

Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health and Social Care Committee, Chair, Liaison Committee (Commons)

I welcome the Bill and the measures to give councils the tools they need to ensure that we drive down the number of empty properties. Will the Minister also use this opportunity to ensure that those who own second homes are contributing their fair share through council tax, and that they are not able to sidestep that by opting to pay business rates and then claiming eligibility for small business rate relief? If we are to achieve our goals on decent, affordable homes, it is important that everybody should pay their fair share.

Dominic Raab Minister of State (Housing, Communities and Local Government)

My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. The situation to which she refers is slightly different from that of vacant homes, but I would say that we need to balance the economic impact of any measures in that area with the underlying public policy imperative that she has rightly referred to. We have also made changes on holiday homes in the context of council tax and stamp duty. We will keep the point she raises under due consideration and I have also discussed it with the Minister for Local Government.

In addition, our new homes bonus scheme provides a financial reward for councils that bring empty homes back into use, so this involves a carrot as well as a stick. This has generated Â£7 billion in new homes bonus payments to local authorities since 2011. Since these measures took effect, the number of properties left empty in England for six months or longer has fallen by a third since 2010, from 300,000 to just over 200,000. So these measures can work and they can deliver changes in behaviour.