



8th July 2008: 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. If you are not a member of NAEPP and want to join, please create an account by [registering here](#).

Suggestions for new name...still a chance to win £25

We've had a good number of suggestions for new names for NAEPP but so far not many people have contributed. And we reckon there's a fair few options not covered so still a chance to win those £25 vouchers of your choice! The names we've had so far fall into 3 categories:

- the good
- the tongue-in-cheek
- the ones that are so bad we hope they are tongue-in-cheek but we're not sure.

This is what we have had to date and we'll let you judge for yourselves which category they fall into:

National Empty Homes Forum - NEHF
Network of Empty Homes Practitioners - NEHP
Empty Homes Network - EHN
Empty Homes Forum - EHF
Society of Empty Residential Property Officers - SERPO
People Exterminating Empty Properties Often - PEEPO
National Empty Homes Assembly - NEHA
Against Empty Homes - AEH
Assembly of Empty Homes Practitioners AEHP
Coalition to Halt the Rise of Empty Properties – CHREP
The Organisation of Practitioners for Private Empty Residences - OPPER
Empty Homes R Us - EHRUs
(The) Empty Property People - EPP
Countrywide Organisation of Practitioners for Private Empty Residences - COPPER
Countrywide Association of Vacant Empty Property Practitioners - CAVEPP
The Association of Uninhabited Property Practitioners - AUPP

You can make your suggestions by emailing them to democracy@naepp.org.uk. **The deadline is the 9th July.** That's probably today if you open this as soon as you get it....

Scottish research into EH Initiatives - can you help?

Ann Flint and Hector Currie have been commissioned by the Scottish Government to research approaches to bringing empty private properties back into use and to make recommendations on initiatives that could be taken forward by both the Scottish Government and Scottish local authorities. The central aim will be to bring about an increase in the supply of private accommodation for low-income and homeless households.

The study would like to identify English and Welsh examples of empty private homes initiatives (rural as well as urban) in recognition that there has been more action taken south of the border that merits being highlighted to Scottish local authorities. **The researchers would appreciate hearing from officers in English and Welsh authorities that have examples of possible initiatives they could include (small or large scale).** They have already identified some leading authorities* but if you have innovative or creative solutions they will want to know about them. Hector has said they are particularly short of good rural initiatives.

The decisions on the selection of 'case studies' need to be made within a couple of weeks so the researchers would welcome as early contacts as possible. In the first instance speak to either:

Hector Currie (hectorcurrie@clara.co.uk or tel: 01786.470262) or **Ann Flint** (annie.flint@btconnect.com or tel: 0141 339 7054).

* Hector informs us "we have so far picked out initiatives by Kent County Council, Mid Devon District Council and Sheffield City Council. We have also noted Newcastle's Private Renting Project, the North London Sub-Region's *Use It Or Lose It* campaign, Lewisham Council's use of EDMOs and Manchester City Council's enforcement work with private landlords' empty homes."

Regional forums - building an information base on the web

We've recently added a new category of information item to the website - [Empty Property Forums](#). However, there is one minor problem - we don't have very much information about the forums at the moment eg - who is the Chair? who is the Secretary or contact point? Nor do we even have all the forums in the list.

This can be a useful resource for fellow practitioners and we would like to find one person in each forum who can maintain the relevant details. We can set them up with special privileges and help them build up full web-pages for each forum, publish news items etc.

At the moment, any logged in member can update the forum details - please do so if you can provide the missing details.

But more importantly please can the forums nominate someone (or put yourself forward) to help us build up this useful part of the website. Send an email to admin@naepp.org.uk if you can help.

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Empty homes statistics - getting the facts right

CLG is currently consulting on changes to the Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix (submitted annually by each local authority). Some of you may have been to the workshops organised in Leeds and London.

Most of the changes proposed by CLG involve simplifications or avoid duplication and are to be applauded.

However there are two key areas where we think empty property practitioners might usefully influence the proposals.

Second Homes – reality and fantasy

Currently the number of empty homes is reported net of second homes. But there is no agreed methodology for counting second homes and our survey earlier this year revealed, as expected, a variety of different approaches.

As the figure for second homes is not recorded anywhere, there is no way of knowing how much influence this has on the overall figure for empty homes. This is bad enough and should not be acceptable. -----(next column)----->

(Empty Homes Statistics - continued)

But the position is exacerbated by the fact that in 2003-04 the government introduced a new and (most respondents to our survey feel) inappropriate use of the phrase "second homes" to refer to **any** furnished property that is no one's principal residence. This definition has been implemented for Council Tax discount purposes and there is no requirement to use it for HSSA purposes. This new definition does not correspond to any common sense definition of second homes that might previously have been used on HSSA returns.

The responses to our survey on the issue showed that some authorities continue to use a common sense definition of second homes in their HSSA returns but, predictably, others have switched to the council tax definition - which will always produce more second homes and fewer empties.

This has serious implications for the number of empty properties reported which is often a "headline" figure in the press. For example in Exeter the number of empty properties reported would drop by nearly **20%** if the council tax definition was used instead of a common-sense one. (The impact will vary from area to area according to the ratio of furnished to unfurnished empties). Putting this in perspective, a 1.4% rise in the number of empties was the main front-page story in *Inside Housing* a few weeks ago.

There are two separate issues to be addressed, , both of which NAEPP has been pursuing with CLG:

- the need for a box to record the number of second homes on the HSSA form
- the need for a consistent definition of second homes for use in the HSSA process that reflects the strategic and policy use of the data

The first of these is simple to implement and it is disappointing that CLG has paid no attention to representations to amend the HSSA form. There is no additional burden to local authorities for data collection: it is just a question of reporting the figure used in the calculation.

Lies, damned lies and statistics

This is doubly important if the definition changes because without a baseline figure **it will be impossible to measure the impact of any change in the definition.** CLG's apparent lack of appreciation for the simplest methodological issues is disturbing, suggesting a cavalier attitude towards empty homes statistics and leaving the government exposed to claims that it has----P3-->

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manipulated the figures for empty homes.

Whilst it may be in the interests of the government and local authorities to under-report the number of empty properties, like all professionals empty property practitioners have an obligation to try and arrive at the truth of the matter. This is the only avenue that NAEPP can pursue.

All the above is pretty dry stuff, but the implications are real enough. At the moment, the position is as follows:

- empty homes statistics may have been distorted by the introduction of a new definition of “second homes” in 2003-04
- the reported trends in the number of empty homes since then cannot be relied on and may be an artefact of changed definitions

It is up to the CLG to sort this out. We will continue to make a constructive contribution which we expect to include suggestions for a consistent methodology for estimating the number of second homes.

BVPI64 / Empty Homes Activity Reporting

In producing the HSSA form for 2007-08, CLG were clear that they did not want to make significant changes to it because the form was to be substantially reviewed in 2008-09 (as reported above).

This did not prevent CLG from removing the field recording BVPI64 results from the form - pretty much the only substantive change made other than some additional fields related to Homelessness Prevention. Whereas the addition of fields related to Homelessness Prevention underwent extensive consultation, the decision to remove the BPVI64 field from the form was presented more or less as a fait accompli without any prior warning.

To compound its sins, CLG offered an entirely spurious justification for its action, wrongly claiming that the indicator was no longer being collected for 2007-08.

By removing the BVPI64 field from HSSA, **CLG has inappropriately pre-empted any debate during the review of the form about reporting local authority empty homes activity.**

Whilst BVPI64 has many flaws as a **performance indicator** (ie to compare the relative performance of local authorities) it nevertheless provides

(Empty Homes Statistics - continued)

factual information about the intervention of local authorities in the local private sector housing market resulting in the re-occupation of empty properties. In other words BVPI64 has a statistical role that should be important for policy and strategic reasons and this is separate from its role as a performance indicator. In this respect it is no different from other items of information recorded on HSSA that will no longer be performance indicators after this year.

Removing any requirement to report on empty homes activity in the HSSA sends exactly the wrong message to local authorities. And doing so prematurely and without adequate justification suggests a real lack of commitment at CLG to encouraging empty homes work.

Local authorities can challenge this by contributing to the debate around the revised HSSA form to be used from 2008-09 onwards. Requiring local authorities to report on their empty homes activities is not as good as a Performance Indicator -but it is a lot better than nothing. And the *NAEPP Guidelines* - or an amended version of them - can still provide a consistent methodology for reporting. **This will be discussed at the NAEPP Executive meeting on the 10th July.**

David Gibbens

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Your views, your news, your empty property blues

Whatever it is, it can get published here in a newsletter or on the website. Contact news@naepp.org.uk if you want to make a contribution, have a letter published.