

# NO USE EMPTY



# ISSUE FIVE SPRING 2009

LATEST NEWS FROM THE EAST KENT EMPTY PROPERTY INITIATIVE

## CAMPAIGN GOES KENT-WIDE! ALL 12 DISTRICTS NOW IN FIGHT AGAINST EMPTY PROPERTIES

**No Use Empty; the Kent Empty Property Initiative has now been rolled out Kent-wide to tackle the problem of empty housing across the whole county.**

Since welcoming Sevenoaks, Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge & Malling in Spring 2008, Kent County Council has teamed up with Ashford Borough Council, Canterbury City Council, Maidstone Borough Council, Gravesham Borough Council and Dartford Borough Council to embrace all of Kent.

The initiative was first launched almost three years ago and following its enormous success, has helped bring nearly 600 empty properties back into use.

There are currently around 15,000 long term empty

properties across the twelve districts, depriving people of a much needed home. No Use Empty has been widely praised across the UK as a unique partnership between County and local councils, achieving tangible results and setting an example for other councils in the country to follow.

The fully joined-up approach in 2009 will work to bring as many of these properties back into use as possible and hopefully make this our best year to date by having access to a wider group of resources, skills and experiences.

Kevin Lynes, Cabinet Member for Regeneration at Kent County Council, said: "It was always our intention to roll out the initiative across Kent and I'm delighted to welcome on

board these new members and a complete set of local authorities."

"We have already proven that the initiative is an effective and efficient approach to tackling empty housing in East Kent, and with the support of our new members I'm sure the initiative will make an equal impact across the county."

Steve Grimshaw, No Use Empty project manager, said: "The Empty Property Officers across the region were already engaged with the initiative following a programme of training sessions we organise on a regular basis. Our new members have seen the impact No Use Empty has made in East Kent, and it's terrific news that they have now officially joined the partnership."

The No Use Empty team urge the public to report properties in their local community which they believe to be long term vacant to the No Use Empty **campaign hotline on 08458 247 605**. For further information on the No Use Empty campaign, visit:

[www.no-use-empty.org](http://www.no-use-empty.org)

### IN THIS ISSUE

- Thanet District Council brings back local eyesore back into use
- New faces at No Use Empty
- Interest-free loans for empty property owners

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY NO USE EMPTY

As the campaign approaches its 3rd anniversary, it's time to celebrate some of the terrific achievements in helping return empty properties back into use:

- ✓ £1.1 million interest-free loans to home-owners of empty properties, of which £400,000 are Buy to Sell and £700,000 Buy to Let.
- ✓ 600 Empty Properties brought back into use
- ✓ 459 Empty property officers from local authorities across the UK have attended training sessions run under No Use Empty, including:
- ✓ Empty Dwelling Management Orders
- ✓ Enforced sale procedures
- ✓ Compulsory purchase orders
- ✓ Tracing people
- ✓ Part L building regulations
- ✓ 12 districts across Kent now working in partnership with KCC

No Use Empty would like to say **A BIG THANK YOU** to all those who have continued to support our campaign, including members of the public who have contacted us with empty properties their area.

# AN EMPTY EYESORE NO MORE

One of Thanet's most well known eyesores, a property that had been in disrepair for over 20 years, has been brought into use as affordable housing following extensive restoration.

The property at 77 Eastern Esplanade has been a target of the No Use Empty campaign after its serious structural defects became a major problem for Thanet District Council. Protective scaffolding had to be erected around the property to protect the public from falling masonry and two dangerous chimney stacks that were leaning precariously had to be demolished.

Following the decease of the owner, the property was passed on to various family members throughout Saudi Arabia. Difficulty in tracing the beneficiaries was a major setback, and the council was left to foot the bill for the work carried out.

A sale was then enforced on the property in April 2007 and since then, Town &

Country Housing Group, one of the council's preferred affordable housing partners, has been working to bring the property back into use. When work started the property was boarded up, with windows missing and major infestation by pigeons in the upper floors. Due to missing slates from the roof, water had been pouring through the property for a number of years, causing serious decay, including dry and wet rot.

Thankfully, the four one and two bedroom flats have now been refurbished and were offered for sale on a shared-ownership basis, allowing for those on a low income to get on to the property ladder by owning part of the equity of the property. Shared-owners are able to acquire additional equity at a later stage when



they can afford to and rent is paid on the share of the property they do not own.

The flats range in price from £100,000 to £140,000. Purchasers were able to buy as little as a 25% share and

pay a rent of 2.7% on the remaining portion. All flats have since been sold and the first became occupied in January 2009. All thanks to the No Use Empty Initiative.

# NO USE EMPTY IN ACTION!

## OVER £1 MILLION INTEREST-FREE LOANS TO HOME OWNERS

The campaign is delighted to have approved over £1 million of interest-free loans to home owners across the County in order to help them renovate almost 100 empty properties in two districts (Dover and Thanet) alone

Home owners are facing testing times when it comes to funding costly but restoration works for their properties when the current economic climate makes it very difficult to borrow money from financial institutions.

However, No Use Empty is on hand to help and Kent County Council has committed a £5 million capital fund to provide financial support to owners of empty properties, to help them pay for necessary renovations. "The cost of renovation works is one of the biggest obstacles

to bringing empty homes back into use, so the loan scheme is a very tangible solution to unlock the problem" says Steve Grimshaw, No Use Empty project manager.

The loan scheme is intended for any owner of an empty property, or someone who is considering buying an empty property (if the property has been empty for 6 months or more) anywhere in Kent. They can apply for an interest-free loan of up to £25,000 per unit to a maximum of £175,000, which is made as an up front payment. Loans will also be



A No Use Empty Loan helps to convert this property in Dover into 21 apartments and 17 new builds.

considered for applications to convert commercial properties into residential accommodation.

Steve continued: "The enormous success of the loan scheme so far highlights just how critical the issue of empty housing is in the County. The

£1.1 million to date that has been awarded to home-owners has greatly assisted people in giving a new lease of life to so many empty homes, and hope that many more can benefit in the future now that the project has been rolled-out Kent-wide."

# STOP PRESS + STOP PRESS + STOP PRESS + STOP

## THE NEW FACES AT NO USE EMPTY



Kevin Lynes

The campaign is delighted to report that we welcome a new cabinet member for Regeneration and Economic Development, Councillor Kevin Lynes, who replaces Roger



Steve Grimshaw

Gough. Kevin was elected to Kent County Council in 2001 and is the county councillor for Tunbridge Wells East. Kent County Council Regeneration Project Manager,

Steve Grimshaw also joins the team replacing Susan Pledger. Steve brings a wealth of experience in project management to the team. He will be responsible for working closely with all the District Council's empty property officers to co-ordinate the campaign and deliver its objectives to help bring empty houses back into use, along with the Project Consultant, Andrew Lavender.

Steve is delighted with his new role. He said: "The No Use Empty campaign is a really unique initiative which has made a real difference to bringing empty properties back into use across Kent. There is

nothing quite like this running elsewhere in the UK, particularly in terms of this distinctive and most effective partnership, so I hope to drive the project forward to continue to pioneer this issue as we now have a real responsibility in leading the way. More than ever, with such a large team on board from all over the county, we're all looking forward to expanding upon the excellent work of the empty homes officers across all the districts.

I believe that particularly in these current challenging times, we realise what a waste empty homes are on valuable housing resource."

## NO USE EMPTY SMASHES EMPTY HOMES TARGETS

The scheme has comfortably exceeded its delivery targets to make a significant contribution to the regeneration of local communities.

New figures have revealed that in the last three years, No Use Empty has delivered almost 600 properties back into the community as new, good quality homes.

The initial three-year target for the campaign was 372, and this figure has been surpassed by more than 30%, with a total of 487 vacant properties given a new lease of life and turned into a home. No Use Empty is now well on course to achieving the 2010 target of 650 properties, especially with all 12 districts on board and the level of interest from potential applicants continues to grow.

Empty houses are a scourge

on our local communities, preventing investment and regeneration, devaluing surrounding properties, attracting anti-social behaviour and depriving people of a much needed home. Kent has tackled this issue head-on, delivering outstanding results which prove that this initiative is an effective and efficient approach to tackling empty housing.

Steve Grimshaw, No Use Empty Project Manager said: "No Use Empty has more than lived up to its early promise. Not only have the councils performed well, but the initiative has had a catalytic effect in encouraging others to report more empty homes for the campaign to bring back into use. We think that Kent has created a fantastic model here that other parts of the country could and should follow."

## IT COULD BE YOU!

### CASE STUDY OF A LOAN SCHEME PROPERTY

Max Dale, the owner of an empty property, 24 High Street, Margate, has used the loan to



carry out major renovation works on his property which will provide 4 new homes. The units had previously been vacant for several years. The work is expected to be completed this month at which point the units will be placed on the market for rent, bringing them back into use. The total project cost was £360,000 of which £100,000 was provided through the No Use Empty initiative.

Max said: "The loan we have received from No Use Empty has made the difference between the house falling into further disrepair and turning the property into a new home. With No Use Empty's support we have been able to rescue this house and we would encourage other owners of empty properties to make the most of this scheme and apply for a loan."



# MEET THE TEAM

**Lisa Webb** Housing Standards Officer, Sevenoaks District Council

Each newsletter we feature a member of the No Use Empty team. Lisa Webb is a Housing Standards Officer at Sevenoaks District Council. Located in West Kent within the Metropolitan Green Belt, Sevenoaks has a population of 109,305 with 47,500 dwellings across the three main towns of Sevenoaks, Swanley and Edenbridge, as well as New Ash Green and Hartley with over 30 rural settlements.

As Housing Standards Officer within the Private Sector Housing team in Sevenoaks, I

have been working on empty homes for five years and every day brings a new challenge. My first port of call is to respond to the many reports made by local residents about empty properties in their area. They might be concerned about empty properties that are in a run-down condition or a property that is not secure and is being vandalised.

Often I go out to inspect the condition of empty properties in order to best work out what can be done to bring them back into use. I am currently investigating a long term empty home in the Swanley area that has been the target of several arson attacks. This property is in substantial disrepair, putting the adjoining home at risk and we are trying to work with the owner to

resolve the problem. Every case is unique and often involves working with other Council service areas such as Building Control and Legal, as well as external agencies such as the Police and Kent Fire and Rescue. It all takes time but it's worth it in the end as you know the property will provide a lovely home for someone once it's had a bit of care and attention.

Patience is definitely a skill you need in this job, especially as tracing the owner can often be an enormous challenge: people sometimes move abroad and inherit properties they don't even know about. Fortunately there are a series of methods we can use and once the owner has been identified, I write to them and explain how the Council can

help. There are lots of different methods and many of these people wouldn't necessarily have thought of. There's the No Use Empty loan scheme or a Council grant, where we can often offer interest-free loans or a grant in order to help fund the essential works needed to bring the home back into use. We also provide guidance on renting out a property, the requirements of Planning and Building Regulations, the auction process, VAT incentives and helping to find a reliable building contractor. My favourite part of the job is being able to meet the owner in person to discuss each individual situation and talk about the help we can offer. After all, they're often sitting on an excellent but wasted source of income.

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