



4th August 2009

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New version of Performance Statistical Monitoring docs

The Executive meeting in June discussed the first draft of the *Guidelines*. The key points to emerge were:

it was unnecessary to have a *Full* and *Summary* version of the *Guidelines*

rent / deposit guarantee interventions should be segregated out

The latest versions of the *Guidelines* and the accompanying spreadsheets are up on the website at www.naepp.org.uk. Don't forget that full paying members can download a more sophisticated spreadsheet that can automatically produce the statistical summaries from detail records.

Feedback

The previous version didn't get much feedback from the membership at large. We'd like to think that's because that everyone is fine with the proposals but we suspect there is a certain amount of inertia involved too. The fact is, we do need some transparent way of measuring our performance or outcomes. Without it, we can easily become invisible - as indeed we are at the moment as far as national statistics are concerned. That really can't be a good thing and we are lobbying to get monitoring of local authority empty homes work re-introduced into the Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix where it used to be (in the form of BVPI64). We have to be able to put forward a credible and broadly acceptable methodology to allow that to happen.

The proposal for a National Empty Homes initiative Action Plan also has a headline target around improved performance in respect of long-term empties. Again - if there are no targets to aim at, it would be difficult to build the case for a national initiative.

“Unacceptable Delay”

The only issue raised by members in respect of the first draft was that the new criterion of “unreasonable delay” might prevent local authorities claiming success which they were legitimately entitled to.

This new criterion was intended to maintain credibility for local authorities by screening out clearly unacceptable delays, for example where the local authority, having initiated some action, then sits on its hands for years while empty properties that are under its control rot away.

We've taken on board the comments by upping the threshold for “unreasonable delay” to one year's aggregate inaction, recognising that in complex cases, delays can be inevitable. We'd like to think cases falling foul of this criterion would be very rare.

MEMBERS' VIEWS COUNT

The latest draft is up there for your comments. If you want to give feedback, please do so by the end of August.

National Empty Homes Action Plan latest news

Shortly before the last Executive Meeting the then minister Ian Wright responded to our proposals for a National Empty Homes Initiative involving a much more dynamic partnership between central and local government.

His response was rather predictable, effectively re-affirming the government's commitment to fight to the last drop of local authority's blood in the effort to tackle empty homes. The Minister's letter is reproduced on the next 2 pages.



David Gibbens
National Association of Empty Property
Practitioners

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Dear Mr Gibbens,

3rd June 2009

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF EMPTY PROPERTY PRACTITIONERS (NAEPP)

Thank you for your e-mail of 22 April to the Rt Hon Margaret Beckett MP and myself, enclosing proposals from the National Association of Empty Property Practitioners (NAEPP) for a national action plan to tackle empty homes.

I am pleased that you were able to attend the empty homes seminar I hosted on 23 April and hope that you found the event as useful as I did.

Thank you for sharing NAEPP's ideas with us. The Government is determined to tackle the issue of empty homes. Empty homes blight communities and are a magnet for vandals intent on anti-social behaviour. They also tie up the resources of local authorities and the emergency services. Bringing them back into use provides much-needed housing and reduces the need to develop new homes on urban fringes and in the countryside, although areas with high concentrations of empty homes often do not correspond with areas of high housing need.

NAEPP are suggesting that the Government should draw up and implement an action plan to promote the re-occupation of empty homes, providing direction, resources and support to partners at all levels to ensure delivery through a national homes initiative.

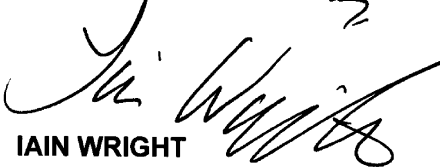
The Government believes that local authorities are best placed to decide what action to take locally in respect of empty homes, based on the needs of the area and their priorities, which is why the use of certain powers is discretionary. We have provided a range of tools that local authorities can use to address the issue of empty properties and we do not believe that more legislation is needed. Rather, we want to ensure all local authorities perform as the best already do by implementing effective empty property strategies. However, we are not convinced that the imposition of a statutory requirement to produce a specific empty property strategy would in itself result in any greater commitment, or level of useful activity, on the part of some authorities.

In terms of resources, the Government believes that a well-developed strategy that places empty properties into the context of the authority's wider housing needs should attract a reasonable proportion of the general grant received by local authorities from this

Department. While there is no direct funding available from this Department, it may be possible for local authorities to use the Targeted Funding Stream from the Homes & Communities Agency. This is what is proposed for London in the draft London Housing Strategy.

The Government believes in providing local authorities with guidance and support in their role of bringing empty properties back into use. We work closely with the independent Empty Homes Agency and supported their new guidance on Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs), which was issued on 10 March. The Rt Hon Margaret Beckett provided a foreword for the guidance. The seminar I hosted provided an opportunity to discuss the obstacles facing authorities in dealing with empty homes, share examples of best practice and to encourage local authorities to take action to tackle empty homes in their area. The seminar was well received and we shall be considering how best to continue our support in light of feedback from the event.

I hope this is useful.

Best wishes.
Yours sincerely

IAIN WRIGHT

(NEHAP latest news - continued)

We have yet to make contact with the new ministers. However, the current emphasis on newbuild seems to be relentless - as evidenced by the recent switch of some funding from Decent Homes to newbuild. *Building Magazine* (31/07/09) reports the London chief of the HCA as suggesting that Councils might consider demolition and rebuilding as an alternative approach. So much for "New Tricks with Old Bricks", to borrow the Empty Homes Agency's phrase.

Anyway, we have had a response from LACORS which is an arm of the Local Government Association (for further info about LACORS see <http://www.lacors.gov.uk/lacors/home.aspx> They have requested a meeting which we hope will be held over the next month or so.

And now for something completely different....

We are indebted to a correspondent who wishes to remain anonymous, for the following anecdote from the front line.

Now here's a funny thing.

Just when we thought that BVPI 64 was dead and buried, it came back to haunt us in a curious way.

We had an Audit Commission Housing Inspectorate visit earlier this year to look at our Strategic Housing Services, including Empty Homes, an area in which we have been both active and successful.

When the Draft report came from the Audit Commission it berated us for the low numbers of empty properties brought back into use through active intervention (i.e. enforcement etc., including CPO work) - 14 in the year from one part-time post.

In their report the auditors said that our performance on this was near the bottom of the fourth quartile, as the neighbouring authorities were doing over 100 !

I knew what adjacent authorities were doing in this sphere - and the answer was extremely close to nil.

It appeared that what our friends from the AC had done was to muddle up the two constituent elements of BVPI 64 and were therefore presumably quoting Rent Deposit Scheme figures believing them to be Empty Homes Intervention statistics.

(And now for something completely different – cont'd.)

On this basis, at over 170 - by adding in our rent deposits- we were well through towards the top of the upper quartile for performance.

A written explanation was given to the auditors in the form of a revision comment on their draft report, together with additional clarification (i.e.explanation).

When the final version of the audit report was received, it was disappointing to see that we had obviously failed in our efforts to explain the intricacies BVPI 64 in sufficient clarity, as although there had been some re-wording, sadly this had not been accompanied by any re-thinking and the outcome amounted to the 'same meat, but with different gravy.'

As Empty Homes was only a very small part of the whole scope of the audit, we decided not to waste any more time attempting to explain it, but rather to focus on other, bigger issues.

Nevertheless it was, what seemed like, a surprisingly basic error - indeed one might be forgiven for wondering whether they were determined to get it wrong, or just incapable of getting it right.

So be aware: having been suddenly killed off before its time had come, the ghost of BVPI 64 is a troubled and misunderstood spirit and it still haunts the world of Housing statistics.

Name and address supplied, but withheld in order to avoid embarrassment, or to protect the innocent : whichever.

It must be said that this story does underline the value in disaggregating rent / deposit type interventions from other types of interventions as currently proposed. Under the old *Guidelines* it would have been appropriate for the authority to have included its 170 such interventions in its BVPI64 figures: what is hard to understand is why the Audit Commission did not then accept the revised figures once this had come to light.

Executive Committee Meeting 10th June

We were glad to welcome Wendy Armstrong and Rachel Edwards from CLG and David Ireland of the EHA, who attended for part of the meeting.

The minutes are now up on the website (you'll need to log in - they're for members only).

New 0844 phone number for NAEPP: In case you hadn't noticed, we now have a new non-geographic telephone number: **0844 736 5 736**. That's a normal local call rate. NAEPP also pays any cost associated with the call being forwarded to us.