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Lowest and highest value properties have the highest levels of empty homes

New research released by the campaigning charity Empty Homes to mark Empty Homes Week shows that both the highest and lowest value properties in England have the highest levels of long-term empty homes.

Numerically, by far the greatest number of long-term empty homes are recorded in lower value properties. In council tax band A over 84,000 homes were recorded by local authorities as long-term empty, more than twice as many as in any other council tax band.

The findings

Empty Homes analysed Government data for England on the number of long-term (over six months) empty homes by each of the eight council tax bands A to H. While 0.86% of homes were recorded as long-term empty across England as a whole, the proportion of empty homes in the highest value council tax band (H) and lowest value band (A) were significantly higher at 1.51% and 1.49% respectively. Excluding these two bands, 0.65% of homes were recorded as long-term empty across the other six intermediate council tax bands B to G.

Long-term (more than six month) empty homes by council tax band

Council tax band	Number of council tax chargeable dwellings	Number of long-term empty homes (more than six-month)	Long-term empty homes as % of council tax chargeable dwellings
A	5,659,959	84,352	1.49
B	4,572,155	37,037	0.81
C	5,096,935	31,075	0.61
D	3,612,011	20,437	0.57
E	2,233,487	12,123	0.54
F	1,183,414	6,950	0.59
G	825,531	6,112	0.74
H	136,327	2,059	1.51
Total all Council Tax bands	23,319,819	200,145	0.86

Although a degree of caution is needed in interpreting the data (see notes to editors 3 to 7), it can clearly be seen that there are disproportionately more long-term empty homes in both the highest and the lowest value property bands.

Commenting on the findings, Empty Homes director Helen Williams says:

“Housing policy is failing people living in poor-standard housing in the midst of homes going to waste in both our most expensive and lower property priced neighbourhoods, but it need not be this way.

“We are urging the Government to establish funding for neighbourhood improvement schemes in lower property price areas to support local authorities and community organisations to buy and refurbish empty properties and to tackle the underlying causes, such as poor housing in parts of the private rented sector. This could make a big difference to the people living there and provide attractive housing for people searching for a decent home at a price they can afford in the wider housing market.

“At the same time, there is enough evidence to suggest that Government needs to explore additional measures to stop people buying and holding onto properties not to live in but to store and grow their wealth. Measures could include a reform of the council tax system to enable councils to charge a lot more where properties are left empty or hardly ever used, or regulation or planning reforms to ensure properties are built and occupied first and foremost to meet housing needs.”

Ends

Notes to editors:

1. Empty Homes is a national campaigning charity focused on promoting strategies for bringing empty property into use to create affordable housing. Find out more at <http://www.emptyhomes.com/>
2. Empty Homes Week 2017 is running from the 16th to 22nd October. Every year local authorities, housing providers, community-led organisations and others see Empty Homes Week as an opportunity to organise events and put out information so that people know about their work to tackle empty homes. Empty Homes Week is also the chance to celebrate successes and reflect on what more needs to be done to bring empty properties back into use to help meet housing needs.
3. To understand the relationship between house prices and empty properties Empty Homes went to the Government’s Council Taxbase data used by Government to arrive at the official statistics on the number of long-term vacant dwellings (see: Department for Communities and Local Government (2016) ‘Council Taxbase 2016 in England’: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/council-taxbase-2016-in-england>). We extracted the number of long-term empty homes in England by each of the council tax bands A to H. From the same source, we extracted the number of chargeable dwellings in England by council tax bands A to H. We then calculated the percentage of chargeable dwellings long-term empty by council tax band.
4. Council tax bands have been used in several studies as a proxy for house prices values. Although council tax bands are based on property valuations on 1 April 1991, not their current value, in relative terms most properties are likely to have remained in the same band: dwellings initially placed in the bottom band A are likely to have remained relatively low in value, with those in the top band H remaining relatively high. In addition, relatively highly priced new build properties will be placed in an appropriate higher council tax band.
5. Government statistics on empty homes may undercount the true scale of long-term empty homes, partly because they are derived from local authorities’ council tax data and councils do not always know that a property is empty. At the same time, many of the homes that people think of as empty do not count as being empty in the official statistics as they are not empty for council tax purposes, for example because they are furnished

and occupied occasionally. Nonetheless people are concerned that these properties are being underused and wasted in the face of so many people looking for a decent place to call a home.

6. The higher level of homes long-term empty in the lowest council tax band (band A) is likely to relate to the housing market and neighbourhood conditions that can be found in some areas, particularly in the North of England. Recent research from Empty Homes found that neighbourhoods with higher levels of empty homes tend to be places where people are living on low incomes and where there is a lot of private rented sector housing not meeting decent homes standards. The charity is calling on Government to fund community-based neighbourhood improvement schemes in these areas to support local organisations to buy and refurbish empty homes to create affordable decent housing and to tackle the underlying cause of the housing market failure there. Empty Homes challenges the view that there is low demand for housing in lower priced neighbourhoods, if homes are refurbished to a decent standard and the wider issues communities face addressed.
7. Empty Homes argues that the higher proportion of homes long-term empty in the highest council tax band (band H) could relate to people with money to spare buying properties in higher value areas not to live in, but as somewhere to store their wealth and earn a return on what they see as an investment.
8. The 2017 edition of *Empty Homes in England* can be found at http://www.emptyhomes.com/assets/ehe_2017_final.pdf. It analyses the latest data available from the Government on long-term vacant dwellings in England; explores why homes remain empty and what can be done to bring them back into use to meet housing needs.

Media enquiries

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