

Rt Hon Christopher Pincher MP
Minister of State for Housing
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

10 September 2020

Dear Minister,

Re: Empty Homes

As I am sure you are aware Empty Homes Week takes place each year from the 21 September. Despite the week being officially postponed this year due to the Coronavirus pandemic, Propertymark believe more must be done to get empty homes back into use. It should not be the case that we need a week each year to fix this problem.

Propertymark represents over 18,000 property agents across the UK working in residential sales, lettings and auctions. We are part of the Empty Homes Coalition, a group seeking action on empty homes. As I am sure you will agree empty homes are a wasted resource and more needs to be done to get vacant properties back on the market for would-be home buyers or landlords.

Latest UK Government data shows that over 216,000 homes in England have been empty for over six months. In all, over 600,000 homes are currently vacant in England, more than the UK Government's housebuilding target of 300,000 per year. If some of these houses were brought into use, it could reduce the need for more new homes which in turn would save substantial amounts of material compared to building new homes. Consequently, this would help to minimise the amount of land used for development and avoid wasting embedded carbon; helping to combat climate change and reach the UK Government's net zero carbon target by 2050.

The Conservatives have long been the party of homeownership and we welcome recent measures such as the holiday on Stamp Duty Land Tax. However, to have a healthy housing market and to 'level up' parts of the country as well as provide assistance to 'left behind' regions more must be done to get empty homes back into use. To this end, the UK Government should commission a study to understand and ultimately deliver improvements to tackle the underlying cause of empty homes in neighbourhoods with higher levels.

Dealing with empty properties can provide regenerative benefits but it can also bring potential savings for the government too by reducing temporary accommodation costs, saving on housing benefit spent in the private rented sector, and reducing the social and economic costs of the poor health, educational and family outcomes associated with living in poor quality and insecure accommodation. The UK Government has stated that they will need to balance the books after the health crisis and we think looking to solve the empty homes problem could be one way of doing this, while also solving the issue of low house building.

Cont'd...

To further help the situation we believe the UK Government should restart the Empty Homes Community Grants Programme, which was in place until 2015 and funded community groups to bring empty homes back into use. It is vital that there are avenues available for people and local authorities to buy, lease and refurbish empty homes to also provide affordable housing. We know that 57% of Councils with high levels of long-term empty homes say there should be a speedier process for obtaining compulsory purchase orders on long-term empty homes. Therefore, more needs to be done to ensure local authorities can work with owners to bring properties back into use.

In addition, we know that 97% of local authorities with generally high levels of empty homes cite owners' inability to fund repairs as a reason homes remain empty and over 80,000 empty homes are in the Band A Council Tax Band. As a result, the UK Government must consider long term incentives to encourage empty homes being brought back into use, such as discounts or exemptions to council tax and SDLT.

It is imperative that we tackle the problem of empty homes and I would be grateful if you would outline what measures the UK Government is currently taking to improve the situation and get more empty homes back into use.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes



Mark Hayward
Chief Executive
NAEA Propertymark