

# Kent on Sunday

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East edition No 586

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Jason Manford – 21 Jan 7.30pm



Brendan Cole – 5 Feb 7.30pm



Big Time American Wrestling  
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The Stranglers – 7 March 7pm  
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**BEFORE**



**AFTER**

**BEFORE**



**AFTER**

**CHANGING FACES:** Warren Court Hotel in Cliftonville, and 61 Beach Street, Deal, are two prime examples of how KCC's No Use Empty scheme breathes fresh life into towns with run-down buildings

# The regeneration project cleaning up communities

In 2005, Kent County Council began No Use Empty (NUE), aimed at getting abandoned and derelict properties back on the housing market, the success of which has surprised organisers who this year celebrated their 3,000th restored home. **Dave Mairs** looks at the scheme rejuvenating parts of Kent

IT could almost be a scene from *The Wire* or some other crime drama from America's urban badlands, but the photograph of decay and abandonment (top, left) comes from Cliftonville, the once-plush area of Margate that perhaps more than any other symbolises the decline of so many of our coastal towns.

Encouragingly, however, the image of the Warren Court Hotel is the 'before' shot providing tangible evidence of a scheme that, for once, embodies the term 'regeneration' in its correct context and is hard to imagine anyone disputing.

The scheme is No Use Empty (NUE) and was started in 2005 by Kent County Council with the ambition of returning derelict or empty properties to use and, of course, in many cases habitation.

The rehabilitation of the Warren Court Hotel is one of the more striking examples among more than 3,000 properties across the county that have been given a new lease of life thanks to NUE.

Central to the process is the awarding of interest-free loans to owners and developers wanting to revive long-term-empty properties (LTEs), which are defined as having been vacant for at least six months.

These awards can be of up to £25,000 per property, with a maximum loan of £175,000 per applicant.

In addition to the loans, which have a maximum 90 per cent loan-to-value (the ratio of a loan to the value of what is being bought), the two main tools used by NUE are a partnership fund, which works in default and compulsory purchase orders, and direct purchase.

Loans, which must be repaid within three years, are not offered where the property will be occupied by the applicant. Rather, any property must be let or sold on completion; it also has to meet the decent homes standard.

Any arena involving large sums of money is liable to attract individuals with dubious motives, perhaps nowhere more than in the world of property, so how does NUE regeneration project manager Steve Grimshaw and his colleagues determine who is a genuine applicant and who has less than lofty ambitions?

"We've only had one loan that's gone bad on us," said Mr Grimshaw, whose team is assisted by at least one empty homes officer from each district authority in the county.

Once ownership of the property is established – itself sometimes a taxing process – a site meeting is set up and discussions held with the

“Every property has its own story. It might be a death, a family dispute, or simply an owner's neglect. We have about 20-30 projects on the go at any one time, a real range”

**Steve Grimshaw**, project manager of the regeneration project No Use Empty

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applicant and consultants.

Among the elements necessary for any NUE project to get moving include confirmation of its proven viability, available finance, ownership arrangements (and VAT and tax strategies), two quotes for the cost of the work, Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors valuations, a letter of consent from a mortgage company, a check of money-laundering regulations identification and presentation of company accounts.

In short, this money is not handed out willy-nilly.

Partnered with the initial County Hall operation were the local authorities of Thanet, Dover, Shepway and Swale, but by 2009 the scheme had been rolled out across the county to incorporate all 12 district and borough councils.

Emerging from the second round of Public Service Agreements, NUE was bankrolled by the county council through a capital-funding package of £6.6 million, a third of which came from central government.

The scheme has, by any measure, exceeded expectations.

A target of 376 properties brought back into use within three years became an actual figure of 478, and it was this year, when some 600 properties were returned to use, that the milestone figure of 3,000 was reached.

Consider further that a similar empty-homes project in the capital, initiated by Mayor of London Boris Johnson, returned a mere eight homes to use last year, and the achievement of NUE is put into context.

In Kent, meanwhile, the county council approved loans totalling £2.5m in 2013 – a record year – while overall the scheme has received total investment of £25m, a third coming from KCC's empty-homes loan fund and two-thirds from owners and developers.

Given Kent had some 9,000 LTEs at the start of NUE, a reduction of a third is clearly reason to be cheerful.

"Returning a third of the homes that lay empty when we launched the scheme in 2005 is a significant marker for us," said Mr Grimshaw.

"This has been a bumper year for No Use Empty, as we have launched our affordable-homes partnership with Amicus Horizon, as well as issuing our biggest loan to date, which shows the initiative is evolving while still achieving its goals.

"We are always looking for new projects to undertake, so we urge owners of empty properties to get in touch."

If it is easy to get lost in a welter of facts, figures and pound signs, it is wise to remember that No Use Empty is very much a human tale.

"Every property has its own story," said Mr Grimshaw. "It might be a death, a family dispute, or simply an owner's neglect and disregard.

"We have about 20-30 projects on the go at any one time.

"There's a real range of properties: there are warehouse, chapel and YMCA conversions, there's a pub in Dover, while properties above shops are the flavour of the month."

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**BEFORE**



**AFTER**



**BEFORE**



**AFTER**

**REBUILDING:** To put Kent's NUE success into perspective, more than 3,000 homes have been developed in three years while a similar project in London saw only eight returned to use in a year

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Back in Margate, close to the Warren Court Hotel, is the Arcadian, one of the most striking buildings on the seafront and one which has gained greater prominence courtesy of its proximity to the much-celebrated Turner Contemporary art gallery.

The Arcadian's dilapidated appearance seemed to encapsulate much of what was wrong with Margate during its lowest ebb, prompting Thanet District Council to eventually threaten the owner with a compulsory purchase order.

Responding to what Mr Grimshaw describes as "a carrot and stick approach", the owner, who held the freehold but not all the leaseholds, agreed to improve the exterior of the building if the council withdrew its threat of compulsory purchase.

With a deal reached and all the leaseholds having been obtained by the owner, NUE stepped in with a maximum loan for the internal refurbishment. Eleven units were completed and all had been let within days of being marketed.

If the story of the Arcadian demonstrated dramatically the value of partnership and the efficacy of NUE in a

specific instance, the wider benefits of the scheme can be just as important.

Derelict buildings are vulnerable to vandalism and their very presence can contribute to a depressing, if not downright menacing, environment in our towns and villages.

"Poor condition can affect the capital value of a property by as much as 18 per cent," said Mr Grimshaw.

"Derelict buildings can cause an anti-social problem for police through copper and lead theft, while we lose quite a lot to fire."

Another, perhaps less immediately apparent, gain from NUE is the fact the return to use of so many proper-

ties, theoretically at least, reduces the necessity to build more houses on Kent's rapidly dwindling green acres.

Such is the positive tenor to the project that NUE has inspired similar ventures elsewhere in the country, notably with the West of England Partnership, a union of four local authorities centred on Bristol, and the Welsh Assembly.

Most impressively, perhaps, the Government's National Empty Homes Loans Fund follows the NUE template of offering loans to developers and owners.

Mr Grimshaw, though, is keen to

keep things in context. "No Use Empty is part of the solution – but not all of it," he said. "Fifty-eight per cent of what we do is advice and guidance."

Perhaps the only real question about the scheme is whether public funds should be used to help developers make potentially handsome profits from the rejuvenation of empty properties.

Mr Grimshaw has no such doubts. "No Use Empty is a beacon for best practice. We're stepping into the role of the banks, and the scheme brings about regeneration, jobs and homes for local people. It gives a fair bit of value back, to be honest."

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