

Press Cutting

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Waste not, want not

Kent's 'No use empty' initiative is helping revive local communities by funding renovation work to transform once-derelict properties into new homes, explains **Steve Grimshaw**

Across the UK, demand for affordable housing far outweighs supply, with an estimated 4.5 million people on housing waiting lists.

Clearly, this is a problem which must be addressed on a local level by district and county councils but, given the cuts to budgets, the onus is on finding an innovative, cost-effective solution.

To ignore the potential of empty homes to meet housing supply could be a costly mistake for local authorities. It is estimated that there are more than one million unused homes in the UK.

Not only are these properties not fit for purpose, they are frequently run down to the point of dereliction. With house-building at its lowest level since the 1920s and space for new developments at a premium, local authorities should look at empty homes as part of the solution to the housing shortage.

In 2005 Kent CC launched its 'No use empty' scheme to transform derelict, apparently-abandoned properties into much-needed housing. The scheme forms part of our commitment to examine better ways of delivering services.

When launching the scheme in 2005, we recognised that owners, and the community as a whole, were unaware of the negative impact of unused, derelict housing. As well as contributing to the housing deficit, empty homes also often have a negative impact on local neighbourhoods by their visual appearance, and a tendency to attract graffiti, vandalism, squatting and anti-social behaviour.

In addition, we have found that the presence of derelict houses undermines the value of nearby properties, causing a depreciation of around 18% to local property value.

As well as working with owners, officers at district and county level have worked with developers and housing associations who are interested in acquiring empty properties for renovation into new homes.

One of the biggest obstacles to bringing empty homes back into use is the overall cost of renovation works. Our No use empty scheme offers interest-free loans of up to £25,000 per unit – up to

Kent's scheme has been hailed a success which other authorities are studying closely

£175,000 in total – to owners or potential buyers of unused housing, so they can renovate the properties and turn them into homes for people across Kent.

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The loans, in most instances, are paid 'up-front' to provide owners with valuable working capital. Loans are also considered for applications to convert commercial properties into residential accommodation.

The average No use empty loan is £18,700. To date, a total of £3.7m has

been issued in loans that will be repaid in full and recycled into the scheme.

The number of new homes created through this scheme stands at 1,627 – and counting, exceeding an initial target of 850.

The cost to the council for returning one empty property back into use has been calculated at around £2,500. This takes into consideration the interest due and revenue support required to administer the loan fund which, when considering the wider, long-term benefits, including the ability to recover future council tax, I think provides real value for money, and shows just what can be done with capital funding.

Five of the 12 districts in Kent currently participate in the initiative, and a further three districts are scheduled to participate from the new financial year. In some instances, the No use empty loan fund will be the only funding accessible to tackle this problem, due to pressures on their own district budgets.

There remain around 8,000 empty properties – unoccupied for more than six months – across Kent. Interest in the



No use empty scheme remains high, and we have already approved double the amount of loan applications in 2010-11 versus the previous financial year. This bodes well for us achieving, and hopefully exceeding, our target of returning a further 600 empty homes to use by March 2013.

The initiative has been widely praised across the UK as a unique partnership between the county and local councils which is achieving tangible results. We are lucky enough to count on the support of national charity Empty Homes, whose chief executive, David Ireland, has helped spread the word and call for other councils to follow our lead.

I am excited at the prospect of another council adopting the No use empty brand and am currently in discussions on how we can make this happen.

When we launched the scheme in 2005, it was with the intention of providing a template that others could follow. And we will continue to publicise our initiative during 2011 in the hope that even more people will participate. ■

Steve Grimshaw is regeneration project manager for Kent CC's No use empty initiative