



*Filling the empties:  
National commitment, local action*

**Empty Homes Network Policy Statement**  
**DISCUSSION DRAFT**

Contents

FILLING THE EMPTY HOMES: FIVE POINT PLAN .....1

INTRODUCTION .....2

1. A NATIONAL EMPTY HOMES INITIATIVE .....3

2. AN EMPTY HOMES LOAN FUND .....5

3. FUNDING FOR SOCIAL HOUSING .....6

4. AN EMPTY HOMES ACT.....7

5. LOCAL EMPTY HOMES INITIATIVES .....8



# ***Filling the empties: five point plan***

## ***At national level***

1. A commitment from government to implement a sustainable, evidence-based, cost-effective national Empty Homes Initiative.
2. A national Empty Homes Loans Fund, administered by local authorities.
3. Dedicated capital funding streams for organisations of all sizes that create social housing from empty property.
4. An Empty Homes Act to bring coherence to the hotchpotch of legislation affecting empty homes.

## ***At local level***

5. A sustainable, effective empty homes initiative in every local authority supported by a cost-effective delivery partnership.

# Introduction

## About this document

The Empty Homes Network has produced this document to help policy-makers and political parties develop effective approaches to tackling the problem of empty homes. It builds on the experience and insight of the Network's practitioners, who work across the public, private and voluntary sectors. For each of our five proposed policy strands we suggest practical measures that can make a difference.

## Why empty homes matter

Empty homes make headlines because they matter to lots of people, people who

- are offended by the sight of wasted homes when so many families still do not have a decent roof over their heads<sup>1</sup>; and/or
- worry about empty homes blighting their neighbourhoods; and/or
- find the condition and/or value of their home affected by an empty property next door<sup>2</sup>; and/or
- suffer from anti-social behaviour associated with an empty property; and/or
- oppose the building of much-needed new housing on open space when existing homes are not being put to good use; and/or
- care about climate change and the carbon cost of building new homes compared with upgrading and re-using existing ones<sup>3</sup>.

These issues concern large numbers of people in **every** community in Britain. That's why empty homes are a national concern as well as a local one and why we need a **national initiative** to address the problem.

But a national initiative is no use unless it can deliver at local level, street by street, property by property: that's where we need councils to take the lead by building effective programmes in their local area.

Empty homes can't solve Britain's housing problem. But unless there is a coherent, strenuous, visible programme to do something about the empties, attempts to build the new homes we need will continue to meet local opposition.

# 1. A national empty homes initiative

A commitment from government to implement a sustainable, cost-effective, evidence-based national Empty Homes Initiative

“A commitment” **means** producing and publicising SMART action plans to underpin the initiative

<b>Specific</b>	Setting aims and objectives
<b>Measurable</b>	Ensuring objectives have outcome measures such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• number of long-term empties brought back to use</li><li>• homes created from redundant commercial space</li><li>• number of social homes delivered</li></ul>
<b>Achievable</b>	Making sure the outcomes are realistic, based on <b>evidence</b> of what works
<b>Resourced</b>	Allocating to the initiative <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• identifiable persons responsible for delivery</li><li>• capital and revenue funding where needed</li></ul>
<b>Time-bound</b>	Planning for the short, medium and long term - what will happen when?

“sustainable” **means** recognising that property will continue to fall empty: creating frameworks that conserve investments in skills and knowledge and permit long-term planning

“cost-effective” **means** balancing costs and benefits based on the evidence, leveraging private sector finance and exploiting the hidden value lying fallow in empty homes.

## 1. A national empty homes initiative (continued)

“evidence-based”

*means*

evaluating schemes and approaches to identify what works.

**Evaluation**

### Approaches to funding

- loan schemes (Wales, Kent, NEHLF, councils)
- private sector grant schemes (councils)
- funding for affordable housing via HCA, Community Grants Programme
- “Clusters of Empties”, homesteading
- prudential borrowing by councils

### Fiscal measures

- Council tax discounts, exemptions and premiums
- VAT

### Incentives to local authorities - New Homes Bonus and alternatives

### Frameworks for delivery

- national initiatives (eg Wales, Scotland)
- regional partnerships (eg Wales, Kent)
- community-led housing

### Effectiveness of enforcement legislation

### Data issues

- accuracy of council tax
- quantifying social benefits
- hidden costs of empties
- social and economic benefits of returning them to re-use

“national”

*means*

recognising the national dimension of the solutions we need and acting accordingly

**National  
Dimension**

- improving the law
- improving taxation measures
- a national funding programmes to support local responses and avoid a postcode lottery
- creating and disseminating templates and models that can be replicated locally
- promoting best practice at local level

## 2. An empty homes loan fund

A national Empty Homes Loans Fund, administered by local authorities

“national”

**means**

recognising the advantages of a **national framework** to support the Loans Fund

**National Framework**

- national publicity for the scheme
- using Homes and Communities Agency investment expertise to manage distribution of funding to councils
- standard templates and models for procedures, documents etc
- skill and knowledge sharing across the country

“Loans Fund”

**means**

an initial pot of money is made available for councils to lend but, being a loan, becomes available for re-use when repaid by owners – a “revolving fund”

“administered by local authorities”

**means**

taking advantage of local commitment, skills and infrastructure:

**Local Infrastructure**

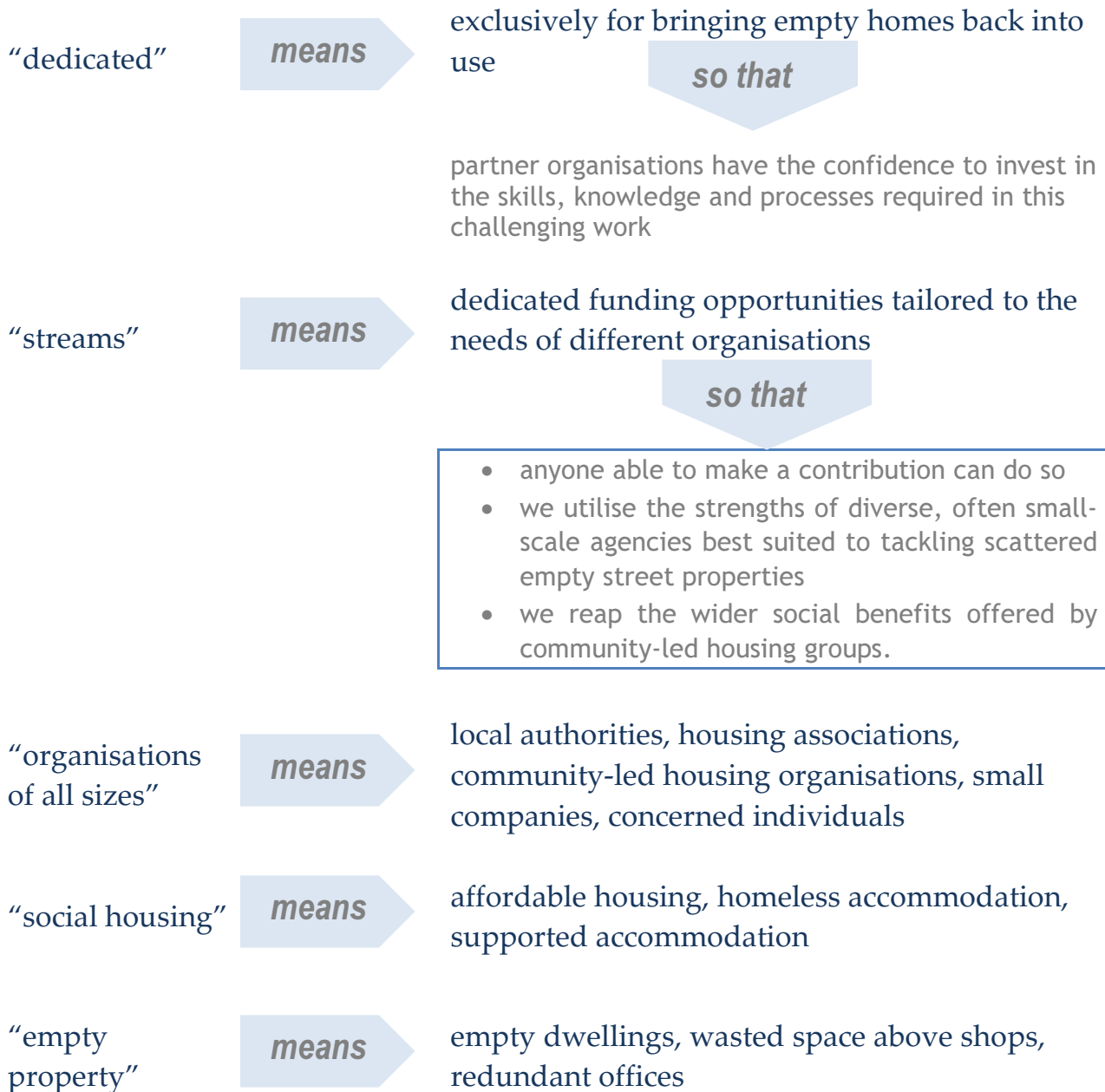
- the commitment of local councils to tackling empties in their areas
- the existing legal powers of councils to offer loans
- the existing procedures and partnerships available in most areas for providing loans to the private sector
- specific experience in loans to bring empties back into use

**IN WALES:** The Welsh Government introduced its national *Houses to Homes* loan scheme in 2012, working in partnership with the Welsh Local Government Association. Together, they joined with local authorities to build a successful Welsh empty homes initiative around the loans scheme, with well-documented benefits described in the [evaluation reports](#) produced by Sheffield Hallam University.



### 3. Funding for social housing

Dedicated capital funding streams for organisations of all sizes, that create social housing from empty property





# 4. An Empty Homes Act

An Empty Homes Act to bring coherence to the hotchpotch of legislation affecting empty homes

“coherence” **means** making the law consistent, proportionate and able to address the issues particular to empty homes compared with occupied homes

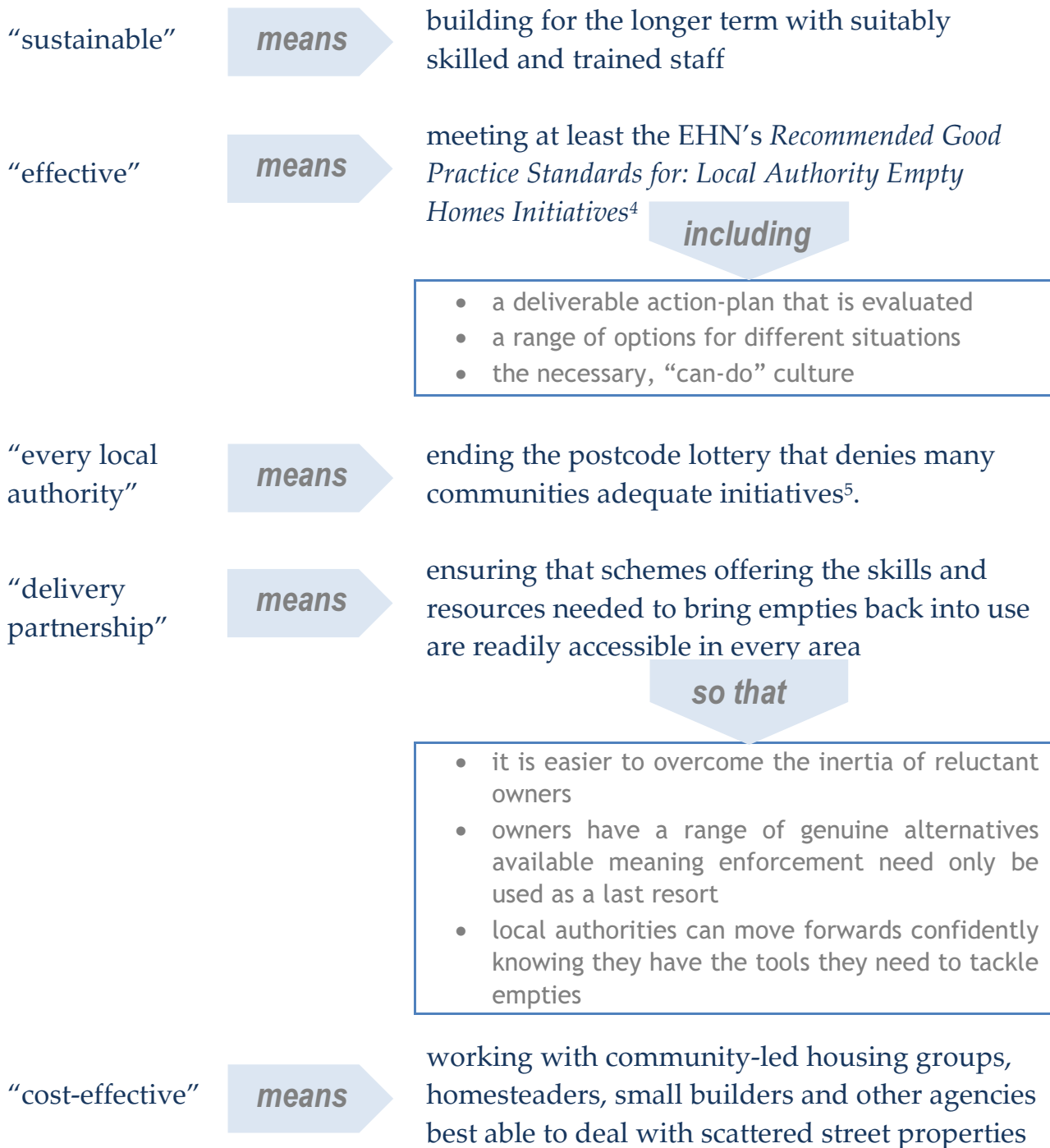
“hotchpotch of legislation” **means** cutting through the red-tape to produce new sensible rules that work

**including**

<i>Definitions</i>	Give consistent definitions of second and empty homes that make sense across council tax /housing statute. Treat second homes broadly the same as empty homes for council tax purposes.
<i>Antisocial property</i>	The law should recognise that some property, like abandoned cars, creates problems for communities and should be categorised and dealt with accordingly.
<i>Compulsory Purchase</i>	End the loophole whereby owners of problem properties can get a £75,000 bonus if councils have to compulsorily purchase them
<i>Empty Dwelling Management Orders</i>	End the rules that prevent owners voluntarily agreeing an EDMO with a council. Bring in a simpler process of application and appeal the same as for other Housing Act measures.
<i>Cost recovery</i>	Rationalise the law to give councils simple, consistent rules that provide an unqualified right to recover the taxpayer money they spend if enforcement action is upheld eg the up-front costs associated with EDMOs.
<i>Valuation Office Agency</i>	Revise the definitions that allow the worst empty homes to be removed from council tax altogether.
<i>Council tax exemptions</i>	Time-limit to two years council-tax exemptions for people inheriting homes.
<i>Council tax data</i>	Clarify rules around access to council tax data for empty homes purposes
<i>VAT</i>	Reduce the costs of repairs by harmonising VAT on repairs with new-build; remove current perverse VAT incentives to keep homes empty. Make Works-in-Default subject to VAT to avoid tax avoidance

# 5. Local empty homes initiatives

A sustainable, effective empty homes initiative in every local authority, supported by a cost-effective delivery partnership



## NOTES

---

<sup>1</sup> There were 57,910 households in temporary accommodation in England, 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter 2014; those households included 84,930 children (CLG Live Tables on Homelessness *Table 775 Statutory homelessness: households in temporary accommodation1, by type of accommodation, at the end of each quarter*). There were 1,688,892 households on council waiting lists in England, 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013 (CLG Live tables on rents, lettings and tenancies *Table 600 Rents, lettings and tenancies: numbers of households on local authorities' housing waiting lists, by district*)

<sup>2</sup> Hometrack estimated that a home next door to an empty property would lose an average 18% of its value (2003 report)

<sup>3</sup> See *New Tricks from Old Bricks* published by Empty Homes and the Building and Social Housing Foundation and available for download from the [BSHF website](#).

<sup>4</sup> Downloadable from the EHN website [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> "...authorities vary significantly in the level of resources devoted to tackling LTE and while those with relatively high LTE are more likely to devote more resources to tackling the problem and vice versa, there are exceptions to this pattern". *Application of Discretionary Council Tax Powers for Empty Homes*, CLG, 2008.

# About the Empty Homes Network

We are a national network with approximately 500 individual members, launched in 2001 as the **National Association of Empty Property Practitioners** with the support of the government. Then-Minister Sally Keeble wrote

*“NAEPP[=EHN] will provide a national voice for local authority and RSL staff in their work to bring empty homes back into use. The Government is keen to see its membership grow into a national network of empty property practitioners. So I would urge all local authorities to take out membership of NAEPP[EHN]. This will ensure that all relevant officers in the authority benefit from the good practice and training opportunities developed by, and for, empty property practitioners”.*

Since then we have expanded our membership to include those working in regeneration companies, in self-help and community groups, and in private sector firms involved in helping bring empty homes back into use.

We are a not-for-profit membership organisation that is separate from and completely independent of the charity Empty Homes Agency.

Our main role is to support all practitioners and organisations involved in addressing the issue of empty homes to help them work as effectively as possible. We do this by facilitating the sharing of information and experience, by organising training events and conferences, by promoting best practice amongst delivery partners and by promoting sound policy at national level.

## For further information

Contact:

David Gibbens, Policy Lead  
Empty Homes Network,  
PO Box 703,  
Exeter,  
EX1 9PX

Telephone: 0844 736 5 736

web: [www.ehnetwork.org.uk](http://www.ehnetwork.org.uk)

e-mail: [david.gibbens@ehnetwork.org.uk](mailto:david.gibbens@ehnetwork.org.uk)

## Document History

1<sup>st</sup> draft issued 23 November 2014

2<sup>nd</sup> draft: Works in default

document source: EHNPolicyStatement-2014-15.docx

last saved: 01/Dec/2014 13:32

