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Charity urges measures to break vicious cycle of high local concentrations of empty homes

New research by the campaigning charity Empty Homes highlights a vicious cycle in which areas with high concentrations of empty homes are linked to high levels of deprivation and poor standard housing.

However, there is a golden opportunity for Government to help break the cycle by putting in place an investment programme that supports neighbourhood improvement approaches, that both refurbish the housing stock and tackle the underlying causes of empty homes in these areas, according to the report.

Empty homes: why do some areas have high levels? urges policy makers to recognise that the high levels of empty homes and poor standard of existing housing in some parts of the country are just as much a part of the housing crisis as the extreme affordability gap in high value areas where demand more obviously outstrips supply.

High levels of empty homes, particularly in parts of the North and Midlands and some seaside towns show the housing market is not working effectively in some places. *Empty homes: why do some areas have high levels?* challenges the view that there is low demand for housing in neighbourhoods with high levels of empty homes, if homes are refurbished to a decent standard and the issues communities face addressed.

Empty Homes surveyed local authorities with higher levels of long-term empty homes overall or concentrations in particular neighbourhoods to understand the underlying causes and what is needed to tackle the waste of empty homes in those areas. Empty Homes found that such areas tend to have more deprivation, more residents on low incomes, and relatively low house prices. In addition, in neighbourhoods with concentrations of long-term empty homes, the charity found a higher level of poor quality private rented sector housing, and a higher perceived level of social problems, such as anti-social behaviour.

The report points to the success of neighbourhood improvement approaches that attract more people to move into an area with higher levels of empty homes and to stay for longer. Through such neighbourhood improvement approaches, more could be done to meet England's housing needs through making better use of its existing stock. Areas with significant pockets of long-term empty homes are still generally within regional housing markets where many people are frustrated in their search for decent housing at a price they can afford.

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

“At present, areas with high concentrations of empty homes tend to be caught in a vicious cycle. But it doesn't have to be that way. We know that targeted funding of neighbourhood improvement schemes brings results.

"By helping communities to buy and refurbish their empty homes, and get to grips with the underlying causes, there is real win-win potential to improve the quality of life of existing residents and to boost housing supply.

"We are urging the Government to establish funding for neighbourhood improvement approaches targeted at areas with higher levels of long-term empty homes to enable local authorities and community organisations to buy and refurbish empty properties and to tackle the underlying causes like poor management in parts of the private rented sector and anti-social behaviour. Such measures can make a big difference and see more people attracted to living in a neighbourhood and staying for longer."

Key findings form what local authority respondents said:

Characteristics of neighbourhoods with concentrations of empty homes v the local authority generally:

- Lower household incomes.
- Lower house prices.
- More deprivation.
- More changes in population/higher population turnover.
- More pre-1919 terraces.
- More antisocial behavior and more crime.
- More private rented homes with higher levels of those homes not meeting the Decent Homes Standard.

Characteristics of local authority areas with relatively high levels of long-term empty homes generally and/or concentrated in particular neighbourhoods v nationally:

- Lower household incomes.
- Lower house prices.
- More deprivation.
- More pre-1919 terraces.

What local authorities think would most help them to bring more empty homes back into use in areas with higher levels of empty homes and/or concentrations in particular neighbourhoods

- Central Government funding/programmes targeted at local authorities with high levels of long-term empty homes.
- More powers for local authorities to take legal action against owners of long-term empty homes.
- Speedier process for local authorities to obtain compulsory purchase orders on long-term empty homes.
- Central Government funding/programmes for wider neighbourhood regeneration schemes.

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 www.emptyhomes.com

Continued

2. Read the full report <http://www.emptyhomes.com/assets/empty-homes-why-do-some-areas-have-have-higher-levels-final-pdf.pdf>

3.. For media enquiries, please contact Helen Williams on helen.williams@emptyhomes.com or telephone 0203 135 0672 or 07788 272 123.

4. The 58 local authorities for the survey were purposefully selected, based on either or both of two criteria. Firstly, from Government statistics they recorded relatively high levels of long-term empty homes (vacant for more than six months). Secondly, they had received money from the Homes and Communities Agency's Clusters of Empty Homes Fund (Clusters Funding ended March 2015). This was to ensure that some local authorities were included with known concentrations of empty homes, even if they were not among the local authorities which recorded relatively high level of long-term empty homes overall (one criterion for Clusters Funding was having over 10% of homes empty in the neighbourhood). However, Empty Homes cautions that it is unlikely that it included all local authorities with concentrations of empty homes; some of them would not have bid for Clusters Funding, while others may have bid unsuccessfully. In addition, as there is no national data on the number of empty homes below the local authority level making it not possible to identify all neighbourhoods with concentrations of empty homes.

Survey fieldwork took place between 19th July and 19th August 2016 with the 58 selected local authorities asked to complete an online questionnaire. The report, *Empty homes: why do some areas have high levels?* is based on 46 completed questionnaires; it contains detailed commentary and tables, while the appendices include the questionnaire marked-up with the overall results. Given the 79% response rate, the statistical reliability of the overall findings is good, although sub-group analyses should be treated with caution.