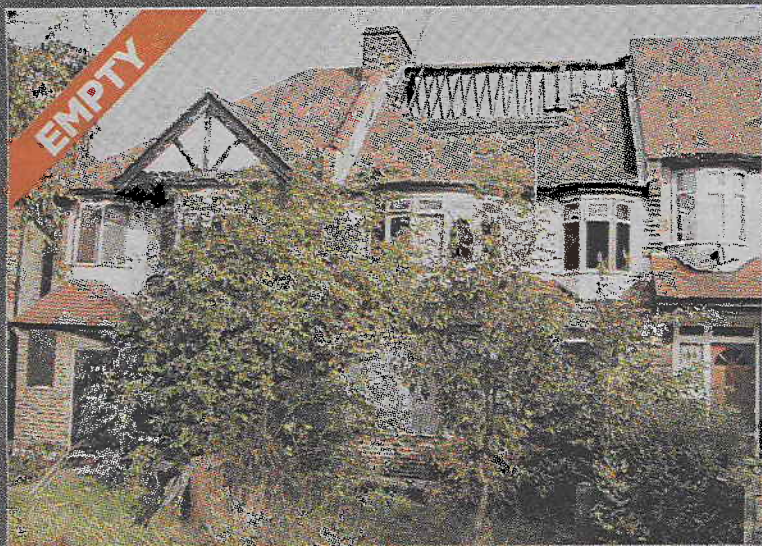
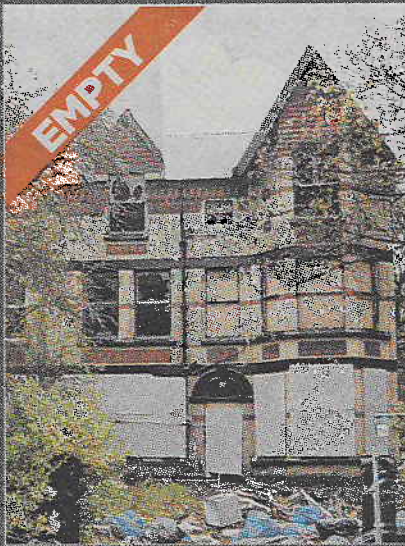


Ministers say we need an extra three million homes – so why are so many unoccupied?



LONDON: One of the 79 houses owned by Transport for London



LIVERPOOL: Six villas are derelict



BUGBROOKE: Five canalside houses have never been lived in

By **Duncan Farmer**

When Hassan and Jeanette Cafer bought a two-bedroom terrace house for £121,000 in Sevenoaks, Kent, in 2002, they planned to convert it into two flats, and within months had obtained planning permission.

But a year later they spent the money on a Marbella apartment instead, leaving the three-storey Victorian house empty for four years.

Squatters moved in, used the floorboards as firewood, and wrecked the kitchen and bathroom.

The story is not uncommon and, according to the latest figures from the Empty Homes Agency, the number of houses and flats in England that have been vacant for more than six months now stands at 672,924, or 3 per cent of the country's total housing stock.

'It's absurd,' says David Ireland of the agency, a charity that aims to get unoccupied homes back into the housing stock. 'More people need housing now than ever before, but more homes are lying empty.'

If all were returned to use, they would cut the Government's target of creating three million new homes by 2020 by almost a quarter. That is unlikely. While

672,924

empty homes in Britain (enough to solve a quarter of our housing needs)

30,000 empty homes were refurbished last year, the total number still rose by 10 per cent compared with 2006, mainly because of new, city-centre flats bought by investors who cannot find tenants. The problem is acute in cities in the North West, such as Manchester and Liverpool, where 4 per cent of all homes are empty.

In London and the South East, where housing need is greatest, there are more than 160,000 empty properties. These are not slums, but include dozens of multi-

million-pound homes in salubrious areas, including Mayfair in London.

Most, like the Cafers', are privately owned and the reason for their state is varied: lack of money for repairs, divorce, death and dispute. In the Northamptonshire village of Bugbrooke, five detached canalside homes, built eight years ago, have never been occupied due to a row between the builder and his client.

Not only do these homes deprive tenants and buyers of somewhere to live, they also blight a neighbourhood. A derelict, empty property can knock an average of 18 per cent off the value of the house next door, according to the Empty Homes Agency.

Councils have wide powers to force owners to clean up run-down homes and sell or let them.

But Kent's No Use Empty campaign offers grants to owners to help cover the cost of refurbishment. The plan has had some success and in the past three years, 487 of Kent's 7,000 empty properties have been brought back to life.

Officers contacted the Cafers in January 2007 to ask why their house was empty, and then offered a grant of £10,000 towards the £50,000 repair bill.

'There were no strings attached,' says Hassan, 47. 'I just had to do the work to their standard and once it was finished they sent me a cheque.' Today, the two flats are let. Hassan and Jeanette, 46, who live in Enfield, North London, and run a restaurant, earn a monthly income of £1,300, and the property's value is £300,000.

Handing out taxpayers' money to investors who have neglected their assets may seem an outrage, but the alternatives can be far more costly.

There is lost council tax as well as the huge bill to house homeless families, which is a statutory duty of local authorities.



INCENTIVE: Hassan Cafer was given £10,000 by the council towards his costs so that his house in Sevenoaks could be converted into flats

Emergency accommodation, such as bed and breakfast hotels, is vastly expensive.

Ironically, local councils are one of the main culprits, owning more than 40,000 empty homes, while other public bodies and housing associations own 45,000.

On the North Circular Road in North London, 79 houses owned by Transport for London have been empty since 1973 when they were compulsorily purchased for a road-widening scheme that didn't happen.

Six large Victorian villas facing Newsham Park in Liverpool have been empty since 2000 falling prey to looters and arsonists. Two are owned by a housing association and two by Liverpool City Council.

The UK Atomic Energy Agency owns eight family houses near Harwell business park in Oxford-

shire. They have been empty since 2004. Despite being structurally sound, the properties are due for demolition because the agency does not want the responsibility of managing them.

A detached house and three two-bedroom cottages owned by the NHS next to the Springfield Hospital site in Wandsworth, South-West London, have been empty for more than ten years and are now virtually derelict.

Government action on the issue is limited. It paid for a website to put owners of derelict homes in touch with would-be buyers, but it attracted only 42 properties. Ironically, the website, too, has been abandoned.

● The Empty Homes Agency, www.emptyhomes.com; 0870 901 6303.

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