

Press Cutting

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Alternative Roots



The number of empty homes across Britain jumped by a third between 1996 and 2008

Vacant Position

With the number of empty homes in Britain reaching the million mark, what is the government doing to combat this problem? Michael Parker investigates

For every two families that need a home there is one property that could house them lying empty, according to the Empty Homes Agency, a charity that has been highlighting the less well understood side of the housing crisis for 20 years.

The number of empty homes across Britain has reached the million mark, jumping by a third between 1996 and 2008. But the moves by the government this year appear to show a confused approach towards the problem.

There are already two methods that are aimed specifically at bringing empty properties back into use: an EDMO (Empty Dwelling Management Order), introduced in the Housing Act 2004; and a PROD (Public Request To Order Disposal), brought in by the Local Government Planning And Land Act 1980. Councils can also use a CPO (Compulsory Purchase Order).

Eric Pickles, the communities and local government secretary, announced in January that houses would have to have laid empty for two years, up from six months, before an EDMO could be served. This month, Grant Shapps, the housing minister, announced the launch of the Community Right To Reclaim Land, a new formulation of the PROD powers. But crucially it can only be applied to public bodies, while the overwhelming majority of empty homes are privately owned.

David Ireland, chief executive of the Empty Homes Agency, said: "Whole housing estates have had their redevelopment stalled. The problem is that these cases are much more entrenched than a few single houses. All you need is a slight dip in property prices, and developers involved in large schemes pull out."

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However, Ireland was content that the government understood the problem. It has put aside £100m to tackle empty homes and has provided the same financial incentives for bringing old homes back into use, as for building new ones.

One area of the country took up the

challenge in earnest: Kent County Council, in a joint effort with a dozen district councils, has operated the No Use Empty scheme for five years. Using approximately £3.5m made available to homeowners as interest-free loans to bring empty or dilapidated properties up to scratch, the scheme has brought 1,481 homes back on to the market. By the end of next month, £1m worth of loans will have been repaid. And it is working: the number of empty homes in Kent has decreased from 8,000 to 6,000.

Steve Grimshaw, regeneration manager at Kent County Council, said: "We concentrate on advice and guidance for landlords. We have property offices to approach landlords in each district. We all come together every six weeks to discuss what has worked. We have had no defaults so far, touch wood. But we have had many calls from other county councils wanting to discuss how the scheme works."

"DCLG [the Department For Communities And Local Government] has been taking an interest, and hopefully we will be able to at least influence how they spend that £100m investment."