

Press Cutting

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Our housing shortage solution starts with reusing empty homes



The shortage of affordable housing is a nationwide problem that has to be tackled at a local level.

As Richard Harrington pointed out recently in *Property Week* (public sector, 04.02.11), the Localism Bill allows each community to address the problem as it sees fit. It is important, therefore, to look at this creatively and consider all the options.

It is estimated that there are more than 1 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 and attract anti-social behaviour such as alcohol and drug abuse.

In addition, we have found that derelict houses undermine the value of nearby properties by up to 18%. Therefore, as well as giving the green light to new residential developments, local authorities should also consider

how empty homes can be returned to use as part of the solution. Kent County Council's No Use Empty scheme, launched in 2005, is designed to do just that: transform derelict, apparently abandoned properties into much-needed housing while at the same time improving the urban environment.

The initiative has so far returned 1,627 empty homes to use, exceeding an initial target of 850, and a further 600 are forecast to be returned to use by March 2013.

The scheme offers interest-free loans of up to £25,000 per home (up to a total of £175,000) to

owners or potential buyers of unused housing, so they can renovate the properties and convert them into homes for people across Kent. To date, loans totalling £3.7m have been issued.

The cost of returning empty homes to use is a fraction of the cost of building new ones

At a time when austerity is the watchword in the public sector, the No Use Empty model provides part of the solution to the county's housing shortage and to improving life in our communities without stretching the local authority's budgets.

The scheme hopefully provides a template that other areas can use. The cost of returning empty homes to use is a fraction of the cost of building new ones, so there is a real incentive for local authorities to intervene and rescue those properties that have fallen into disrepair.

If adopted more widely, not only can the local authorities reduce the housing deficit, they will remove the eyesores that blight many UK streets and in turn make a real difference to quality of life for their residents.

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