

Scandal of Waverley's empty homes

WAVERLEY'S housing crisis was ridiculed this week after it emerged more than a thousand homes are 'purposefully unoccupied' in the borough.

The demand for housing in Waverley is cited as cause to build up to 10,000 new homes across the borough over the next 15 years - with this figure forming the cornerstone of Waverley Borough Council's emerging Local Plan.

Waverley also has a long list of people waiting for reduced-rent council, social or sheltered homes - with around 1,700 applicants on its housing register and only around 300 council homes becoming available each year.

However, according to new stats from the Department for Communities and Local Government, as many as 1,330 homes in Waverley were registered as vacant in October 2015.

If released to the open market, these homes could meet Waverley's identified housing need for more than two years - without endangering a single green field on the fringes of Waverley's settlements as the Local Plan proposes.

For that to happen, the GMB trade union has called on the Government to adopt a tougher tax regime to encourage owners of vacant homes to better utilise their properties.

Paul Maloney, GMB Southern regional secretary, said: "It is abundantly clear that the current tax regime is not working and a more robust structure is needed. Even if the full 50 per cent extra charge in council tax is levied, this is not a deterrent to the wealthiest investors.

"These empty properties can be used and transformed into homes for people and families desperately in need of decent and affordable

housing. For that to happen there needs to be a punitive tax regime put in place."

The current tax regime differs significantly depending on where the vacant property is located.

Councils can either offer a discount for a second home or an empty property or they can charge extra for empty properties - up to 50 per cent on top of the full charge, if the property has been empty for two years or more.

In Waverley, if a property is empty and unfurnished, owners can apply for a 50 per cent council tax discount for six months. But if the property has been empty for over two years, the council will charge the maximum-allowed 50 per cent extra council tax.

Owners of homes which have been empty for more than two years in Waverley can also access a reduced rate of VAT (five per cent down from 20) for the cost of renovating or converting the empty property to a habitable condition.

A council spokesman said: "Waverley is working hard to provide affordable homes in the borough; part of our approach is to encourage property owners to rent out empty properties to people who need them.

"The council is active in identifying empty homes and offers a free service to landlords to bring them back into use. Over the last 15 years we have helped landlords set up more than 800 tenancies.

"The council recognises that more empty homes need to be brought back into use and are working in partnership with a local agency and are currently running an advertising campaign promoting free help and support, including guaranteed rents, to potential landlords willing to let their properties

to people who need them.

"Tax is also used to encourage owners to return property into use."

Across the South East, 82,477 properties were registered as vacant in October 2015, over a quarter of which, 23,600, had been vacant for more than six months.

In England as a whole there were 600,179 vacant dwellings, 203,596 of which had been empty for more than six months.

However, the GMB has warned this situation will only get worse next year when the Housing and Planning Act comes into force in April 2017, forcing councils to sell off high-value council properties when they become empty.

Charting the problem back to the 1980s, GMB regional secretary Mr Maloney continued: "The decisions of the Thatcher government to sell council housing stock, and not replace it, and to pay landlords housing benefit instead of providing social housing directly has been a huge and expensive mistake.

"Last year, for example, £24 billion was spent on housing benefit, with much of this public money ending up untaxed in bank accounts in offshore tax havens. If a fraction of that amount had been spent on social housing for rent, the strain on the tax payer would be less and people would have housing they can afford to live in.

"Selling social housing, at a time of dire shortages of homes for rent at affordable prices, is scandalous and irresponsible madness."

For more information about the discounts and exemptions available to property owners in Waverley, visit the website www.waverley.gov.uk/info/200354/discounts_and_exemptions/1829/empty_properties_and_council_tax.