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NAEPP

The National Association of Empty Property Practitioners

Supporting the people who bring empty property back into use for housing

A NATIONAL ACTION PLAN ON EMPTY HOMES

Why a National Action Plan?

There are serious and universally recognised problems with housing in Britain: homelessness, overcrowding and an ageing housing stock where many homes are in disrepair and leak energy. And there is the enormous wasted potential of around 1 million empty dwellings – dwellings that could be upgraded, brought back into use and used to give people the quality of homes they need.

What stands in the way of this is, in most cases, the apathy and inertia of the owners, whether in the private sector or the public sector. And where the obstacle is inertia, the main tool to deal with it is **energy**: the energy to keep plugging away at the problem, to ensure that relevant assistance is provided, to put in place the measures that are needed, to set an agenda and stick to it.

The government is to be applauded for some of the individual policy measures it has introduced such as Empty Dwelling Management Orders, changes to the VAT regime and better access to council tax information. **But there is no coherent plan, invested with sufficient energy, to do justice to the scale of the problem.** And this pattern is repeated at local authority level.

Local action remains key. We want to see every housing authority (or group of housing authorities) have an effective, properly-resourced Empty Homes Initiative. Some authorities have this already – but very many do not. **The government itself needs to set an example and engage more pro-actively with the the issue,** making sure its policy initiatives bear fruit and refining those initiatives where appropriate. It needs to give more substantial support to local authorities and other partners, throwing into the ring its own desire to make a difference along with the commitment to carry through. It is an extraordinary situation that, with around 1 million empty homes in the country, there is apparently not a single civil servant devoted exclusively to moving the empty homes agenda forwards, despite the huge range of resources and legislative and regulatory levers the government has at its disposal.

The government must take the lead by putting in place an effective framework for delivering the combination of resource, commitment and direction required to unlock the wasted potential in empty homes. Any targets attached to this work need to be realistic and achievable and avoid perverse incentives: the key will be effective evaluation of initiatives at all levels on a detailed basis, through normal Audit Commission processes.

The National Association of Empty Property Practitioners has drawn up this proposed **National Action Plan on Empty Homes** because we believe it is **our** members who have the most thorough grasp of what works and what doesn't, who deal with the tricky business of actually trying to bring empty homes back into use day in, day out – and who know how much difference it makes to have committed people driving the agenda forwards. It is a plan we are asking the government to take up and organisations such as *Inside Housing*, The Empty Homes Agency, the Chartered Institute of Housing, the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, the Local Government Association, the Homes and Community Agency, the homelessness charities and all the political parties to support. It seeks to provide a balanced framework of resources and structure that, over the longer term, can make a real difference.

A DRAFT National Action Plan on Empty Homes

A National Framework

1. The government should draw up and implement a **National Action Plan on Empty Homes** providing direction, resources and support to partners to ensure delivery.
2. The government should establish an **Empty Homes Unit** headed by a national Empty Homes Champion, tasked with developing the Action Plan and promoting the re-occupation of empty homes.
3. Meaningful but achievable national targets should be set for interventions resulting in
 - **reoccupation** of long-term empty properties in the country
 - **preventing** properties becoming empty long-term through early intervention
 - **securing** accommodation for households that are homeless or threatened with homelessness
4. Specific measures need to be taken within government to tackle once and for all the continuing scandal of empty homes under the control of public authorities such as the Ministry of Defence and health authorities.
5. Local housing authorities should have a statutory obligation to produce and implement Empty Homes Strategies, which should be given star-ratings through usual Audit Commission inspection processes. Local targets should as a minimum cover the same ground as the three specified above but should reasonably reflect local circumstances and priorities.
6. The Audit Commission should be resourced with the specialist skills needed to evaluate Empty Homes Strategies effectively.
7. CAA ratings for local authorities should be capped at no higher than one level above the level attained by the local Empty Homes Strategy.
8. The key regional housing and regeneration bodies, such as the regional offices of the HCA and the Government Offices, should be jointly tasked with producing effective Regional Empty Homes Strategies, geared to supporting local authorities at regional level eg through regional forums and to ensuring transparent allocation of any dedicated funding streams allocated regionally to empty homes work.

Resources

9. In the short term, £15M p.a. of revenue funding should be set aside from the Housing Planning and Delivery Grant pot to move the National Action Plan forwards.

10. The government should re-institute funding for the **Empty Homes Agency** as the “national conscience” for empty homes,
11. A substantial sum of pump-priming capital (£300M+) should be ring-fenced for grants / loans on empty properties, to be allocated where homes are brought back into use to house those in housing need (eg homeless or threatened with homelessness). Subsequent funding, established via the National Action Plan, should take into account the ability of local authorities to recycle such grant through clawback mechanisms.
12. The Government should facilitate the introduction of such grant/loan schemes through the proposed Empty Homes Unit, by establishing “good practice” template terms, conditions, processes and procedures.
13. Additional council tax receipts resulting from the reduction in discounts on long-term unfurnished empties **and** “Second homes” council tax receipts should both be **retained by the local housing authority** rather than being returned to central government, in a ring-fenced fund specifically targeted at regeneration and empty homes work – and subject to adequate Empty Homes Strategy and spending plans.
14. Pending the implementation of point 13, the proposed Empty Homes Unit should provide match funding to local authorities and regional bodies specifically for the employment of local “empty homes champions” to promote local / regional empty homes initiatives

Information and Access to Information

15. Monitoring of local authority empty homes activity should be included in the Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix in accordance with NAEPP recommendations.
16. National statistics on empty homes down to local authority level should be published promptly and systematically by the government and the methodology should be transparent.
17. The Local Government Act provision allowing release of personal information in respect of empty homes owners for the purposes of implementing empty homes strategies should be extended to all properties not in regular occupation, even where furnished;

Removing the Shackles from Local Government

18. Local authorities should be enabled to lease homes for up to 10 years **outside of the Housing Revenue Account**. Rent assessments and housing benefit subsidy arrangements should be aligned with those applicable to Registered Social Landlords. (This will allow local authorities to procure and supply homes to prevent homelessness at intermediate or low market rents - but without incurring any Public Sector Borrowing as such funds would be revenue only. Currently local authorities are forced to rely on Registered Social Landlords or private sector landlords for short- or medium-term provision. Local authorities have responsibility without sufficient power.)

Miscellaneous Measures

19. It should be made explicit that the “market” rent to be assessed as part of the Management Plan under a final EDMO should be the relevant Local Housing Allowance amount;
20. The compensation arrangements for owners of empty homes subject to compulsory purchase should be waived where homes have been empty for more than 2 years.
21. VAT on refurbishment and repair of homes should be reduced to 5%;

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