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National holiday to mark BVPI64 replacement

Prime Minister Gordon Brown today announced a day of national rejoicing, including a giant firework display in London's Hyde Park, to mark the launch of NAEPP's replacement for Best Value Performance Indicator 64.

Well, actually, he didn't - but he should have done. The consultation draft of the new proposals, now entitled *Guidelines for Monitoring Empty Homes Interventions: A Standard Approach for Local Authorities*, was launched on NAEPP's web-site at www.naepp.org.uk on Friday.

As there is currently no official framework for measuring local authority empty homes successes NAEPP's proposals effectively replace not just the old NAEPP Guidelines but BVPI64 itself. We will be lobbying the government to incorporate the proposed monitoring framework into the Housing Strategy Statistical Annex. And obviously all local authorities are encouraged to adopt it the reporting categories and criteria it contains.

Spreadsheet included

The document has been launched both in a summary form and in a fuller version that provides explanation and rationale. An accompanying MS Excel spreadsheet demonstrates what the monitoring framework looks like in practice. Full members of NAEPP can also download a version capable of automatically populating the summary page from detailed records for individual properties.

Key changes

Consultation with NAEPP members earlier in the year had thrown up many interesting ideas. Released from the constraints of a single performance indicator, the Executive meeting on February 23rd was able to reach agreement on more refined proposals that now adequately recognise the breadth of empty homes work and the range of different outcomes involved.

Profiling what we do

The *Guidelines* propose that local authorities break down their successes as follows:

- re-occupation of homes empty < 6 months
- re-occupation of homes empty 6-24 months
- re-occupation of homes empty > 24 months
- occupation of new home empty > 6 months
- additional homes created through conversion
- demolitions

What can be counted

The issues around defining “successful interventions” mean the *Guidelines* remain longer than we'd like. But much of the text has been re-drafted to make it as precise as possible and short-circuit cunning (and now somewhat pointless) attempts by local authorities to boost figures inappropriately. This is vital if empty homes monitoring is to protect its credibility and achieve reintroduction into the HSSA.

The criteria themselves are mostly unaltered. Probably the most significant change is that only the initial letting counts where re-occupation is via a rent-and-deposit scheme. Hopefully, this change, tighter wording, and banding by length-of-time empty will finally put to bed any controversy about counting successes “inappropriately”.

New Issues Addressed

Elsewhere, more attention is given to issues not previously dealt with eg “unreasonable delay” prior to re-occupation, which could prevent a success being claimed; and the role of arms-length intervention through partners. And more prominence is given to threats of enforcement, allowing success to be inferred if certain criteria are met.

MEMBERS' VIEWS COUNT

The draft will be presented for final amendment at the Executive Meeting on the 10th June. If members have any comments please supply them NOW.

National Empty Homes Action Plan latest news

The drafting of NAEPP proposals for a national empty homes action plan has taken centre stage since our last proper Newsletter (and explains why you've had to wait so long for this one). Thanks to the many different people who contributed their thoughts - they're listed at the end of the plan.

The document went through quite a lot of changes as it was developed. The current version on the website can be considered stable and we strongly recommend that you print off this final version if you have not already done so.

Minister to respond shortly

The key step in promoting the proposals so far has been to send them to Margaret Beckett and Iain Wright (the ministers with direct responsibility for housing and empty homes). We wanted to give the government a chance to get behind the plan before starting widespread lobbying - in the hope that we would be pleasantly surprised to find such lobbying was unnecessary.

An email from Wendy Armstrong at CLG on Tuesday 12th said "you should get a response from the Minister shortly".

40 points: one Big Idea

Whilst there are 40 points in the plan, one is by far the most important, one that would improve the landscape of empty homes work dramatically: the proposal for the government to involve itself directly in delivery. This proposal for the government to set up an Empty Homes Unit to lead a national empty homes initiative will be the focus of any NAEPP lobbying. (We asked *Inside Housing* to add it as a fourth demand to their recent *Empty Promise* campaign).

This is not pie-in-the-sky: it is eminently practical and affordable. The government has already done something similar with the Rough Sleepers Unit and the Bed and Breakfast Unit - which is why we asked Ashley Horsey, once Chief Executive of the Empty Homes Agency and subsequently Head of the BBU, to write a Foreword. The main difference with the NAEPP proposals is that they would be very much cheaper.

Central AND local not central versus local

Any debate about our proposal will revolve around one key issue: the respective roles of central and local government. We will not be too surprised if we hear back from the government that empty homes is a "local problem" that should be addressed by local authorities entirely in the

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(NEHAP latest news - continued)

context of local democracy. And not only that, we will no doubt find that we already have all the tools we need to tackle the problem!

But let's call a spade a spade. Really, this would be just another way of saying that central government doesn't think empty homes are important. Because local authorities are only "free" to invest in empty homes strategies after they have run through the entire list of their statutory duties and obligations: social services, education, homelessness, environmental protection, hmo work and so on.

The reality is that empty homes initiatives in most authorities are very often just scratching around amongst the scraps of resources left over for discretionary activities. And that is just not good enough to create the kind of empty homes initiatives that communities deserve.

No bun-fights

As with the Rough Sleepers Initiative or bed and breakfast targets, it is obvious that most day-to-day delivery on empty homes needs to be handled at local level. **But the impetus, support and even co-ordination provided by central government can make a huge difference.**

With empty homes, as with rough sleepers, the public are not interested in a bun-fight between central government and local government about who is responsible - they just want to see solutions. There is no doubt that most local authorities are willing to play their part, given a fair crack of the whip. **The question to the government is - are you?**

Welcome to Wendy Armstrong at CLG

We gather that Wendy has been assigned to lead on empty homes work within the CLG Private Housing Management Condition & Adaptations team. She's thus, to the best of our knowledge, effectively a replacement for Rob Miles who played a major role in the EDMO legislation. As such, she's an empty homes practitioner and we welcome her to our world.

As a practitioner organisation we think **people are important - they make a difference.** We'll help and support Wendy in her empty homes work in whatever way we reasonably can.

HPDG non-delivery non-incentive

CLG has just released the [latest consultation](#) on Housing and Planning Delivery Grant. This is for years 2 and 3 of the 3-year grant programme, which has been cut by £75million to reflect the housing downturn.

No incentive for empty homes work

We had entertained some hope, given the patent failure of HPDG to stimulate any housing delivery and with the number of empty homes rocketing, that the government would revive proposals floated in the first consultation to make empty homes work a suitable target for funding.

But no such luck. **There is no mention of funding empty homes work through HPDG in the consultation paper.** Yet the £75million removed from the HPDG pot would have funded an effective national empty homes initiative many times over.

A ray of light?

There is one tiny crumb of comfort in the consultation: the proposal to offer £20k to rural local authorities that publish plans showing how they are looking to progress rural affordable housing - and then demonstrating progress against that plan. The money would not be payable until after the 3-year programme had ended, based on reviewing progress made in 2010-11.

This is positive because, in our proposals on using HPDG for empty homes, we made it clear that simplistic rewards geared to largely meaningless delivery targets would not be helpful - but that it would be appropriate to reward progress against properly thought-out plans. So the government have taken on board something from our proposals. The principle has been accepted - but unfortunately the rewards have gone elsewhere....

Have your say

The lack of a consultation question doesn't prevent your local authority from responding by asking for HPDG funding for empty homes work. We will certainly be doing so - and pointing to our proposals in the draft national empty homes action plan.

Your replies need to be sent to julian.wheeler@communities by 23rd June.

Yes, Minister....

[Report from David Gibbens, Housing Enabling Manager, Exeter City Council]

About three weeks ago I went to a seminar in Whitehall that had been organised by CLG officials and was attended by Iain Wright, who seems to be the minister leading on empty homes (rather than Margaret Beckett).

In format it was like a mini-conference, with excellent presentations from David Ireland of the EHA who gave a general overview of the current position on empty homes, Chris Skinner of Norwich on compulsory purchase, Dave Stott of Manchester on enforcement options and Mark Du Val from LACORS.

There was an interesting mixture of both officers and members from various places such as Gloucester, Birmingham, Reading to mention but a few. By all accounts it was something of an experiment by CLG and further such events might be held - including at regional level.

(We'd say it would probably be better to support the forums that already exist - maybe running a joint event.)

Welcome interest from minister

I was impressed by the genuine interest and concern showed by Iain Wright in the issue. It bodes well for the future - as does the fact that CLG held the event in the first place. Perhaps most interesting in terms of insight into current CLG thinking was the questions they posed the three breakout groups:

- *How can local authorities engage with the public in carrying out their empty property work?*
- *How can local authorities work with Housing Associations effectively to help bring empty homes back into use as affordable housing?*
- *How can local authorities best prioritise the empty homes they target for action? Unit cost, suitability for affordable housing, ease of reuse, the effect on communities of leaving them empty.*

I attended on behalf of my local authority not NAEPP. Part of our programme over the next few months is to re-establish NAEPP itself as a key player whose opinions need to be listened to. For example, looking at the second question above, and the demands of the *Inside Housing Empty Promise* campaign, the direct role of local authorities working with owners seems to be under-valued.

Building empty homes work in Wales

Shelter Cymru, assisted by the Empty Homes Agency, have been funded by the Welsh Assembly Government to help build best practice around empty homes work in Wales. seminars We understand the aim is to create a pan-Wales forum and we wish it every success.

Some interesting documents from the Welsh project are being published on the website.

NAEPP support for forums

Supporting regional forums is perceived by NAEPP as a key role. Most regional forums run themselves quite effectively without needing any help - but that isn't true across the whole country. There seem to be some blank spots on the map.

At the two Welsh sub-regional forums mentioned above NAEPP did brief presentations profiling different approaches to organising forums, to help prepare the ground for the Welsh authorities developing their own forum.

If anyone else needs assistance with forums we'll be happy to do what we can to help. We would also appreciate useful documents from forums to put in the library. If you have anything - please send it through to admin@naepp.org.uk.

Inside Housing "Empty Promise" campaign comes to end

The *Inside Housing* campaign on empty homes work came to an end, as planned, after the Budget in April (though you can still find the stories on their website). Regrettably, the hoped-for VAT changes didn't feature in the Budget but we are certainly not going to judge the campaign a failure on that account! That particular issues looks set to run and run.

The campaign did a great job of raising the profile of empty homes work. And it gave us the impetus to crystallise our own ideas - not because we wanted to jump on the bandwagon but because it has become apparent that fresh thinking needs to be injected into the issue. We think we've started to do that.

Bob Lawrence - gone but not forgotten

By decision of the Executive, NAEPP donated £125, via the *justgiving* website (<http://www.justgiving.com/boblawrence?page=1#donationtable>), to the homelessness charity Crisis, as a gesture of respect to Bob Lawrence, who died last November and to whom the draft National Action Plan is dedicated.

Bob was the first Chief Executive of the Empty Homes Agency and no disrespect is intended to his successors when we say that Bob did more than any other single individual to put empty homes on the map as an issue. Anyone in post today as an empty homes officer is in his debt.

There is an obituary on *Inside Housing's* website at <http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/story.aspx?storycode=6502021> which focuses mainly on his more recent work as a Homelessness Advisor at CLG. In his empty homes era, Bob was a towering presence who wasn't afraid to challenge and made people listen. Times have moved on an empty homes work has become more mainstream, but for us to get this far, Bob's campaigning zeal and indignation made a vital contribution.

We'd love to know what Bob would have made of our National Action Plan proposals. We can imagine that he would have found plenty to be scathing about. But we also believe he would have supported the basic idea that it is up to all organisations - not least the government - to put their money where their mouth was on the issue.

Incidentally, there is still time to donate to Crisis, up until the 25th May.

Website downtime and new server

The website experienced a torrid time over last weekend, following problems with our host server. We're taking the opportunity to shift the site to a new server where the hyperlinks will once again all refer to www.naepp.org.uk. Just possibly, if you have bookmarks set up, these will now need to be updated. Sorry about that.

The site should be faster, but experience shows shifting servers never goes quite as smoothly as we would like. Please let us know about any hiccups. At the time of writing the most obvious one is a rash of odd characters and a loss of some recent documents from the Info library. Work continues to recover from this.

New 0844 phone number for NAEPP: In case you hadn't noticed, we now have a new non-geographic telephone number: **0844 736 5 736**. That's a normal local call rate. NAEPP also pays any cost associated with the call being forwarded to us.