

PRESS RELEASE



The National Association of Empty Property Practitioners

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

TIME TO GET SERIOUS ABOUT EMPTY HOMES

The National Association of Empty Property Practitioners (NAEPP) supports the National Week of Action on empty homes and warmly welcomes the Empty Homes Agency's call for a national programme to tackle the issue.

This week, the Halifax published its Annual Empty Homes Survey showing that the number of long-term empty homes had risen slightly. Last week NAEPP also published figures showing that the number of long-term empty homes had fallen slightly[1]. The Halifax figures are based on local authority Housing Strategy Statistical Returns reflecting the position at April 2008. Our figures are based on the Council Tax Base returns from local authorities reflecting the position at September 2009.

But the real story isn't whether the number of empty properties is going up or down. It is that the number of long-term empties has remained stubbornly high at around 300,000 for many years and that not enough is being done to try and reduce it.

That is rightly of concern to many people, for three main reasons:

- Empty homes can easily become nuisance properties, blighting neighbourhoods and reducing property values.
- It is an affront to many that, whilst some families do not have an adequate home, suitable dwellings are left standing empty.
- People are reluctant to accept that resources should be wasted and open space lost to new-build whilst existing homes are under-utilised

Since March, inspired by *Inside Housing* magazine's *Empty Promise* campaign, we have been developing proposals for just the kind of programme that the Empty Homes Agency is calling for. The latest version of these proposals - *From Empty Promise to National Action Plan: Creating a National Empty Homes Initiative* can be found on our website at www.naepp.org.uk. [2]

Whilst we list many individual proposals that can help, the key message is that **piece-meal policy initiatives are not sufficient**. What is needed is a much more coherent response, with stronger leadership at national level to support sustained delivery by local empty homes initiatives. Currently there is no champion for empty homes within government pushing the issue forward and not a single civil servant dedicated to the task. Billions are poured into new-build programmes whilst few local authorities can fund effective programmes to deal with empty homes in their communities. Can there be any current issue where there is such a mis-match between its importance to the wider community and the resources devoted to addressing it?

As practitioners we are clear that there are no magic bullets or quick fixes when it comes to tackling empty homes. But the public does have the right to expect that the best possible job is being done to address the problem in a systematic way. That means continuity and proper planning. **We envisage a partnership between central and local government and other organisations that plays to the strengths of all and achieves the best value for money.** In this specialist area, it is not realistic to expect 300-odd local authorities each to create cost-effective local initiatives that are up to the job. But nor is central government equipped to deliver on empty homes directly. We'd like to see a trail-blazing framework that shows how engagement by central government can provide the support to make local action more effective. Such models will be essential to meet the challenges to public spending posed by current economic problems.

We don't harbour any illusions that empty homes can provide the answer to all the country's housing needs. But the issue deserves serious attention. The government should set itself a challenging target for improving performance by the public sector on helping bring long-term empties back into use - **at least doubling historic outputs**[3]. And then it needs to support its partners to deliver it.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

1. Our analysis of the Council Tax Base figures for England showed that the number of long-term empties (excluding exempt properties) dropped by 3.4% from September 2008 to 2009 (see <http://www.naep.org.uk/node/558>). There are of course many other homes such as short-term empties not included in the figures for long-term empties. The total for the United Kingdom is thought to be around 1 million, including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
2. *From Empty Promise to National Action Plan: Creating a National Empty Homes Initiative* can be found on our website at <http://www.naep.org.uk/NationalActionPlanFinal>
3. Until 2007-08, local authorities were required to report their performance on bringing private sector empty homes back into use through Best Value Performance Indicator 64. This has now been discontinued. However this covered success with all private sector homes, not just long-term empties. It would be necessary to disaggregate the performance on long-term empties from the audited data in order to set the proposed national target. NAEPP has proposed guidelines for monitoring local authorities' successes with empty homes, but not in the form of a National Indicator. See the Annex to our national action plan proposals and also <http://www.naep.org.uk/statsinfoatest> for fuller details.
4. The National Association of Empty Property Practitioners was set up with the support of the government, the Empty Homes Agency and the Housing Corporation in 2002. It adopted its constitution at its first Conference in November 2002 and became fully independent of the Empty Homes Agency in 2003. Currently over 270 individuals from about 200 different organisations are registered as members of NAEPP. Subscriber status is available to non-practitioners and allows access to most of the benefits of membership.

For further information contact:

David Gibbens (Policy and Support)

Tel: 0844 736 5 736

web: www.naep.org.uk

e-mail: admin@naep.org.uk

Postal address:

David Gibbens, NAEPP, PO Box 703, Exeter, EX1 9PX