

**“No Stone Unturned”  
An Empty Homes Initiative for London**



## Introduction

London faces growing problems of housing supply and affordability. With tens of thousands of long-term vacant dwellings – and many more thought to be unreported<sup>1</sup> – the opportunity for a credible London-wide empty homes initiative is real. We know that this won't, on its own, solve London's housing crisis. But by taking a strong lead to tackle empties, London can show it means business, that no stone will be left unturned in the drive to provide sufficient housing.

## May Elections

Empty homes are not a party political issue. Politicians from across the spectrum take the issue seriously – as does the public.<sup>2</sup> But the May elections do provide a useful opportunity to take a fresh look at old problems: 2016 offers an ideal opportunity to develop an empty homes initiative worthy of London's status as a world-leading city, an inspiration not only for the rest of the UK but for cities around the world.

## The Empty Homes Network

Nearly every empty homes practitioner in the country belongs to the Empty Homes Network. Our proposals draw on a wealth of experience about what works (whilst also keeping a careful eye on what doesn't work). Our members have decades of experience in researching, developing and delivering empty homes strategies at local authority and in some cases cross-boundary levels.

## Why a London Empty Homes Initiative?

There are diverse reasons why homes sit empty. The barriers to re-use are often difficult to surmount. This means that tackling empty homes is a specialist task. It needs skilled practitioners, who are adept at negotiating and familiar with a wide range of tools. But individual local authorities often don't have sufficiently focused teams to deliver what is needed: communities face a postcode lottery and local action can be ineffective. This is why a London-wide initiative is required.

A London-wide initiative can make big improvements in the effectiveness of empty homes work in the capital by providing

- the necessary **leadership** to drive up the standards of empty homes work
- the **impetus** to ensure delivery at local level
- **replicable models and templates** to improve **efficiency** and **quality** in the shaping of schemes,
- a source of **expertise** able to be deployed across the city.

**Kent's No Use Empty** initiative<sup>3</sup>, **Scotland's Empty Homes Partnership**<sup>4</sup> and **Wales's Houses to Homes**<sup>5</sup> initiative all demonstrate the value of cross-boundary approaches. But the strength and scale of London's regional government offers the opportunity to exceed what has been achieved elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/feb/21/tens-thousands-london-homes-deemed-long-term-vacant>. Changes in council tax discount arrangements and the introduction of the Empty Homes Premium have both contributed to under-reporting of long-term empties. As a result, in responding to FOI requests for numbers of long-term empties, some local authorities are now simply saying they don't know e.g.

[https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/vacant\\_properties\\_out\\_of\\_town\\_la\\_5#incoming-752319](https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/vacant_properties_out_of_town_la_5#incoming-752319)

<sup>2</sup> See the results of a major survey reported on our website here <http://www.ehnetwork.org.uk/newsitem/do-more-about-empty-homes-government-urged> and the summary of press coverage of the same survey on the EmptyHomes Agency site at [http://www.emptyhomes.com/empty-homes-events/eh\\_week\\_around\\_the\\_country/empty-homes-agency-in-the-news/](http://www.emptyhomes.com/empty-homes-events/eh_week_around_the_country/empty-homes-agency-in-the-news/)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nue.org.uk/>; <https://www.nue.org.uk/newsletter-edition-no-8-10-years/>

<sup>4</sup> [http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/empty\\_homes/scottish\\_empty\\_homes\\_partnership](http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/empty_homes/scottish_empty_homes_partnership); see also [Latest Annual Report](#). f

<sup>5</sup> <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/houses-into-homes/?lang=en#>

Financially, not only do London boroughs gain New Homes Bonus from more effective empty homes work but also 20% of the New Homes Bonus earned via bringing homes back into use is hypothecated to the projects of the London's LEP (the London Enterprise Panel).

### What it could mean in practice

- a clear, written action plan with targets and priorities attached, identifying available resources and laying out the relationship between a possible London Empty Homes Unit and the London boroughs
- a London-wide **empty homes loans scheme** (modelled on the proven schemes in Kent and Wales) aimed at private owners, with optional nomination rights to local authorities
- a source of **loan finance at preferential rates** via Public Loans and Works Board or Municipal Bonds Agency
- a London-wide **empty homes hotline** for reporting empties and for owners seeking advice for re-use; and London-wide advertising of available interventions
- **a specific delivery stream under the London Enterprise Panel** tailored to support **community-led self-help housing schemes** that deliver training, volunteering and employment opportunities, such as those run by World Habitat Award Winners Canopy and Giroscope<sup>6</sup>.
- funding for **DIY Home Ownership** models (i.e. homesteading) – including shared ownership options – directed towards publicly- or privately-owned empty homes
- **effective regulation of Property Guardian schemes** to ensure that the potential for short-term re-use of empty buildings is met, whilst driving up standards and driving out cowboys
- a **central advice and service centre** providing access to the skills or advice needed to progress the more complex eyesore cases that blight communities, via compulsory purchase, Empty Dwelling Management Order or enforced sale
- effective **engagement with public or private sector providers** that can include London-wide procurement of services needed to support empty homes schemes such as property management, building surveying, legal processes for CPO, etc.
- continuous **monitoring** and regular **evaluation** to tune and improve the initiative
- support for options that connect empty homes interventions to the **provision of affordable housing**
- support from London to individual boroughs predicated on **strong local strategies**.

### Appeal To Candidates

**We invite the candidates in the May elections give the proposal for a London Empty Homes Initiative serious consideration** and make such commitments as they can to implement one if elected. We are willing and able to help lay the groundwork for such an initiative.

### For further information

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.worldhabitatawards.org/winners-and-finalists/project-details.cfm?lang=00&theProjectID=D38EE679-D4AE-52C7-7049E278566D6CD5> Although the award-winners are based in the North of England, London organisations such as [Habitat for Humanity](#) run similar projects.