

Matthew Pennycook MP
Minister for Housing and Planning
Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Copied to: Rushanara Ali MP, Minister for Homelessness

19th December 2024

Dear Minister,

Empty Homes Offer Immediate Solution to Housing Supply Crisis

At a recent parliamentary roundtable, MPs and Peers joined with sector experts to discuss what more can be done to bring long-term empty homes back into use. The consensus was clear: empty homes can play a significant role in immediately addressing the housing supply crisis and reducing homelessness.

With the highest ever number of households in temporary accommodation, including over 159,000 children, it cannot be right that so many thousands of properties are sitting empty. Bringing them back into use not only offers a quick route to supporting more households into secure homes but would assist the Government's net zero ambitions and help to revitalise communities where homes have fallen into disrepair.

The figures are stark. There are over quarter of a million (265,000) long-term empty homes in England that have been vacant for over 6 months. This does not include second homes or homes going through probate. At the same time, over 123,000 households are in temporary accommodation.

We are writing as a cross-party group of parliamentarians and housing organisations to urge the Government to take further action.

There are immediate, easily implementable and low-cost actions that would drive change:

- **Increase Affordable Homes Programme (AHP) Flexibility** - We welcome the £500m uplift to the Affordable Homes Programme. Currently however, just 10% of AHP funding outside of London can be used for acquisitions under the Programme, compared to 30% within the capital. The Government should increase the percentage of funds that can be allocated for acquiring and refurbishing empty homes. This would immediately provide councils with vital extra funding to address empty homes more effectively. Bringing empty homes back into use provides a ready source of supply and can be cheaper than building new ones. This can be achieved through a simple ministerial directive to local authorities, without requiring any changes to regulations. Such a change should also be carried through to future iterations of the Programme.
- **Reform Empty Homes Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)** - Reducing the qualifying period for EDMOs from two years to six months through a statutory

instrument would enable councils to address long-term empty properties more promptly and would be in line with actions taken by the Welsh Government. Government should also consider removing the requirement that properties have to have been causing a nuisance before an EDMO can be used, as planned by the last Labour government.

Ahead of the long-term housing strategy due to be published in Spring, we are calling on the Government to:

- **Introduce a national empty homes strategy as part of its long-term housing plans** – Following the example of Wales, a comprehensive strategy outlining targets, funding mechanisms and policy reforms would help to drive the action needed at a local level to bring large scale numbers of empty homes back into use to meet local housing need. Funding could include:
 - A no or low interest national loan fund for local authorities, SME developers, empty homeowners and community groups to support the acquisition and refurbishment of empty homes to meet local housing needs.
 - Ring fencing empty homes premium receipts to be used for the purpose of bringing empty properties back into use as affordable housing.
 - The No Use Empty Scheme introduced by Kent County Council in 2005 provides a best practice example of how successful a national loan fund could be. Starting with an initial £5m investment, the scheme has now administered more than £100m worth of recyclable loans and brought nearly 9,000 empty properties back into use. Loans have no interest for first-time users and then charge low interest for those seeking a further loan. The scheme has also benefitted from additional funding from the then Homes and Communities Agency to bring properties back into use as affordable homes, with the requirement that they were leased to registered providers for a minimum of 5 years.

- **Establish a statutory duty for councils to undertake empty homes work** – A statutory duty would support consistent and effective action nationwide. As part of this recommendation, the Government should require local authorities to report on the numbers of empty homes actively brought back into use as a result of intervention by them including the number of social rented homes created and properties leased to meet local housing need, as well as develop standalone empty homes strategies. Data on empty homes is currently inconsistent; this would enable better monitoring and informed decision-making.

- **Reform probate** – Current legislation means that in certain circumstances properties subject to probate can be exempted from the Empty Homes Premium in perpetuity. This not only results in properties remaining empty for longer, but also reduces the ability for councils to generate income from such properties. By introducing a probate application time limit, properties would be subject to charges from such time that the time limit expires. Protections would be needed for those where probate is being delayed through no fault of their own.

There is huge potential for empty homes to play a key role in alleviating the housing supply shortage to meet local housing need in the short term whilst we scale up building more social and affordable homes. We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss this.

Please could your office contact paula.barker.mp@parliament.uk to establish when might be suitable for such a meeting.

Yours,

Paula Barker MP

Sian Berry MP

Lord Best

Lord Bird of Notting Hill

The Lord Bishop of Chelmsford, the Rt Revd
Dr Guli Francis-Dehqani

Bob Blackman MP

Jonathan Brash MP

Lord Foster of Bath

Baroness Greender

Paulette Hamilton MP

Baroness Lister of Burtsett

Dr Simon Opher MP

Shockat Adam MP

Baroness Pinnock of Cleckheaton

Lee Pitcher MP

David Smith MP

Baroness Thornhill

Baroness Watkins of Tavistock

Steve Witherden MP

Sue Edmonds, CEO, Capital Letters

Matt Downie, CEO, Crisis

Adam Cliff, Secretary, Empty Homes
Network

Rebecca Moore, Director, Action on Empty
Homes

Jonathan Tame, Housing and Community
Advisor, Church of England