

Kent County Council pledges 5 million fund for empty homes problem

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A 5 million fund has been launched by Kent County Council to provide interest free loans to landlords, developers and property owners across the county, specifically targeting those sitting on empty homes.

The radical initiative aims to bring thousands of neglected and derelict properties back into habitable use.

Kent County Council is now working with some local councils to provide interest free loans not only to current owners of empty properties, but also to those considering buying one. The loan can stretch to up to 25,000 pounds per single dwelling or 175,000 pounds for properties that are being converted into multiple dwellings.

The property in question has to have been empty for at least six months, and owners have a limited time in which to bring it back into residential use. If a loan is taken out now, the time limit expires in March 2008.

There are thought to be about 680,000 empty properties in England, most of which are situated in the north west of the country. London has the second highest proportion of empty homes, followed by the south east.

The ground breaking scheme is the first of its kind to be launched by a county council. KCC cabinet member Roger Gough said: *"The launch of this capital fund will be a major boost to the campaign and signals KCC's commitment to tackling the problem of empty housing which causes a major blight on neighbourhoods. This loan scheme will help create much needed high quality and sustainable accommodation in the area."*

Susan Pledger, manager of the council's empty homes project, added: *"The campaign's new loan scheme provides an attractive opportunity for property owners and developers to help encourage them to bring empty properties back into use."*

Those interested are encouraged to discuss their proposals with the relevant district council's Empty Property Officer at an early stage, with impartial advice available on bringing their property back into use. **Empty Dwelling Management Orders** were introduced under the Housing Act a few months ago, thereby allowing councils to take over empty homes following reasonable efforts to identify and communicate with the owners. In cases where negotiation with the owner has taken place, suitable arrangements are made either for renovation to commence on the empty property or for it to be sold.

In addition to the interest free loan scheme, the capital fund will also be used to enable Kent County Council to buy empty properties which may be acting as a disincentive to new investment in an area. The aim, as part of wider regeneration activities, is to target specific empty properties ensuring that they are not preventing the development of vibrant and prosperous communities.

David Ireland, from the Empty Homes agency, agreed that paying for renovation is one of the biggest obstacles to bringing empty homes back into use. *"This excellent initiative helps in a very tangible way to unlock that problem"*, he declared.