

Blaenau Gwent Private Sector Empty Homes Strategy 2024-2029

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Foreword



The Strategy voices our dedication to prevent and deal with empty homes...

Cllr Helen Cunningham, Deputy Leader of the Council / Cabinet Member Place and Environment

This strategy sets out our commitment to prevent and tackle empty homes in Blaenau Gwent. Empty homes not only attract anti-social behaviour, but also waste valuable resources when there is a growing demand for housing. This strategy shows our dedication to prevent and deal with empty homes, by helping owners to make them useful again. We also understand, however, that sometimes we need to take enforcement action to resolve some properties. Formal enforcement action is always a last option, and this document explains when and how we will do this.

This Empty Homes Strategy has been created together with a number of other housing strategies and policies that, collectively, express our vision to ensure everyone can access a safe, secure home in sustainable communities where people want to live.

1. Introduction and Overview

This strategy sets out the Council's plans to tackle the high number of empty homes in the county borough. It also sets out the range of initiatives available to the Council to help owners bring their empty homes back into use. This strategy only refers to private sector empty homes and does not extend to empty homes owned by Registered Social Landlords (RSLs).

Private sector empty homes represent a wasted resource, an ongoing financial expense, and in many cases a missed opportunity to provide much-needed affordable housing. They can also cause blight to communities and distress to residents affected by their unsightly appearance if the property has been left in a poor state of repair. They can attract vandals, squatters, unauthorised occupiers, and other crime and anti-social behaviour. They can impact on the value of neighbouring properties and incur significant costs to the Council, Police, Fire Authority, and Community Safety Partnerships dealing with the associated problems.

Extensive academic research has shown that poor quality housing is a key determinant of poor health. Tackling empty homes and bringing them up to standard will play an important role in promoting and contributing to positive health and well-being for the residents of Blaenau Gwent, a key priority of the

Council. Blaenau Gwent's Empty Property Team is committed to working with empty property owners and prospective owners to encourage them to bring their properties back into beneficial use and where possible, prevent properties from becoming empty in the first instance.

According to the BGCBC council tax data on the 1st of April 2024, the number of properties that had been empty for 6 months or more was 1023.

In response to addressing this Welsh Government priority and the high number of empty homes in the county borough, the Council accepts that it needs to provide additional staffing resources tasked with proactively working with owners of privately owned empty properties.

If an owner is uncooperative or obstructive the Council will consider using the wide range of formal enforcement action available to bring the property back into beneficial use.

Formal enforcement action is always a last resort, but the Council believes that leaving properties stand empty for long periods when there is a shortage of housing in the County Borough to meet the needs of our communities is not acceptable.

The main objective of this strategy is to maximise the number of empty homes brought back into use. Therefore, doing nothing is not an option.

2. National and Local Context

2.1 National Priorities

Welsh Government acknowledges the benefits of returning empty homes to use. In October 2019, it responded to a report from the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee on Empty Properties, 2019, committing to tackling empty properties. The Empty Property paper contained a number of recommendations. The Paper set a target of bringing 5,000 empty homes back into occupation across Wales during the fifth Assembly term. Link to Welsh Government website - [Empty Properties \(senedd.wales\)](https://www.senedd.wales).

The Council supports Welsh Government's focus on returning empty homes back into beneficial use and have developed an action plan. The action plan sets out the aims and objectives of how the Council will implement some of Welsh Government's recommendations and tackle empty properties within the Borough. The action plan supports the implementation of this strategy.

The actions set out within this strategy will assist in helping the Council achieve the goals set out in the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015. The seven key goals are as follows:

- **A Prosperous Wales:** bringing empty homes back into use will be financially beneficial to the community as a whole.
- **A Resilient Wales:** bringing empty homes back into use will help promote and support social and economic resilience.
- **A More Equal Wales:** the beneficial use of empty homes can help tackle homelessness issues and provide good quality housing for vulnerable persons.
- **A Healthier Wales:** poor quality housing is a key determinant of poor health. Improving the housing stock will have a positive effect on health and well-being.

- **A Wales of Cohesive Communities:** tackling empty homes will positively impact the community as a whole in terms of helping to reduce anti-social behaviour and improving the general amenity of an area.
- **A Wales of Vibrant Culture and Thriving Welsh Language:** tackling empty homes will assist in improving and maintaining the cultural heritage of Blaenau Gwent. The production of bilingual documentation associated with empty homes will help to promote and further the Welsh language.
- **A Globally Responsible Wales:** Whilst empty homes in Wales don't directly impact on the global scale tackling them and making use of a wasted resource will improve the area as a whole and potentially lead to investment in schemes and projects designed to make a positive contribution to global wellbeing.

The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015 also sets out 5 ways of working that should be adhered to. These are as follows:

- **Long-Term:** Housing is a long-term asset. The return to beneficial use of empty homes will have significant long-term benefits to individuals and communities, safeguarding the ability of future generations to meet their long-term needs.
- **Integration:** Empty homes negatively affect economic and social health and wellbeing so tackling this issue will help improve these key issues in a wider context. The strategy looks to integrate property and community improvements that will benefit and transform lives and communities, bringing together a variety of stakeholders to deliver long term sustainable benefits for lives and communities.
- **Involvement:** This strategy identifies how the Council will work in unison with stakeholders and members of the community to tackle empty homes and will aim to help meet the needs of specific communities.
- **Collaboration:** This strategy sets out a plan of how the Council will work with stakeholders and other bodies to achieve its aims and objectives.
- **Prevention:** This strategy aims to tackle the current issues associated with empty homes, prevent further issues from developing and make significant improvements for the benefit of the residents of Blaenau Gwent. Implementation of the strategy will result in significant visual improvements to housing and their surrounding environments (improved look and feel) helping to prevent anti-social behaviour and enviro-crime.

2.2 Local Strategic Context

The Blaenau Gwent Corporate Plan (2022/27) is a requirement of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and aligns to this legislation along with the Gwent Public Service Board (PSB) well-being plan and the eight Marmot principles. It identifies four priorities, known as well-being Objectives, which set out the direction for the Authority. Tackling Empty Properties specifically feed into the themes are 3 of the Plan priorities, namely:

- **Respond to the nature and climate crisis and enable connected communities.** Dealing with empty properties will assist in reducing carbon emissions, providing modernised energy efficient homes and supporting growth and well-being and connects communities.
- **An ambitious and innovative council delivering quality services at the right time and in the right place.** In dealing with empty properties, the Authority will work in partnership to provide high

quality services to meet local circumstances in dealing with empty properties, and improve the quality of life and well-being within the community by contributing to meeting housing need.

- **Empowering and supporting communities to be safe, independent and resilient.** Dealing with empty properties will contribute to a reduction in community safety problems. This will increase the resilience of Communities, where more people are welcome and safe, and it will minimise dependency and maximise independence.

This strategy is also consistent with the following local authority strategic and policy documents.

- Local Housing Strategy
- Local Development Plan
- Regeneration Strategy
- Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy. 2024-2029
- Public Protection and Environmental Enforcement Policy.

2.3 Local Delivery Context

The Council wants to explore a range of alternative models for empty property owners who either want to repair, privately rent or sell their property. This will include working with property owners in the private sector along with registered social landlords who may wish to purchase empties from private owners to help meet local affordable housing need.

By targeting empty homes and bringing them back into use we aim to:

- Improve the environment around the empty homes and reduce associated incidences of anti-social behaviour.
- Increase the supply of housing and the affordability of housing.
- Improve housing conditions in the private sector; and
- Assist in the promotion of the good health and wellbeing of people living in the private sector.

A detailed action plan has been developed to support the successful delivery of this strategy's priorities (Annex1).

2.4 Housing Needs within Blaenau Gwent

The Council recognises the difficulties residents face when trying to find a good quality, affordable home. There is extreme pressure on the housing market throughout the Borough from increased demand on the homelessness team, a long waiting list on the Common Housing Register, unaffordable private sector housing, and a shortage of affordable housing, especially for those most in need such as first-time buyers.

This has been exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis, changes to the asylum dispersal arrangements and the war in the Ukraine.

We know from analysing key data sources and from monitoring access to Council services that many people continue to struggle to access good quality, affordable accommodation throughout the borough. The cost of owning or privately renting a home continues to increase year on year, exacerbating the affordability issues further.

As at 1st April 2024, there were approximately 2,700 applications on the Council's Common Housing Register from people requiring social housing. There also been a significant increase in the number of people seeking homelessness assistance from the Council and requiring temporary accommodation to alleviate their situation.

Increasing the supply of accommodation in the borough by returning empty homes back into use will help the Council mitigate some of these housing pressures.

3. Understanding Empty Properties

3.1 Why Properties Become Empty

We know from supporting empty property owners that their homes may become empty for a variety of different reasons including:

- The normal process of buying, selling, and letting properties (market churn).
- A property that is difficult to rent or sell due to its physical state, requiring renovation beyond the budget of the owner.
- A property that is difficult to rent or sell due to location, poor facilities, infrastructure, etc.
- When the property has been abandoned by an untraceable owner.
- When there is an issue of unresolved ownership, often as a result of the previous owner's death. Resolving ownership can be a lengthy legal process, during which time the property may remain empty.
- Property holding, when a property is left empty due to speculative investment, through acquiring property through inheritance, or where partners co-habit leaving the second property empty. Where the property is adjoined to a business and the owner does not wish to sell or let it.
- Due to an aging population, older property owners may move into alternative older person's accommodation for care or support needs. They may choose not to sell the property which can result in it remaining empty for the short or long term.

3.2 Defining Empty Properties

A long-term empty property is defined as private sector residential properties that are liable for Council Tax and have been unoccupied for 6 months or more on the 1st of April. The definition is taken from the Data Cymru's revised set of national performance measures. See below.

3.3 Monitoring Performance

Information collected by Data Cymru in relation to the above pi's is very important to enable local authorities to give an account of their performance to the public. The Council's performance regarding empty homes is currently measured using two parameters:

- **EMH001 - the percentage of empty private properties brought back into use during the year through direct action by the local authority.** This is defined as an empty property that is liable for Council Tax, which has been unoccupied for a period of 6 months or more.

- **EMH002 - the percentage of empty private properties brought back into use during the year through direct action by the local authority.** This is defined as an empty property that is liable for Council Tax, which has been unoccupied for a period of 12 months or more.

It is important to also recognise the value in providing additional dwellings through conversion has on increasing the housing stock within Blaenau Gwent. As such, the Authority will continue to measure:

- **BG-EMH (PAM45)** - the number of additional dwellings created in a year where properties are converted/sub-divided into additional dwellings to bring them back into use as a result of local authority action.

3.4 Problematic Empty Properties that are out of Valuation.

Some empty properties can have their Council Tax band deleted by the Valuation Office Agency under certain circumstances i.e. where a property is truly derelict or under major renovation (visit [Council Tax: renovations and repairs – Valuation Office Agency](#)). Such properties are not included in the Council Tax service's empty property data set (see Section 6.4, below). Such properties will be dealt with by Officers as they arise, in accordance with risk and the Authority's enforcement policy, with a view to bringing them back into use and valuation for Council tax purposes.

3.5 Increasing Supply

Increasing housing supply is a key priority of the Council. This not only includes bringing an existing property back into use as a home but also maximising the potential of the property in providing additional homes. Empty Property Officers will offer support and work with other relevant departments such as regeneration, planning and building control to support the residential element of any mixed-use development or any change of use from commercial to residential to provide additional homes.

3.6 Challenges with Bringing Empty Properties Back To Use

There are many challenges involved with bringing empty homes back into use Including:

- Being unable to cover the cost of making the property habitable or saleable.
- Inheriting the property but the new owner not having the resources, time, or motivation to deal with it.
- Property is up for sale or being repaired.
- Inherited the property but have not decided what to do with it.
- Some empty properties are left completely abandoned by the owner. These properties will remain empty until the authority intervenes.

Tackling empty properties can be extremely resource intensive. Although there may be some quick wins, through building rapport, reputation and momentum in offering incentives and taking meaningful enforcement action. However, some difficult cases can take several years to resolve.

4. Bringing Empty Properties Back Into Use

4.1 Empty Property Action Plan

The overall aim of the Empty Property Action Plan (Annex 1) is to maximise the return to beneficial use of empty properties within Blaenau Gwent thereby increasing the number of homes available to both rent and own, improving the built environment, decreasing the number of both vacant and underutilised sites as well as supporting diversification of town centres.

The Empty Property Action Plan identifies key actions required to meet the 3 objectives to achieve the Council's aim:

Objective 1: Promote, educate and support empty property owners and prospective purchasers/ developers.

Objective 2: Prioritisation and targeted approach in addressing empty properties.

Objective 3: Take appropriate enforcement action to effectively deal with empty properties.

4.2 Empty Property Officers - Environmental Health

Having specialist officers focusing on bringing empty properties back into use is an essential aspect of achieving the Action Plan's ambitious aim and meet the Council's priorities, as outlined in section 1.

The benefits of specialist officers include:

- Maximisation of the return of empty properties back into beneficial use thereby increasing the supply and quality of accommodation within the borough.
- Dedicated staff resources to progress empty homes work programme - including both proactive and reactive work.
- Increasing opportunities to address unmet housing need, including homelessness and demand.
- Addressing the strategic objectives identified in the Council's Local Housing Strategy and other strategic documents as they relate to empty properties.
- Delivering financial support to empty homeowners in accordance with the Authority's Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy, in relation to local grants/ loans as well as national products, such as the Valleys Taskforce (VTF) - links to supporting employment regarding contractors etc.
- Delivering on Welsh Government's 5 year Empty Property Enforcement Agenda.
- Financial benefit to the authority in recovering existing debt already owed through unpaid council taxes, social service intervention and/or works in default.
- Ensuring Council Tax/rates are payable for the property going forward.
- Assisting council tax department to keep accurate data and find liable persons ensuring they maximise their revenue.
- Assisting other departments with empty property engagement and finding ownership details, carry out works in default and ensure a long-term solution to avoid the need for their long-term involvement.
- Helping economic growth of an area by increasing population spending in local shops, attending education and as such helping regenerate areas.

- Reducing waste of resources and cost to the authority when officers from various departments attending site to deal with antisocial behaviours and problematic empties.
- Improving community cohesion, and general visual amenity.
- Co-production, co-ordination and joint implementation of strategies and initiatives, with internal and external partners, for the return to beneficial use of empty homes and non-residential properties.
- Development of relevant partnerships and initiatives to enable sustainable solutions for empty property owners, including working proactively with internal departments such as Council Tax, Legal and Planning as well as external organisations such as the Police and Registered Social landlords working closely with regeneration officers to enable empty residential and non-residential properties to be brought back into use, as part of strategic town centre improvements and for other key regeneration initiatives.
- Full utilisation of grant and loan funding streams. Maximising financial investment opportunities in the Borough.
- Provision of centralised support, advice, and assistance to anyone involved with empty properties.

5. Promote and Educate Empty Home Owners and Stakeholders

5.1 Maximise Every Opportunity for Support

Providing initiatives that offer empty homeowners various options to bring their properties back into use is vital. Officers will work closely and assist where necessary to ensure every initiative and funding opportunity provided by Welsh Government, the Council and third-party organisations is maximised. The team will also signpost owners effectively to access any funding or opportunities available or assist them if they wish to sell their empty properties.

5.2 Proactive Engagement

It is vitally important that the empty property officers work with owners and stakeholders providing as much help, assistance, and education as possible to encourage owners to bring their properties back into use informally. Officers will continue to develop strong branding to promote their works in bringing empty back into use, which will be used to promote the service and encourage owners to engage.

Other actions to be undertaken by the Council to help increase the number of empty homes returned to use include:

- Review and Relaunch the Authority's Empty Property Information Pack to inform and support empty property owners.
- Review and Re-launch the dedicated pages on the Council's Websites.
- Officers will regularly present at Landlord forum meetings to keep landlords updated.
- Social media campaigns to promote Empty Property work to raise awareness around empty properties.
- Engage with stakeholders including local estate agents and auction houses property investors and landlords.
- Collaborative working with other council departments.
- Technical support and advice to landlords.
- Partnership working with key stakeholders.

- Working with Registered Social Landlords (RSLs).

5.3 Incentivising Owners

The Council's Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy provides details of all the forms of financial assistance available locally (subject to funding sources being available). This includes support for empty property owners, as follows:

- Loans to Let (maximum £35,000 per unit of accommodation)
- Loans to Sell – max £35,000 per unit
- Owner Occupier Loans – Max £35,000
- National (Valley's Task Force) Empty Homes Grants (Owner-Occupiers) – Max £25,000 per unit
- Private Sector Leasing Scheme – Grants available for renovating properties where landlords agree to lease their properties back to the Council for affordable (social) housing lettings (subject to conditions).

Officers will also actively seek to maximise innovative financial and other solutions in partnership with other stakeholders, for example with Regeneration colleagues, in relation to town centre mixed-use (commercial/residential), Housing Associations and others, to help owners with repairing and bringing empty properties back into use.

6. Prioritisation and Targeted Approach To Tackling Empty Properties

6.1 Evidence Based Approach

Officers will use Council Tax data to identify properties that have been vacant for 6 months or more from the 1st of April each year. The data is cleansed to remove the properties that are exempt under the Data Cymru performance indicator definition. Using the list ensures a strategic approach to the targeting of empty homes for intervention.

6.2 Effective Use of Resources

A two-pronged approach is used by Officers to ensure the most effective use of resources:

1. Support and encourage recently empty homes back into use, preventing them from becoming problematic empty properties:

- Properties that are recently empty, less than 24 months.

2. Tackle problematic empty properties:

- Properties that have been empty the longest: 10 years +, 5-10 years, and 2-5 years.
- Properties that are problematic and subject to complaints.
- Properties with the largest debt owing to the authority including works in default debt and council tax debt.
- Properties without ownership details under council tax.
- Properties that are subject to escheat (ownerless) in conjunction with the Crown solicitors

- The Council is mindful of fluctuations in the housing market and the need for the prioritisation criteria to be flexible to adapt over the life of the strategy to address changes in priorities, local needs, and Welsh Government financial products.

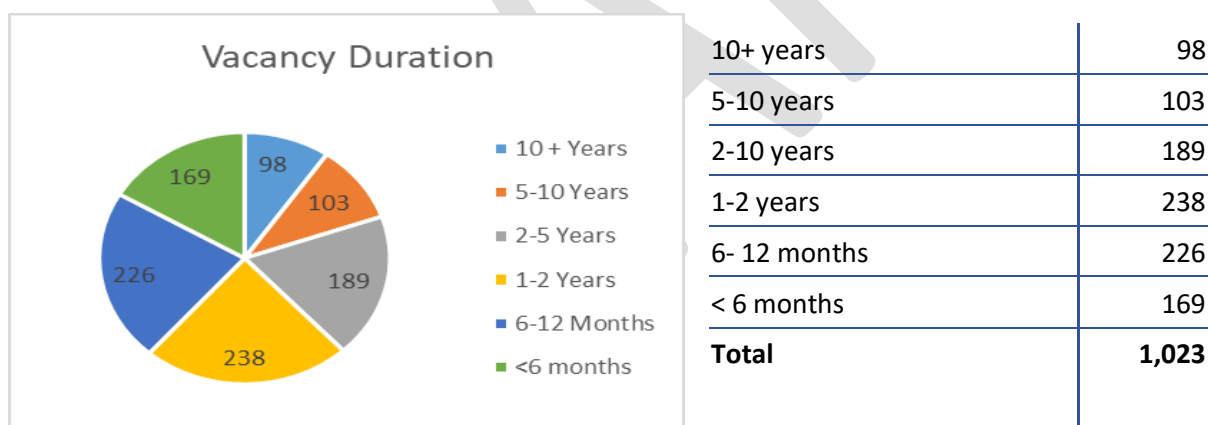
6.3 Mapping Empty Properties

Going forward the empty homes data will be ‘GPS mapped’ making it easier to identify patterns/trends or concentrated areas where more empty properties may be situated. Mapping will allow the team to analyse this data to further develop the prioritisation system.

6.4 Current Breakdown of Empty Homes Within Blaenau Gwent

Understanding the empty home data is vital when deciding the prioritisation criteria for targeting properties. As shown below over half of our empties have been empty for 2 years or less. Therefore, it is vital that these are considered swiftly to establish whether they are being actively addressed through the market and to prevent them from becoming long-term, problematic empties. Some properties within the 10+ year category have been empty for several decades. It is very unlikely that these empty properties will be returned to use without intervention from the Council and will therefore likely require enforcement action.

Number Of Years an Empty Home Has Been Empty



(Blaenau Gwent council tax data April 2024)

N.B Empty property council tax data includes dwellings entitled to statutory exemptions

6.5 Empty Property Complaints

The Council must encourage the community and neighbours of empty homes to report any concerns or problems any empty home is causing. The aim is to make it easy to report concerns using a ‘complaint about empties’ enquiry form on the dedicated website that will be created.

In addition to receiving direct complaints, the empty property officers will carry out joint investigations with other Specialist Environmental Health colleagues to investigate complaints from neighbours of empty homes who are experiencing issues such as dampness, mould, defecting guttering, or

overgrown gardens. Officers will also offer support to other departments dealing with an empty property, such as Building Control. When investigating a complaint, Officers will not only address the immediate issue subject to the complaint, but also use the service request as an opportunity to engage with the owners to find a long-term solution to bring the property back into use. Any owners unwilling to work informally to resolve issues will be subject to enforcement action where applicable.

7. A Two-Pronged Approach to Tackling Empty Homes

7.1 Preventing Properties from Becoming Problematic Empty Homes

Over half of the empty homes within Blaenau Gwent have been empty for less than 24 months. Empty property team officers recognise the benefit of early intervention to support and encourage owners of properties that have only recently become empty. This will help ensure the property is not left to deteriorate, becoming a problematic empty. The owners of these properties will be contacted by Officers giving them the advice pack and asking them to contact us to confirm their intentions in bringing the property back into use. Officers will take the opportunity to discuss the support and options available to help the owner. Where appropriate, Officers will also agree a reasonable timeframe with the owner for action to be taken.

7.2 Tackling Problematic Empty Properties

It is important to recognise that taking enforcement action is very time-consuming and will require significant resourcing. Therefore, it is important to choose the most problematic properties to take forward for formal action such as enforcement. This will be done by carrying out a risk assessment of all priority properties.

7.3 Risk Assessments

A Risk Assessment Inspection approach has been developed to prioritise which properties are escalated for enforcement consideration. Properties will be assessed against their complaint/enforcement history, current conditions and appearance, anti-social/community impact, length of time vacant etc. The risk assessment will provide a scoring of high, medium, and low. The highest priority empty homes will be proactively addressed initially. Local Housing Need may also be a factor in deciding whether to act. All properties that have scored high will be considered for enforcement action. It is important to recognise that due to the complexity of taking enforcement action the numbers will be low.

7.4 Initial Engagement

In the first instance, the empty homeowner will be approached and offered advice, encouragement, support, and education on ways to bring their properties back into use. However, this strategy is clear that 'doing nothing is not an option'.

Where owners refuse to cooperate or cannot be traced, the Council will consider the most appropriate enforcement powers available (Annex 2). This may include the use of powers to carry out works in default and recover the debt.

7.5 Tracing Owners

One of the main problems encountered when dealing with empty properties is property ownership. In cases where the property owner cannot be traced there are various options available to attempt to trace the owner for example:

- Checking various data sources such as Council Tax data, Land Registry search and Probate search.
- Engaging with neighbours, councillors, the local community and other stakeholders
- Placing posters on the empty property and/or utilising social media asking for contact to be made.

Officers will carry out all reasonable enquires to trace the owner or the person responsible for the property such as the next of kin. However, when the owner is untraceable all correspondence will be attached to the empty property.

8. Potential Legal Remedies

8.1 Deciding on The Best Course Of Action

When deciding to formally act to deal with an empty home, it is important to consider the wider context of bringing the property back into use and the mechanisms in place to recover the debt.

Certain legislation is more appropriate when considering enforced sales proceedings under the Law of Property Act 1925. Details of the Enforcement Action available is listed in Annex 2.

Some high-priority empty homes are in poor repair but may have an owner that ensures the property does not cause ongoing public health issues or pays off any small to medium debt register against the property. This type of situation makes it very difficult to find a long-term solution. It's important that this doesn't discourage the Council from dealing proactively with this type of property, but the risk of challenge and complexity involved should be acknowledged. If the owner is unwilling to engage or is untraceable, a legal warrant might be required to facilitate a housing inspection and to allow access for works in default if permitted via the legislation.

End

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Mae'r dogfen hon ar gael yn Gymraeg

This document is available in Welsh