



18<sup>th</sup> February 2009

The latest selection of news of interest to Empty Property Practitioners. If you want a news item published here or on the website please contact [news@naepp.org.uk](mailto:news@naepp.org.uk). If you are not a member of NAEPP and want to join, please create an account by [registering](#) on our website at [www.naepp.org.uk](http://www.naepp.org.uk)

## BVPI 64 - where next for Empty Homes Stats?

As reported in our last newsletter, CLG neatly managed to sidetrack any attempt to ensure consistent reporting of local authority empty homes work. They did this by removing the requirement to report BVPI64 from the Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix form a year early. So it was no longer on the 2007-08 HSSA form that was used as the basis for the consultation exercise on housing statistical returns in the autumn, even though local authorities still had to report on BVPI64 in 2007-08. **Only BVPI64 was singled out in this way, from among the other PIs that were being dropped when the NIs came in.**

Had CLG not taken this step, they would have had to carry out meaningful consultation on the appropriate monitoring and reporting of local authority empty homes work. Instead, the issue became invisible.

However, empty homes practitioners up and down the country have not lost sight of the need for documenting their important work; and most have been keen to ensure a degree of consistency by continuing to rely on the NAEPP *Guidelines* to determine what interventions do and don't count as success.

### IPF to the rescue?

Quite unexpectedly the Institute of Public Finance picked up on the issue of reporting activity on empty properties and wrote to NAEPP in December asking for clarification of our position. But the IPF had already decided off their own bat "*It was agreed necessary that BV64 should still be collected*"

You can read the IPF email to NAEPP and our response at on the website at:

<http://naepp5.planetdrupal.ca/node/468>

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### Website Discussion

Meanwhile, Amanda Thomas of South Gloucestershire has started website discussions on different aspects of BVPI64 or its replacement including for example how we deal with unsold new-build properties. Again, you'll need to login to the site to read the exchanges - but your input will be very welcome.

### Turning a Threat into an Opportunity

But the discussion about a successor to BVPI64 needs to move on and become a bit more focused. There is too much agonising about what should or should not be included or whether the threshold should be 6 months or a year or two years.

**The end of BVPI64 can also mean an end to mindless target setting and meaningless statistics.** The many facets of empty homes work are all valuable - but not truly comparable. Collecting demolitions, conversions and re-occupation all within one figure was always an absurdity.

**So we must take this opportunity to argue for empty homes reporting that reflects the diversity of what we do,** for reintroduction into the HSSA return. Such reporting should be no less refined than reporting on, say, homelessness activities in P1e returns. We can segregate demolitions from conversions from re-occupation. We can report on properties re-occupied within 6 months of becoming empty separately from those re-occupied after 6 months. Figures such as these can be aggregated if it's desirable to have an overall figure but the opportunity to look deeper will always be there.

Meanwhile, targets can be set locally to reflect local conditions.

More detailed proposals be discussed at the Exec on the 23rd Feb, so any comments will be gratefully be received.

## How many empty homes are there?

In our last *Newsletter*, we registered shock, horror, disbelief etc, that apparently the CLG is reporting CTB (Council Tax figures) to Parliament as the number of empties, not the figures from the HSSA returns. Our reaction was based on the fact that this would involve discounting all furnished empties as second homes, thus understating the number of empty properties to a significant degree.

We have subsequently learned, through the Empty Homes Agency, that the number of empty properties has not gone down as a result of this change. Does this mean that our fears about under-reporting were unfounded? No - it means that historically some local authorities have been deliberately understating the number of empties in their areas.

In conversation, a well-placed source at the Empty Homes Agency described how he challenged one local authority about the suspiciously low number of empties being reported on its HSSA, to be told that they simply halved the figure being provided by their Council Tax department. Hmmmm. Nice one. Why didn't we all do that?

Trying to discover the "official" number of empty properties is not actually very straightforward. The EHA has compiled tables from HSSA returns but CLG figures are not very apparent on the Housing website, despite numbers frequently being bandied around in the press. In fact, considering the degree of public interest the difficulty in accessing figures is disappointing.

Taking into account

- the issue around counting of second homes as described above;
- the many unsold and empty newbuild properties that may not yet be registered as completed (to save developers paying council tax); and
- the inherent under-reporting in Council tax data if figures are collected at "today's date"

the EHA's view that there might already be over 1 million empties could well be true.

Meanwhile, at the very least, figures for empty homes should be easily available to the public on the CLG website and the methodology for collecting them made clear.

## The *Inside Housing* "Empty Promise" campaign

It was a pleasant surprise to find *Inside Housing* taking up the cudgels on empty homes. Launched with a full front page spread on 30<sup>th</sup> January, the campaign looks set to re-invigorate the issue and will be welcomed by all empty homes practitioners.

And particularly welcome is the recognition that local authorities and housing providers are central to achieving success:

*"Of course it's the councils and housing providers which are left to tackle the consequences. Which is why it's time they had more help".*

The campaign focuses on three demands:

- cut VAT to 5% on refurb/renovation
- more grant for purchase and repair
- clearer guidance on EDMOs

Without wishing to look a gift horse in the mouth, there is one area where the *Inside Housing* campaign has not quite grasped the nettle and this is best illustrated by looking at the Empty Homes Agency's response, which adds an additional "demand":

- give councils proper rewards for getting homes back into use through the Housing and Planning Delivery Grant mechanism

Empty homes practitioners, their jobs consistently under threat, their toolboxes often emptied as resources go elsewhere, their commitment frequently undermined by being diverted into other areas of work, will welcome the EHA's recognition that "guidance" is not enough - **local authority initiatives need adequate funding.**

Whether HPDG is the best mechanism is open to question. What is clear, however, is that the government allocated a huge amount of money to HPDG and a very small proportion of that would make a significant difference to the robustness of local Empty Homes Initiatives.

NAEPP's response to HPDG was to request that **money be top-sliced from the HPDG to provide match-funding to Local Authorities for Empty Homes Initiatives.** We believe that remains the best way to support local initiatives.

We welcome the *Inside Housing* campaign and we will work to support and refine it.

## National Conference and AGM 2009

Yes it's time for our biennial Annual(!) Conference. The last one seems to have been greatly valued by those who came and we're confident we can make this year's even better.

At the moment we seem to be facing a lot of competition from the likes of Capita (and probably soon the CIH, given the new *Inside Housing* campaign on Empty Homes - see next column). We welcome the opportunities these other events bring but our commitment will always be to provide a **practitioner-focused event at a price that practitioners can actually afford** - which cannot be said for all the alternatives. And we of course provide discounts to NAEPP Corporate Members.

We need **YOU** to tell us how to make this year's event even better than previous years' efforts. That's what a practitioner organisation is all about. We'll email out some basic questions shortly, but just to get you thinking here are some of the key items to be considered:

- location - is Birmingham best?
- duration - is one day enough or can we go residential and make it a two-day event?
- what are the key issues to be addressed?
- format - what works best: the balance between plenary and breakout sessions
- "training" - how far can a conference be a training event?
- networking - how important are networking opportunities in the format
- low demand versus high demand - how do we keep it relevant

## Invoices for 2008-09 - please pay promptly

Corporate Members will have received invoices for 2008-09. We would greatly appreciate your co-operation in getting these paid. Your fees are the **ONLY** source of income. Regrettably, chasing up invoices, filling out Supplier Forms and BACS forms, trying to extract Purchase Order numbers, dealing with the inevitable "she left 2 years ago" responses etc takes a disproportionate amount of time, diverting energy from more important things. Who'd be a small supplier to local authorities? **So please do what you can to help.**

## A new name for NAEPP - coming soon?

You'll recall that there was a widely-held view that NAEPP might benefit from a name change. We invited suggestions and the names were discussed at the last Exec meeting in July. The full list of suggested names is being put on the website.

There was a lively discussion at the Exec meeting which focused mainly on:

- the importance of the word "National"
- the relative merits of the words "Homes" and "Properties"
- the merits of "Network" versus "Forum" versus "Association"
- the importance of "Practitioners" to distinguish us from other people with a stake in empty homes work

The discussion was accompanied by interesting sound effects as those present attempted to see what the abbreviated names would sound like.

This produced a short-list which can now be exclusively revealed to you:

- the National Empty Homes Network
- the National Empty Homes Practitioner Network
- the National Network of Empty Homes Practitioners

The discussion also revealed strong continuing support for retaining the existing name both because it accurately sums up what we are about and also for practical reasons around costs and time etc in changing bank accounts, logos, website names. As a small organisation with limited resources, we had to ask do we really need the aggravation? So retaining the name is also on the table as a serious option.

We'll email out the short-list for your views and any final decision would have to be taken at the forthcoming AGM/National Conference.

## Logging on to the website - ask if you get stuck

We get quite a few messages from people who have forgotten their login or password. It's **normal**. Don't be ashamed to ask if you can't remember... email [admin@naepp.org.uk](mailto:admin@naepp.org.uk) or let the site send you a new password.