

Sign language course starting

SPACES are available for Holly's Hands sign language course, starting on Friday, January 6.

The five week project for children is held at the Sunshine Children's Centre, in South Borough Primary School, Stagshaw Close, Maidstone, between 11am and noon, every Friday. To book call Cathy on 01622 752 285.

Kidney support

HELP raise funds for people suffering with chronic kidney disease by sending a dedicated charity your unwanted postage stamps and foreign money.

Donations can be sent to the Mary Jordan, British Patient Association, 3 The Windmills, Turk Street, Alton, Hampshire, GU34 1EF. For more details call 01420 541 424.

Solo album

THE front man of Maidstone band One Day Elliott, Paul Richards, known as El Capitan, has released his first solo album. Myself and Others, which includes 12 tracks, is available to buy from iTunes and Amazon.

Festive cheer

VILLAGERS are invited to spread some festive cheer with Carols on the Green in Sutton Valence, on Friday, December 16. The event, in Lower Road, will start at 6.30pm. For more information call the parish council on 01622 844 135.

WHILE NATIONAL PROBLEM GROWS, MORE PROPERTIES PUT TO USE HERE County bucks trend by filling empty property

by Trevor Sturgess
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KENT has bucked the national trend by bringing 2,000 empty properties back into use.

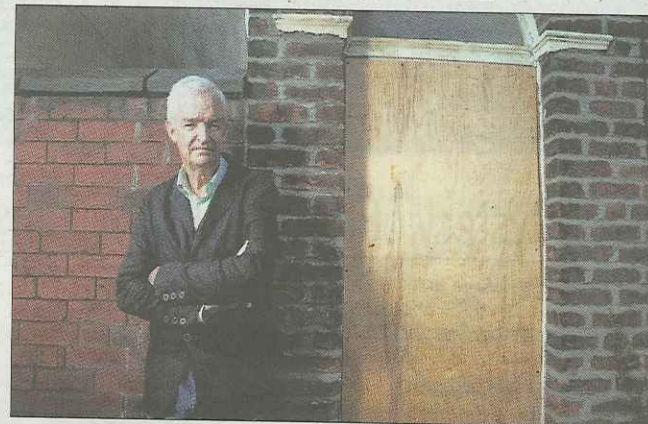
National Empty Homes Week has highlighted the travesty of a million properties standing empty while thousands of people struggle to put a roof over their heads.

But Kent's pioneering No Use Empty campaign has defied the odds to transform scores of properties and improve local neighbourhoods.

For six years, an award-winning partnership between Kent County Council and district councils has created a scheme widely regarded as a role model. Bristol has already copied the idea and other authorities are looking to Kent to see how it can be done in their area.

Empty shops, warehouses, a redundant chapel, an old school house as well as homes have been transformed by the scheme.

Steve Grimshaw, KCC's regeneration project manager, said: "Empty homes are not only a drain on owners, they are a drain on the community as a whole, in that they often prove to be a magnet for anti-social behaviour and crime, decrease adjacent property prices and deter investment into the area."



Jon Snow on Channel 4 programme Dispatches, which is running a series of programmes on empty homes and problem landlords



Steve Grimshaw, project manager of the KCC No Use Empty scheme; David Ireland, chief executive, Empty Homes charity

Factfile

- The number of empty properties brought back into use since 2008 across mid and west Kent:
- Maidstone: 80 homes restored to use, but 533 remain vacant.
- Tonbridge and Malling: 25, with 252 still unused. The council has offered interest-free loans to owners of empty homes who want to renovate them and return them to use.
- Tunbridge Wells: 54, with 430 remaining idle.
- Sevenoaks: 48, with 455 unused for six months or more.

Kent's No Use Empty project was launched in 2005, when 9,000 unused properties were identified across the county.

Since then, nearly 2,000 have been returned to use, helping

an estimated 6,000 people. "It's made a significant impact on numbers," said Mr Grimshaw, adding that the scheme had safeguarded 300 jobs.

David Ireland, chief executive

of the Empty Homes charity, praised the Kent scheme, saying it was the first time a county council had been involved. The scheme won a Regeneration and Renewal Award for Partnership Working.

Around £5.3 million has been advanced already, bringing in a further £10.9 million of other money, boosting total investment to more than £16 million.

KCC and the districts are poised to bid for up to £10 million to extend the scheme to 2018.

Mr Grimshaw called on the public to notify the council of empty properties.

"We've got a proven track record and a history we can share with everybody," he said.



WINNER: James Waterson with his prize dish

Picture: Barry Duffield PD1962209

James is top kid cook in our contest

A BUDDING young chef from Maidstone has picked up the top prize for his culinary skills in the KM Kent Cooks competition.

James Waterson, a pupil at St Simon Stock Catholic School, was the overall winner of the contest with his stuffed chicken wrapped in bacon and banana sweet.

Tonbridge Grammar School student Isabelle Gale won the video category of the competition and there were finalists from Oakwood Park Grammar School and Invicta Grammar School.

Amy Monk from Invicta Grammar School won the kmhealthylifestyles online poll and was presented with a family ticket to Leeds Castle.

Thanet College hosted the event, which brought together 15 finalists from primary and secondary schools in Kent and Medway.

Each student had to cook their signature dish for a panel of judges which included representatives of channel ferry firm