

PEOPLE'S NEWSROOM

THE SECOND HOME CONUNDRUM

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Could an appeal to morality be part of the solution to the holiday house crisis in rural communities?

Imagine that you live in a large city. You believe that you are a good person. You have a job which pays your bills and feeds your family. One day, your grandmother dies. She leaves you a small flat in Kensington. It's worth a million pounds.

In the newspaper there's a supplement about houses for sale in small villages. There's also an article in the financial section about the wisdom of investing in property. So you sell grandma's flat and you look around for a second house in the country.

You fall in love with a place, a three-bedroom semi in a quaint little village whose name you have trouble pronouncing. It's perfect, but work keeps you in the city most weeks, and winter is so grey in the countryside.

Now Imagine you are a young person. You live with your parents in a small village in the countryside. You and your partner want to have a baby. It seems logical to find a home together. You've been born and raised among people whose culture you are part of, and whose language you speak. Your people. Imagine that the price of houses in the village is ten times higher than when your parents bought their little three-bedroom semi back in the 1970s. But wages in the area haven't really risen in real terms since then. You and your partner can't possibly afford a house, so you migrate to a large city, and you find a job which pays your bills and feeds your family.

Now imagine you are an old person. Let's say you're the grandparent of that young person who moved away. When you were younger you knew everyone in the village. You knew who you could trust and who you couldn't and who would notice if your daily routine changed, and if they didn't see you for a while, who would come and look for you. One day you have a fall. It's nothing serious, except you can't get up. It's cold there on the floor, but someone will come along, sooner or later.

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If you're feeling guilty while you read this, remember: it's not your fault. It's the system. You were encouraged to buy that little place in the country. You were given sound financial advice. You didn't know any better.

Or did you? Was it an act of inadvertent selfishness, or are you fundamentally immoral?

The very thought of it makes me feel weird. So I call up a friend who owns a holiday property in North Wales, who also happens to be a doctor of psychology. She didn't want to be named so we'll call her Jenny. I ask Jenny if she's fundamentally immoral.

'I don't think I'm immoral,' she tells me. 'I bought a house miles from any village which had been on the market for years and I had the money to do it up. I honestly don't think that many people would want to live there.' She now rents that house out on Airbnb.

I ask her if she'd still buy an investment property in Wales now that she's spent some time here and heard people's stories of empty villages and housing shortages. 'I'd still buy this house, but homes have got to be more important than holiday houses,' she replies, quite vehemently, 'because without the people all you've got is a fake national park'.

In June 2021, a campaign was started in one of the worst affected areas of North Wales, Pen Llyn, by a group called Hawl i Fyw Adra (The Right to Live At Home). Moved by the sheer number of houses being bought for holiday use and the lack of protection for local people, their main demands seem reasonable enough:

The right to live where you grew up and the right for your community to continue.

Their spokesperson said: Our intention is to win sympathy, compassion and cooperation from people from all walks of life. We stress that the National and Local Governments have the power to resolve the situation. We call on them to regulate second homes and the housing market to protect our identity and culture for future generations.'

Earlier this year, Hawl i Fyw Adra made an emotional appeal against second homes, one person wrote it on the beach in a small village where 70% of the houses are holiday lets and it went viral in Wales.

'The second homes situation in communities across Wales is at crisis point,' Mabon Ap Gwynfor, MS for Dwyfor Meirionnydd said. 'The overuse of properties as second homes in communities across Wales is driving local people out of the property market, putting unacceptable pressures on local services in peak season, and creating desolate, half-empty towns and villages in winter.'



Blaeunau Ffestiniog. Credit: Andrew Sterry

Nearly everyone agrees that something must be done.

In September this year, in response to a multitude of political demonstrations and campaigns like Hawl i Fyw Adra's, the Welsh Government announced that they will close the 'loophole' which allows some holiday house owners to pay business rates rather than council tax, and give local councils the right to levy up to 300% additional tax on holiday houses, as of April 2023.

With money already collected from the existing 100% extra council tax scheme, Gwynedd Council have launched their 'Homebuy Scheme', a financial aid package aimed at helping local people buy their first home. They have also announced changes 'covering planning law and the introduction of a statutory registration scheme for holiday accommodation'.

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These solutions seem reasonable in the light of the severity of the housing and language crises, but are our options limited to higher taxation and changes to legislation?

Perhaps some of the extra tax revenue from the holiday property levy could be used to launch a compassionate and honest PR campaign aimed at winning the hearts and minds of

potential holiday house owners. A simple sharing of truth between the people affected and those that are accelerating the effect, so that at least everyone can understand what's going on and make an informed decision.

A similar appeal to people's sense of morality and fairness has recently been made in Cornwall, where a Crowdfunder campaign has been launched to ask holiday house owners to donate their £400 energy rebate, which the UK government is issuing this winter, to help poorer people deal with the cost of living crisis. They aim to raise £5.4 million.

Their success or failure to appeal to the consciences of multiple property owners could be a good indication of whether such a campaign would work elsewhere.

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