regarding the potential benefits of these reforms, but I am writing in a personal capacity as I believe that this particular part of the reforms could affect me and people like me.

I believe that in theory it is a good idea to raise council tax on empty homes as it will discourage companies and individuals who own multiple properties as investments from seeing keeping them standing empty as a viable option. However, I think that there are some circumstances in which this could be an unfair measure.

I will give you the background of my own story which is an example of a situation which I believe many people in the current economy may be experiencing. In 2011 my then partner and myself split up and I moved out of the family home. Initially I wanted to put the house on the market for sale but due to the housing price crash it had gone into negative equity and my ex-partner persuaded me that she should stay living there with our son for his security and continuity during the upheaval of the family breakdown. I agreed to sign the house over to her but she was not able to secure a mortgage so that we could do this. She continued to live in the house and pay the mortgage and council tax herself but I remained responsible as joint owner for any payments on the house including council tax and utilities, that I would be liable for if she fell behind. During 2012 my ex-partner met someone new and decided to move in with that person, which led to the house standing empty and the decision to put it on the market. As the market is very sluggish and some work needed to be done on the house before it was fit for sale, as well as the negative equity meaning that my ex-partner tried to hold out for a good price, it is only now in the process of a sale.

This is a circumstance which I am sure quite commonly leads to houses standing empty. Other stories may be along the lines of my sister who has moved area for a better job and put her house on the market but has not yet found a buyer. Individuals who try to better themselves or move on from bad situations in these ways would be punished by this potential increase of council tax on their empty properties.

Whereas I do not want to discourage reforms, I would appreciate some form of leeway being written into this bill. For instance it could be that people would be exempt from this increase if the house is uninhabitable, if this is their only property (e.g. they are living in rented accommodation while their house is being renovated) or if their house is on the market or is in the process of a sale. I appreciate that the wording of the proposed changes give councils the power to increase council tax, which would imply that it is at their discretion, but I think that putting examples of excepted circumstances into the bill would make it clearer and would reassure people who are in the situation that I am in.

I hope that this information has been clear and I appreciate the opportunity to be part of the consultation process with these reforms. If you require any more information regarding my input, please do not hesitate to get in contact.

Yours sincerely

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