

LONDON ASSEMBLY

July 2026

Housing Committee

This document contains the written evidence received by the Committee in response to its Call for Evidence, which formed part of its investigation into Empty Homes in London.

Calls for Evidence are open to anyone to respond to. In June 2026 the Committee published a number of questions related to its investigation, which can be found on page two. The Call for Evidence was open from 1 June to 7 July 2026.

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LONDON ASSEMBLY

July 2026

Questions asked by the Committee

1. How would reducing the number of empty homes help to tackle the housing crisis in London?
2. What are the key factors driving the increasing levels of empty homes in the capital?
3. How effective are the mechanisms available to boroughs to tackle empty homes?
4. What are the challenges with the monitoring and transparency of empty homes in London and how do these challenges impact efforts to address the issue effectively?
5. How could the Mayor and/or government reduce the level of empty homes in London

Additional questions for London boroughs:

6. What are the main challenges in tackling empty homes in your borough?
7. How do you measure the level of empty homes in your borough and what are the challenges in doing this?
8. What changes or resources would allow you to better address empty homes in your borough?
9. Are there any specific challenges around empty social housing in your borough, and what action are you taking to bring these homes back into use?
10. How could the GLA and/or government better support local authorities to tackle empty homes?



Crisis's Response to the London Assembly Housing Committee's Call for Evidence: Empty Homes

July 2026

Crisis is the national charity for people facing homelessness. We know that homelessness is not inevitable, and we know that together, we can end it. Crisis is dedicated to ending homelessness by delivering life-changing services and campaigning for change. Every year we work directly with thousands of people experiencing homelessness, to help them rebuild their lives and leave homelessness behind for good.

A safe and settled home is the foundation on which people can thrive and live healthy, fulfilled lives. Having a decent home is vital for health and well-being. It makes it easier for people to succeed at work and in education and to maintain relationships with family, friends and wider networks in their community. Making sure that everyone has a safe and genuinely affordable home benefits us all, creating a stronger, more productive society where everyone can play their part.

We welcome the Committee's investigation into the potential role of empty homes in meeting the urgent need for more genuinely affordable housing in London. In our submission, we will focus on long-term empty homes (over 6 months) as we believe this is the most significant category in policy terms and these are the properties that will very likely need some form of intervention to bring them back into use. Crisis published a report on the role that long-term empty homes and vacant commercial properties could play in ending homelessness in 2023.¹

In London the latest statistics from October 2025 showed that there were 47,287 long-term vacant properties, a significant increase from 38,386 in 2024 and nearly double the 24,677 properties recorded as long-term empty in 2019. This rise in the number of empty homes happens against the backdrop of London being in grip of a severe housing and homelessness crisis, with 75,000 households living in temporary accommodation (TA) and 3,944 people seen sleeping rough between January and March 2026.²

1. How would reducing the number of empty homes help to tackle the housing crisis in London?

While reducing the number of empty homes in London would not by itself meet all of London's housing need, it could be a cost effective and quick way to increase housing supply, supplementing new developments which are more expensive and take longer to come on stream. Empty homes should be targeted for bringing back into use as genuinely affordable,

¹ [crisis-make-history-ending-homelessness-with-homes.pdf](#)

² [Temporary accommodation over time in London \(updated 2025\) | Trust for London, Greater London 2025-26 Q4.pdf](#), p.5.

settled homes with secure tenancies, alleviating housing waiting lists. They should be used to reduce the numbers of people in TA, rather than increasing the supply of TA. Given around 30% of long-term empty homes are one-bedroom properties, these should be used as homes for people with experience of homelessness, for example Housing First homes where floating support is also provided.

Nationally the latest statistics from October 2025 show that there are 303,185 long-term vacant properties in England, a large increase up from 264,884 in October 2024 and 261,147 in October 2023.

2. What are the key factors driving the increasing levels of empty homes in the capital?

The most up to date statistics show that there are 47,287 long-term empty homes in London. Set against the high housing need of 75,000 households in TA and 3,944 people seen rough sleeping between January and March 2024, the number of empty homes shows how important it is that these homes are brought back into use. Crisis's research into the causes of empty homes indicates that there are four main reasons why properties remain empty over longer periods of time³:

1. Where there are difficulties tracing the owner or identifying who the owner is. This is a particular challenge where the previous owner had passed away.
2. The owner has limited capacity to take the necessary action to bring a long-term empty property back into use. This could be in the form of limited financial resources, time, knowledge and emotional well-being. Owners who have inherited a property will often fall into this category.
3. The owner is not willing to take action to bring their property back into use, either because they have purchased it as an investment or they simply refuse to take action.
4. Limited local authority commitment and/or capacity to deploy the tools available to them. This includes not having dedicated officers with the requisite skills and training and an absence of funding.

In London we also observe that a significant driver is where new homes are built and then sit empty either due to low private market buyer demand or overseas investors purchasing homes and not occupying them.

3. How effective are the mechanisms available to boroughs to tackle empty homes?

Our research found that there were three main mechanisms or powers which boroughs use to tackle empty homes: Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs), Enforced Sales and

³ [crisis-make-history-ending-homelessness-with-homes.pdf](#)

Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs). In order to financially disincentivise owners leaving homes long-term empty, councils can also levy council tax premiums on these properties.

Our research with practitioners found that EDMOs were not commonly used by local authorities because they are not fit for purpose, being too complicated and time consuming. We recommend that Government should review EDMOs and consider the case for reforming them to maximise the impact for local authorities. One reform could be to shorten the period of time a property must be empty before EDMO action can be taken from 2 years to 6 months, this would return EDMOs to their original form.

Enforced Sales provide local authorities with a route to transfer ownership of long-term empty homes where the present owner is either unwilling or unable to take necessary action to bring it back into use and either refuses or is unable to repay a relevant debt owed such as Council Tax. One limitation of enforced sales is that where the owner has a mortgage, the mortgage lenders get priority charge on the property, making it harder for the local authority to recoup debts owed to them. With this power, the property is then auctioned, meaning that the local authority does not have control over what the property is afterwards used for.

Local authorities can use CPOs to seek to acquire a property compulsorily for a specified purpose where agreement cannot be reached with the owner. CPOs can only be sought where the authority can demonstrate that the acquisition would be in the public interest. Our research has shown that CPOs can be very costly, take a long time and be labour intensive due to their complexity and councils therefore need the right staff with the right knowledge and expertise to use CPOs. CPOs can be very effective, and result in the council owning the empty property which can then be used to address housing need, however their use requires significant capital budget, which not all local authorities are prepared to or able to fund.

It is also important to note the role that local community groups can play an important role in helping to bring empty properties back into use. Under the Empty Homes Community Grants Programme, community-led groups were provided with funding and brought empty homes back into use. This programme was evaluated as being good value for money with additional benefits of increasing employment and training places and improving neighbourhoods.⁴

5. How could the Mayor and/or government reduce the level of empty homes in London?

⁴ [Microsoft Word - EHCGP End of Programme Evaluation Report .doc](#)

Crisis welcome the announcement from City Hall that 500 empty homes will be brought back into use as homes for people at risk of rough sleeping. Building on this, we would like to see the ambition raised further, given the potential for empty homes to be a timely and cost effective way to address homelessness. This would require additional capital funding.

In order to rapidly boost the supply of social housing, the Mayor could use the London Affordable Housing Programme to encourage more acquisitions of empty homes by boroughs and registered providers of housing. This should be considered as part of a wider approach to acquisitions, which also looks at the potential to acquire properties being sold in the private rented sector to boost the supply of genuinely affordable, settled homes in the capital.

The Mayor should also advocate to the national government for a National Empty Homes Initiative, strategically led by elected mayors across the country. In London, working with London Councils and London's boroughs, this would enable the Mayor to set up an Empty Homes Initiative in partnership with organisations best placed to deliver its work, including the Empty Homes Network, the Empty Homes Agency and the National Housing Federation. The aim of the initiative should be to create a framework that facilitates and supports a primarily proactive approach alongside targeted enforcement activity, to bring more long-term empty properties back into use for preventing and ending homelessness by provided settled homes with secure tenancies.

As the Mayor does for a range of key issues, the GLA could play a role in transparently publishing and tracking data on empty homes across London.

To enable local authorities across London and the rest of England to bring more long-term empty homes back into use, the Westminster Government should:

- **Run a one-off acquisitions programme for councils to urgently reduce temporary accommodation use and provide housing for interventions that deliver to a Housing First philosophy.**
- Launch a National Empty Homes Initiative (as above under recommendations to the Mayor).
- Consider combining the empty homes initiative with retrofitting to improve the efficiency of homes and ensure they are fit for the future, as recommended by the Empty Homes Network.
- Introduce a non-statutory code of practice to help guide local authorities on how to make best use of the tools available, to bring as many properties back into use as reasonably possible and how to prioritise the provision of settled homes for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness.

- Explore ways to improve data collected about long-term empty residential properties and consult on how best to tighten the definition of 'empty property' for the purposes of applying the Council Tax premium. Local authorities also need support to build the right IT infrastructure for effective case management, enforcement, and monitoring, which would improve the data collected beyond the statutory Council Tax base.
- Review Empty Dwelling Management Order, Compulsory Purchase Order and enforced sales processes and the way they are currently being used by councils to tackle empty homes and consider the case for reforms to ensure local authorities can maximise their impact. This should include using a statutory instrument to reform Empty Dwelling Management Orders, reducing the period before they can be used from two years to six months.
- Create a flexible national fund to enable local authorities and their partners to access both capital and revenue funding, incentivising councils and their partner organisations to bring homes back into use with the primary purpose of meeting local housing need.
- Unlock the potential of empty commercial buildings by adopting the recommendations of the [joint inquiry of the APPG for Housing Market and Housing Delivery and the APPG for Ending Homelessness](#), including to introduce mandatory minimum standards based on Healthy Homes Principles, encourage local authorities to make better use of available tools to give greater direction over conversion and give councils the immediate ability to require affordable housing contributions through Permitted Development Rights. including to introduce mandatory minimum standards based on Healthy Homes Principles, encourage local authorities to make better use of available tools to give greater direction over conversion and give councils the immediate ability to require affordable housing contributions through Permitted Development Rights.
- Encourage public bodies to make effective use of empty commercial buildings that are already in public ownership, reviewing the case for conversions to deliver affordable-led housing development that can address homelessness pressures.
- Restore LHA rates to at least the 30th percentile. This would play a critical role in underpinning the viability of community-led empty homes investment, while having far wider benefits for homelessness prevention.

Call for Evidence: Empty homes
London Assembly

Evidence submitted by the Homes that Don't Cost the Earth (HDCE) project team

Website: <https://darkmatterlabs.notion.site/hdce>

We are a cross-sector initiative led by [Arup](#), [Dark Matter Labs](#), [Rising Tide](#) and [UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose](#), supported by the [Laudes Foundation](#). Our work has primarily focused on housing policy, affordability and environmental sustainability at a national level in England. While our evidence to date has been at a national level, many of the system dynamics identified through our research are highly relevant to London. For the next stage of our work, the HDCE team are partnering with London boroughs to explore how these findings can be applied in local contexts.

From our research, we believe significant capacity to meet housing need already exists within existing buildings and neighbourhoods. Empty homes form an important part of this opportunity. Bringing suitable vacant homes back into use can increase housing supply, improve affordability, reduce environmental impacts and support community regeneration. The greatest opportunity lies in treating empty homes as part of a wider housing utilisation agenda that makes better use of existing buildings alongside delivering new homes.

Empty homes should be understood as part of a wider housing utilisation challenge

The housing debate often assumes that unmet housing need can only be addressed through new supply. However, HDCE research shows that England already has more homes, bedrooms and floor area per person than at any point in recent history¹. England's housing stock has grown to a record 25.2 million dwellings, with available floorspace per person now around 43 square metres on average — approximately 20% more than in the mid-1990s. The issue is therefore not solely one of quantity, but also how effectively existing housing stock is used and distributed.

Our research highlights that around one-third of households are under-occupied¹, while significant numbers of homes remain vacant or otherwise unavailable for occupation. Empty homes represent one visible manifestation of a broader housing utilisation challenge that includes long-term vacancy, under-occupation, unsuitable dwelling sizes and barriers to mobility. Reducing empty homes therefore offers benefits beyond increasing housing numbers. It can improve utilisation of existing buildings, reduce pressure for environmentally intensive new development, make better use of existing infrastructure, and bring homes closer to households that need them.

Empty homes are often a symptom of wider structural barriers

The growing number of empty homes should not be viewed simply as a monitoring or enforcement issue. HDCE research suggests that several structural factors contribute to vacant and under-utilised housing:

- Financial incentives that encourage homes to be treated as assets rather than places to live.
- Low housing market turnover and barriers to downsizing and rightsizing.
- Increasing levels of under-occupation among older owner occupiers.
- High refurbishment and retrofit costs.
- Fragmented funding and delivery mechanisms.
- Challenges associated with acquisition and conversion of empty properties.

The scale of under-utilisation is striking. For every overcrowded home in England, there are now nearly ten homes that are under-occupied. And for every homeless household, there are more than five empty homes. This suggests that if the right conditions could be created for households to rightsize, only a small fraction of those moves would be sufficient to house England's entire overcrowded and homeless population.¹

Our work with Shelter on the Building Climate Justice report ² similarly found that vacant homes can form part of an integrated housing delivery strategy, but bringing them back into use requires active intervention, investment and delivery capacity rather than relying solely on market forces.

Empty homes should be linked to climate, retrofit and housing objectives

The urgency of this is underlined by projections from existing research: under current housing policy, England's housing sector alone is on course to consume 104% of England's entire remaining carbon budget for limiting global warming to 1.5°C — leaving nothing for any other sector of the economy.³ This makes the reuse and repurposing of existing buildings not an optional add-on to housing strategy, but a climate imperative.

HDCE examines housing through the lens of affordability alongside environmental limits. A key finding is that reuse of existing buildings often carries substantially lower environmental impacts

¹ Dark Matter Labs, Arup and UCL IIPP (2024) Response to the Environmental Audit Committee request on how Government's proposed reforms to national planning policy and housebuilding targets might affect environmental protections and current approaches to sustainable development. Available at: UK Parliament Committees Written Evidence (Accessed: 9 July 2026).

² 2025 Building Climate Justice.

https://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/building_climate_justice

³ zu Ermgassen, S.O.S.E. et al. (2022) 'A home for all within planetary boundaries: Pathways for meeting England's housing needs without transgressing national climate and biodiversity goals', Ecological Economics, 197. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0921800922002245>. Cited in: Horn, S. et al. (2025) Taking Stock: A foundation for future housing strategy, Homes that Don't Cost the Earth, p.24.

than demolition and rebuild, while also making better use of existing infrastructure and neighbourhood assets.

The Building Climate Justice modelling demonstrated that combining net-zero new build delivery with the reuse of vacant homes and appropriate conversions could reduce overall carbon impacts by at least 40%, and at a similar grant cost, compared to a strategy based solely on new-build delivery.

Empty homes should therefore not be viewed as a standalone housing issue. They represent an opportunity to simultaneously:

- Increase housing supply.
- Make better use of existing infrastructure, reducing per-unit infrastructure investment
- Improve affordability.
- Reduce homelessness pressures.
- Deliver retrofit and energy efficiency improvements.
- Reduce embodied carbon associated with new construction.
- Increase sovereign material sufficiency.
- Support neighbourhood regeneration.
- Reduce local public spending on temporary accommodation and social care

Monitoring and transparency

While improving the consistency and quality of empty homes data is important, action to bring homes back into use should not be delayed while data improvements are pursued. The scale of vacant homes is already sufficient to warrant intervention, particularly when considered alongside the challenge of current delivery rates. Evidence should therefore be used to support delivery, rather than becoming a prerequisite for it.

Current measures of empty homes provide an incomplete picture of housing utilisation. HDCE's work suggests there is value in moving beyond vacancy statistics alone and towards a broader understanding of:

- Vacancy (homes and commercial buildings)
- Under-occupation.
- Housing mismatch.
- Building condition.
- Retrofit potential.
- Housing need.

A more integrated evidence base would allow policymakers to identify which homes are vacant, why they remain vacant, whether they are suitable for reoccupation, and what interventions would be required to bring them back into use.

There is a significant opportunity to develop more consistent national and local datasets linked through UPRNs and combined with planning, housing and energy information to support more strategic decision making.

Towards a London housing utilisation strategy

The GLA is well-placed to develop and champion a housing utilisation-first strategic framework, both for its London boroughs and as a model for national policy.

Such a framework could move through four interconnected stages.

First, a **utilisation assessment**: mapping not just vacant homes but the full spectrum of under-used housing capacity across London, including vacancy, under-occupation, housing mismatch, retrofit potential and building condition, linked through UPRNs and combined with planning, housing and energy information into a consistent evidence base.

Second, a **strategic targeting phase**: using that evidence to identify where interventions will have the greatest combined impact — bringing homes back into use while simultaneously delivering retrofit, reducing homelessness pressures, and supporting neighbourhood regeneration.

Third, a **portfolio of interventions**: recognising that no single tool is sufficient, and that the most effective strategies combine regulatory levers, incentive reform, direct delivery capacity and community-led approaches, calibrated to different parts of London.

Fourth, a **delivery and learning infrastructure**: building the cross-tenure, cross-department coordination between housing, planning, climate and health teams that is needed to implement and iterate on these interventions over time.

HDCE's work suggests there is value in moving beyond vacancy statistics alone and towards a broader understanding that encompasses vacancy across homes and commercial buildings, under-occupation, housing mismatch, building condition, retrofit potential and housing need. A more integrated evidence base would allow policymakers to identify which homes are vacant, why they remain vacant, whether they are suitable for reoccupation, and what interventions would be required to bring them back into use — forming the foundation for the kind of strategic targeting described above.

Submission to the London Assembly Housing Committee

Call for Evidence: Empty Homes, June to July 2026

Submitted by: Dr Rex McKenzie

Senior Lecturer in Economics, Kingston University London

Faultlines Research Collective

Date: 29.6.2026

About this submission

This submission is made in a personal capacity, drawing on a programme of research into the financialisation of housing and offshore property ownership in England and Wales. This includes the OCOD+ dataset, covering approximately 106,000 offshore-owned residential properties, developed with colleagues at Kingston University, University College London and supported initially by Trust for London, a wider body of work on wealth chain urbanism and the financialisation of urban real estate, and an active comparative research programme examining how sustained fiscal dependency shapes local authorities' institutional capacity to pursue alternatives to investor-led development models. I focus my response on Questions 2, 3, 4 and 5, where this research base is most directly relevant, with a shorter response to Question 1.

Question 1: How would reducing the number of empty homes help to tackle the housing crisis in London?

MHCLG Council Taxbase data put the number of empty homes in London at 105,138 in 2025, equivalent to 2.5 per cent of the dwelling stock and the highest level in over twenty years. Set against a context in which 46 per cent of homeless London households, around 34,000 families, are now placed in temporary accommodation outside the capital, the scale of unused stock sitting alongside acute housing need is difficult to justify on efficiency grounds alone.

That said, the Committee should be cautious about treating empty homes as a simple substitute for new supply. The empty homes total is heterogeneous: it includes short-term frictional vacancy between sales or lets, probate cases awaiting resolution, homes withheld from the market as long-term investments, and around 11,000 empty council homes in London, many tied up in estate regeneration programmes. Reducing the number of empty homes is best understood not as a single lever but as several distinct policy problems that happen to share a category in the Council Taxbase. The most defensible case for the Committee's investigation is not that empty homes alone would resolve the housing crisis, but that bringing investment-driven and administratively stalled vacancy back into use is a comparatively low-cost way of improving the utilisation of existing stock, particularly in boroughs where demand pressure is highest.

Question 2: What are the key factors driving the increasing levels of empty homes in the capital?

Alongside the conventional drivers, such as probate delays, slow letting rates for new student accommodation and Build to Rent schemes, and stock awaiting refurbishment, a structural factor

deserves more attention from the Committee: the use of residential property as a store and vehicle of capital, independent of occupation. 'Buy to leave' behaviour, in which new-build property is purchased as an investment and left empty, is one visible symptom of a broader pattern in which housing functions as a financial asset rather than as shelter.

My OCOD+ research shows this pattern is not confined to anecdote. A substantial share of offshore-owned residential property in England and Wales, around 106,000 properties on the most recent count, is held through corporate structures, frequently routed through low-tax jurisdictions, where the property's function is capital preservation or appreciation rather than habitation. For an investor of this kind, occupancy is at best a secondary consideration and at worst an operational inconvenience. This is the demand-side counterpart to London's housing shortage: the same scarcity that drives up prices for residents also makes London property an attractive store of value for capital seeking safety and appreciation, and a portion of that capital has no need for the property to be lived in at all.

London's disproportionate share of empty local authority housing, the highest of any English region, is a separate but related story, and one I would encourage the Committee not to treat as merely residual. It is conventionally explained by Right to Buy losses, constrained capital budgets, and the long timelines of estate regeneration, and those factors are real. But constrained budgets explain why a regeneration scheme is delayed; they do not on their own explain why, scheme after scheme, the delivery model that gets pursued defaults to dependence on a private development partner rather than alternatives such as direct council-led delivery, phased meanwhile-use, or community land trust models. In ongoing comparative research I am conducting into local authority fiscal dependency, the working finding is that sustained austerity-era budget pressure does not only constrain what a borough can afford; over time it narrows what a borough's officers and members can institutionally conceive of as a viable way to deliver housing at all, independent of whether better-resourced alternatives might in principle be deliverable. This is not a London peculiarity. Fourteen English councils have issued section 114 notices since 1988, the large majority since 2018, and recent analysis suggests close to 40 per cent of English councils consider it likely they will require Exceptional Financial Support within five years. London's stalled estate regeneration sits inside that wider national pattern of fiscal dependency narrowing institutional options, expressed here through stalled delivery rather than, as in some other English cities, uncontested investor-led development. The Committee's recommendations are likely to be more effective if they treat financialised private vacancy and stalled local authority vacancy as distinct problems with distinct mechanisms, not only distinct remedies.

Question 3: How effective are the mechanisms available to boroughs to tackle empty homes?

The tools available to boroughs, principally Empty Dwelling Management Orders, council tax exemptions and premiums, enforced sale and compulsory purchase, work reasonably well where the owner is an identifiable individual responding to ordinary financial incentives. The Empty Homes Premium, which from April 2024 can be charged at up to 100 per cent after a property has been empty for as little as one year, is a meaningful cost for an owner who is simply slow to sell, let or renovate.

These same mechanisms are considerably weaker against property held through layered corporate or offshore structures. A council tax premium calculated as a percentage of liability is, for a long-horizon investor anticipating capital appreciation in London's property market, a manageable cost of holding the asset rather than a meaningful deterrent. Enforcement instruments such as Empty Dwelling Management Orders and compulsory purchase also depend on being able to identify, locate and serve notice on an accountable owner, which becomes materially harder when the registered proprietor is an overseas corporate vehicle several steps removed from the individual who actually controls the asset. Boroughs are, in effect, being asked to use tools designed for owner-occupiers and small landlords against a category of owner for whom occupancy was never the point.

A parallel, less visible version of this problem applies to empty council-owned homes, where the borough is itself the owner and ownership opacity is not the obstacle. Here the constraint is institutional rather than legal: a borough with full legal capacity to act on its own stock may nonetheless lack the institutional bandwidth, established precedent, or internal mandate to pursue anything beyond the conventional private-partnership regeneration model, even where that model has demonstrably stalled. Both forms of empty homes, financialised private vacancy and stalled local authority vacancy, are accordingly resistant to the same standard policy toolkit, but for opposite reasons: one because the owner cannot be effectively reached, the other because the owner's own institutional capacity to act differently has narrowed. Treating both as failures of enforcement alone risks missing what would actually need to change in the second case.

Question 4: What are the challenges with the monitoring and transparency of empty homes in London, and how do these challenges impact efforts to address the issue effectively?

This is the area where I would most encourage the Committee to focus its recommendations, because it underpins the effectiveness of everything else. The Council Taxbase, the main source of empty homes data used by the Committee and by Government, records occupancy status but says nothing about who owns a property or why it is empty. It is, by design, blind to ownership structure.

Since 2022, the Register of Overseas Entities has required foreign entities owning UK property to disclose beneficial ownership information to Companies House, and reforms since then have extended public access to some trust information from August 2025. However, independent analysis of Companies House and HM Land Registry data, published as CAGE working paper no. 680, found around 8,000 properties where the overseas entity's reported corporate beneficial owner had no valid basis for that exemption under the Register's own rules, meaning the true beneficial owner is effectively unreported. Trust-held property remains only partially visible, with access conditional on fees and, in some circumstances, a demonstrated legitimate interest. Identity verification for company directors and persons of significant control is still being rolled out and will not be complete across the existing company base until late 2026.

The practical consequence is that the two datasets a borough or the GLA would need to assess investment-driven vacancy, occupancy status from council tax records and beneficial ownership from Land Registry and Companies House data, are neither linked at property level nor reliably complete

on the ownership side. Our OCOD+ dataset demonstrates that this kind of property-level linkage is achievable at scale, including a systematic method for identifying offshore corporate ownership from public registers. It also demonstrates the limits of what is currently knowable from public data alone, given the gaps documented above.

A comparable monitoring gap exists on the local authority side, and it is worth the Committee distinguishing it clearly from the ownership-opacity problem above. There is no equivalent standing capability for identifying which boroughs' stalled regeneration sites reflect institutional capacity constraints that capacity-building support could address, as opposed to sites where the binding constraint is genuinely financial and would require capital funding instead. Without that distinction, support risks being allocated on the basis of which boroughs ask loudest rather than where it would be most effective. Boroughs themselves are poorly placed to commission this kind of diagnostic work independently: nearly 40 per cent of English councils currently consider it likely they will need Exceptional Financial Support within five years, and the Local Government Association estimates a combined funding gap of £6.2 billion across 2025-26 and 2026-27 alone. A borough under that kind of fiscal pressure has neither the spare capacity nor, often, the institutional appetite to commission a diagnostic of its own constrained decision-making. Without a standing, maintained capability covering both ownership transparency and institutional capacity, the Committee, the Mayor and boroughs remain reliant on periodic academic research rather than routine administrative data to understand how much of London's empty homes problem is attributable to financialised holding, and how much to local authorities that need different kinds of support than they are currently able to ask for.

Question 5: How could the Mayor and/or government reduce the level of empty homes in London?

- Commission or fund a standing data-matching capability linking Council Taxbase occupancy records to HM Land Registry and Companies House Register of Overseas Entities data at property level, made available to boroughs and the GLA for monitoring purposes.
- Press central government to close the beneficial ownership gap identified in independent research on the Register of Overseas Entities, in particular by requiring Companies House to verify, rather than passively accept, the basis on which an overseas entity reports a corporate beneficial owner instead of an individual.
- Consider escalating or asset-value-linked charges, rather than flat percentage premiums, for properties demonstrably held through corporate or offshore structures for extended periods, since a fixed premium is unlikely to alter the behaviour of an investor for whom the property is a long-term store of value.
- Treat empty local authority housing as a distinct strand of the investigation, with its own programme of capital funding and delivery support, separate from measures aimed at financialised private vacancy, and fund or commission a diagnostic capability to identify which boroughs' stalled regeneration programmes need capacity-building support to pursue alternative delivery models, as distinct from those needing capital funding alone.

- Use the Mayor's convening role to press government on the pace of beneficial ownership transparency reforms, since this is primarily a matter of national legislation and Companies House enforcement capacity rather than something boroughs or the GLA can resolve alone.

Concluding remark

Empty homes data alone cannot tell the Committee why London's properties stand vacant, whether the owner is an offshore investor with no need for the property to be occupied or a borough whose institutional capacity to deliver an alternative has narrowed under sustained fiscal pressure. Closing that gap, both the ownership-transparency gap and the institutional-capacity gap, is, in my view, the single most useful step the Committee could take forward from this investigation.

Dr Rex McKenzie
Kingston University London / Faultlines Research Collective

Call for Evidence: Empty Homes in London

Submitted by: London Borough of Barnet

Date: June 2026

1. Introduction

The London Borough of Barnet welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Housing Committee's investigation into empty homes in London.

Barnet is committed to maximising the use of existing housing stock as a key component of addressing housing need. Alongside new supply, bringing empty homes back into use is one of the most cost-effective and sustainable ways to increase available housing.

This submission draws on Barnet's recent scrutiny committee work in January 2026 (see [published report](#) and the related [committee discussion](#)), it also reflects feedback based on operational experience, and an ongoing engagement with sector bodies such as the Empty Homes Network.

Our submission sets out:

- The scale and nature of empty homes in Barnet
- The drivers contributing to vacancy
- Current borough interventions and their effectiveness
- Recommendations for the Greater London Authority (GLA)
- Recommendations for central government

2. Scale and Impact of Empty Homes

Empty homes represent a significant but complex component of London's housing system. In Barnet:

- Many empty homes are **short-term vacancies**, reflecting natural churn such as sales, probate, or refurbishment; this applied to 1,969 of 5,247 empty homes in October 2025.
- A more significant subset that needs to be the area of focus is **long-term empty homes (over 6 months)**, which represent the most impactful opportunities for intervention.
- Long-term empty homes are disproportionately located in:
 - Private sector stock
 - Larger or higher-value properties
 - Units with complex ownership or legal barriers

While the overall number of empty homes may appear modest relative to total stock, for example even in Barnet which is perhaps the borough worst affected by empty properties in London, numerically there were more long-term empty homes (3,278) in October 2025 than the number of households the Council was required to have placed into Temporary Accommodation (3,065). While the two are not causally linked, it demonstrates that if the problem of empty properties could be tackled at scale, it would have a tangible impact on wider housing market activity.

Analysis of the geographic distribution of empty properties data in Barnet showed concentrated clusters of long-term empty dwellings and second homes in areas dominated by newly built developments as well as traditional areas with a higher proportion of rental accommodation.

Whilst it is clear the Council must respond to the 57% increase in empty properties in the 12 months to October 2025 that means over 2% of the total housing stock in Barnet is now classed as 'Long Term Empty Properties', the limited options and resources for taking action highlight how challenging it is to engage meaningfully.

The impact of long-term empty homes is disproportionately negative for the borough:

- Each long-term empty home is a lost opportunity to house households in acute need
- Concentrations of property vacancies can contribute to neighbourhood decline
- Public confidence is undermined where homes remain unused during a housing crisis

It is important to note that **council tax data remains the most robust and consistent dataset available to local authorities and government for identifying and tracking empty homes**. Our scrutiny committee report contained analysis that entirely depends on council tax data quality.

3. Key Drivers of Empty Homes

Barnet's evidence suggests that empty homes arise from a combination of structural, economic, and behavioural factors:

3.1 Private Sector Dynamics

- Speculative holding of assets in high-value markets by UK and non-UK residents
- Delays in letting or selling due to market expectations
- Fragmented ownership, including overseas ownership

3.2 Property Condition and Financial Constraints

- High refurbishment costs
- Limited access to finance for bringing properties back into use

- Increasing construction and compliance costs

3.3 Legal and Administrative Complexity

- Probate delays
- Housing with restrictions on rental/sale (such as 'older persons accommodation')
- Title or ownership disputes
- Enforcement thresholds and burdens of proof

3.4 Social Housing Factors

- Voids arising from repair backlogs or major works
- Lettings processes and allocation delays

3.5 Data and Visibility Challenges

- Limited access to real-time or cross-agency data

4. Current Borough Approaches and Effectiveness

Barnet employs a range of tools to address empty homes, including:

4.1 Council Tax Premiums

- Application of increased premiums on long-term empty homes
- Provides an incentive but has variable behavioural impact

4.2 Dedicated Empty Homes Work

- Identification and engagement with owners
- Advice and support to bring properties back into use
- Use of enforcement powers where appropriate

4.3 Enforcement Powers

- Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs) (rare due to complexity)
- Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs) as a last resort (rare due to the cost)
- Dealing with nuisance and security issues caused at and by empty properties

4.4 Partnership Working

- Collaboration with housing providers and internal teams (Council Tax, Planning Enforcement and Housing Regulatory Services)
- Integration with homelessness prevention strategies

4.5 Outcomes and Constraints

While these measures have led to individual successes, their impact is constrained by:

- **Limited dedicated resources**
- **High administrative burden of and over complexity of enforcement powers**
- **Insufficient financial incentives for owners**
- **Gaps in national policy and fiscal levers**
- **Lack of availability of suitably trained and competent Housing Enforcement Officers**

The [summary briefing note](#) for the scrutiny committee provides a useful overview of the extent of actions we have considered taking forwards in Barnet, and highlights the limited available resources for taking action, with effectively only a 0.5 FTE post funded to deliver action in this area of work. The lack of clear and measurable statutory duties in relation to Empty Homes and the lack of dedicated funding and resources mean that the empty property challenge can only benefit if there is far greater prioritisation and targeted funding at a proportionate scale to the strategic challenge. Since the scrutiny committee, an additional full-time post has been approved with costs capitalised.

5. What Additional Support is Needed

5.1 Funding for Local Authority Capacity

Local authority empty homes activity is labour-intensive and requires specialist expertise.

Barnet strongly recommends the creation of centres of excellence in London, alongside:

- **Dedicated, ringfenced funding for empty homes teams**
- Funding to support:
 - Data management and analytics
 - Casework and enforcement
 - Owner engagement and support
 - Staff training

Without sustained funding, activity is predominantly reactive rather than strategic.

5.2 Investment in Data Integrity and Systems

Council tax data is the backbone of empty homes identification but requires:

- Ongoing validation and verification
- Integration with other datasets (e.g. Land Registry, utilities)

We recommend:

- GLA and/or central funding to support:
 - Data reconciliation
 - Improved digital systems
 - Cross-borough data sharing
 - Use of tracing agents

This would significantly enhance consistency and comparability across London.

6. Recommendations for the Greater London Authority

The GLA has a key strategic role in coordinating and amplifying borough efforts. There would be significant benefits from partnership working with the Empty Homes Network, who have a strong handle on this area of work – the issues and solutions.

6.1 Strategic Leadership and Coordination

- Establish a **London-wide Empty Homes Programme**
- Provide a consistent framework for:
 - Definitions
 - Data collection
 - Reporting
- Institute several 'Centres of Excellence' in local authorities to lead London-wide coordination, and provide ongoing training and expert advice/support to all borough staff across London.

6.2 Targeted Funding Streams

- Introduce GLA-funded programmes for:
 - Bringing long-term empty homes back into use
 - Acquisition and redevelopment of problematic properties
 - Staff training
 - Empty homes centres of excellence – to lead on staff training, provide expertise and help to pilot new ideas and initiatives.

6.3 Support for Acquisitions

- Expand use of the **Affordable Homes Programme** to:
 - Enable borough acquisition of long-term empty homes
 - Provide grant support for refurbishment

6.4 London-wide Data Platform

- Develop a shared data platform to:
 - Identify trends

- Benchmark borough performance
- Support intelligence-led interventions

6.5 Advocacy Role

- Champion borough priorities with central government, particularly on:
 - Tax reform
 - Simplifying the available enforcement powers (see 7.3 below). Funding

7. Recommendations for Central Government

Significant change will require national legislative and fiscal reform.

7.1 Taxation Reform

- Review and strengthen **council tax premiums** on long-term empty homes
- Consider:
 - Higher caps on premiums, with a strong cost escalator for persistently empty homes.
 - Reduced exemptions from council tax premiums
 - Align LHA rates and funding mechanisms to make affordable lettings more viable
- Explore **additional fiscal measures**, such as:
 - Levy on persistently vacant properties
 - Adjustments to Capital Gains Tax to discourage long-term vacancy
- Improve **VAT treatment for refurbishment** of long-term empty homes, if necessary, this could be tied to a minimum period of letting as affordable housing (i.e. link to LHA rates).

7.2 Funding for Local Authorities

- Introduce **long-term, ringfenced revenue funding** for:
 - Empty homes teams – council tax investigation (and higher cost debt recovery)
 - Enforcement activity – recognizing the importance of housing enforcement work
 - Enforcement activity – recognizing the significant up front cost for local authorities in tackling empty homes *(and the freedom for owners to reinstate a property or 'commence refurbishment' works which results in a high incidence of casework where there is no cashable saving or benefit for a local authority to resource the activity)*
- Provide **immediate capital funding** for:
 - Acquisitions – allowing grant programmes to be used to support greater acquisition activity linked to the reinstatement of empty homes as affordable housing.
 - Refurbishment – Grant schemes to recognise the higher cost of refurbishment in any programme providing grants for reinstating affordable housing.

7.3 Reform of Enforcement Powers

- The CPO process should be much more straightforward, cover Council costs and not include additional compensation for the owner.
- All the empty property enforcement powers should be swift, cover full cost recovery for the local authorities and not include any element of owner compensation.
- Payment of any outstanding debts to the Council should be included as part of any EDMO or CPO action. Instead of a costly public enquiry the appeal process for single CPOs should be to First Tier tribunal.

7.4 Support for Refurbishment and Retrofit

- Provide grants or low-interest loans to:
 - Owners bringing empty homes back into use
 - Improve energy efficiency and meet regulatory standards

7.6 Measures to support interim or permanent changes of use where property restrictions have led to a concentration of empty properties:

- Create a designation and definition for 'persistently empty properties', allowing councils to identify the dwellings that remain continuously unused over a long period.
- Introduce enhanced powers for local authorities to act in such cases:
 - Allowing a simplified process for addressing restrictions and covenants
 - Unlocking the interim use of such properties for temporary accommodation

7.7 Data and Transparency

- Deliver a sustainable resourcing mechanism for council tax data cleansing in relation to empty homes (costs £250,000-£300,000 per annum, last achieved by a 'new homes bonus').
- Improve national datasets to significantly improve policy design and targeting by linking:
 - Council tax
 - Other relevant areas of taxation
 - Land ownership
 - Property use

8. The Role of Empty Homes in Addressing Housing Need

While empty homes are not a substitute for new supply, they represent:

- A **quick-win opportunity** relative to new development
- A **cost-effective intervention**

- A means of improving existing neighbourhoods

A coordinated approach could make a meaningful contribution to housing availability across London, and help councils with addressing the current temporary accommodation crisis.

9. Conclusion

Barnet Council supports the GLAs focus on empty homes as part of a wider response to London's housing challenges.

Key messages are:

- The issue is **significant but nuanced**, requiring targeted intervention
- Local authorities are **central to delivery**, but require additional capacity and tools
- The GLA can play a stronger role in **coordination, funding, and leadership**
- Central government action is essential to address **structural barriers**, particularly through taxation and legislative reform

With coordinated action across all levels of government, empty homes can play a more substantial role in meeting London's housing needs. But it will need resourcing and shared commitment to unlock the kind of structural changes to current systems that might enable us to unlock the potential of London's empty homes to help meet its current housing challenges. **Barnet Council is keen to work with the GLA and Government to develop and enhance activity around empty homes.**

10. Contact

For further information, please contact:

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Your ref:	My ref:	Please ask for:	Date:
	RS/PR/ALSA	Alison Sarmiento	24 June 2026

Dear Sirs

Housing Committee call for evidence

In response to your call for evidence, please find below comments to your questions 6 – 10;

6. What are the main challenges in tackling empty homes in your borough?

Opening a line of communication with owners of empty properties and building a rapport is often the most challenging part of this work. Given it is not an offence to keep properties empty, it is essential to be able to communicate and encourage owners to bring properties back into use by offering grants, signposting to colleagues in Housing Acquisitions for advice concerning letting schemes etc whilst also making clear the enforcement options open to the local authority should properties cause nuisance etc. For a variety of reasons, owners are often absent or unwilling to engage with the local authority so establishing this degree of contact is vital.

7. How do you measure the level of empty homes in your borough and what are the challenges in doing this?

Statistics on the numbers of empty homes are routinely obtained by the Council Tax Department. Premiums are levied against the council tax account for long-term empty properties. The Empty Property Team work closely with colleagues in Council Tax and share information when it becomes available.

8. What changes or resources would allow you to better address empty homes in your borough?

Same as 10.

9. Are there any specific challenges around empty social housing in your borough, and what action are you taking to bring these homes back into use?

When notification is received concerning empty social housing, the provider is notified as soon as possible who usually begin their own investigation. On occasions, leasehold properties can experience probate delays for example, however, as a rule, the housing provider is keen to work with the local authority in order to see the property brought back into use.

10. How could the GLA and/or government better support local authorities to tackle empty homes?

The Empty Homes Grant offered by Ealing Council offers owners of empty properties up to a maximum of £15,000 to help them bring a property back into use where nomination rights are then given to the Council for a minimum of 5 years. In order to qualify for the grant, various criteria must be met, one of which is that the property must fail the Decent Homes Standard. This means that many properties that only need a minor upgrade, are exempt from the scheme and remain empty. If there was funding available from the GLA at a lower level than the Empty Property Grant, for example a maximum of £5,000 per property (similar to the previous West London Better Homes Grant except to remove the criteria that properties must fail the Decent Homes Standard) this may encourage owners to apply. Rather than 5 years nominated housing rights as in the case of the Empty Property Grant, owners would agree to lease the properties to the local authority for a shorter period, for example 2 – 3 years, to reflect the smaller grant amount. This could also be used by owners of properties who have previously applied for an empty property grant of £15,000 and which the local authority has already had 5 years nomination rights, in order to ‘freshen-up’ the property and to provide the LA with the accommodation for an additional 2 – 3 years.

My colleagues in Council Tax have added the following:

What changes or resources would allow you to better address empty homes in your borough?

How could the GLA and/or government better support local authorities to tackle empty homes?

Two points about a coordinated funding approach and use of existing experience:

1. Yes – more resourcing to identify empties, for which then we make sure the liability and associated responsibility goes to the owner. So, funding for more inspectors and assume if the GLA want to rationalise and be cost-effective a London-wide pool of inspectors could operate around London with a joint funding resource.

E.g. Could be a good apprentice employment route as long as can drive and can pay an apprentice wage and help with the current employment challenge, still can have a mix of experience though.

2. Then there is the subsequent issue of what to do with empties which have no apparent re-occupation date.

So, then we start looking at Compulsory Purchase Orders and buy-backs schemes to house homeless and incentives to homeowners to house people, the Homes for Ukraine Scheme is an example of active direct funding for emergency housing.

I believe there are few legislative Acts, like Section 17 of the Housing Act, that can help and a good legal team in the GLA will be required to ensure specific and precise action to acquire empty dwellings.

We note as reported at present the birth rate and school roles in parts of London are decreasing and this in part, will be due to people not being settled due to not having a long-term home to call their own and consequently delays in starting families. The new Renters Right Act will assist but we still need to house people initially and there is a social benefit here to all.

I hope this is useful.

Yours faithfully



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London Borough of Lewisham

Call For Evidence – Key Questions

1. How would reducing the number of empty homes help to tackle the housing crisis in London?

Reducing empty homes would directly increase the effective housing supply without the need for new construction. Bringing vacant properties back into use can:

- Provide faster access to housing compared to building new homes.
- Reduce pressure on house prices and rents by increasing availability.
- Help address homelessness and temporary accommodation pressures.
- Make better use of existing infrastructure and neighbourhoods.

In a big city with high demand like London, even a relatively small number of reoccupied homes can have a meaningful local impact.

2. What are the key factors driving the increasing levels of empty homes in the capital?

Several factors contribute to empty homes:

- **Investment/second homes:** Properties held as assets rather than lived in.
- **Probate delays:** Homes left empty after a death while estates are settled.
- **Major refurbishment or redevelopment:** Properties vacant during long renovation projects., including long planning application process/approval.
- **Market conditions:** Owners may hold properties off the market expecting price increases.
- **Overseas ownership:** Some properties are rarely occupied.
- **Short-term letting dynamics:** Homes periodically vacant between lets or removed from long-term rental supply.
- **Administrative/data issues:** Some properties recorded as empty due to classification or lag in records.

3. How effective are the mechanisms available to boroughs to tackle empty homes?

We have several tools, with mixed effectiveness:

- **Council Tax premiums:** Can incentivise owners to bring properties back into use but may not deter wealthier owners.
- **Grants/loans:** Can encourage renovation but require funding.
- **Enforcement (e.g., improvement notice, planning, environmental health):** Useful where properties are derelict but limited otherwise.
- **Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs):** Allow councils to take over management of long-term empty homes, but are complex, resource-intensive, and rarely used.
- **Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs):** Effective in extreme cases, but slow, costly, and legally complex.

Overall, tools exist but are often underused due to cost, legal barriers, and capacity constraints.

4. What are the challenges with the monitoring and transparency of empty homes in London and how do these challenges impact efforts to address the issue effectively?

Key challenges include:

- **Inconsistent definitions:** “Empty” vs “long-term empty” varies, making comparisons difficult.
- **Data lag:** Council Tax records may not reflect real-time occupancy.
- **Hidden vacancy:** Properties may appear occupied but are rarely used.
- **Fragmentation:** Data sits across boroughs with limited central coordination.
- **Limited public transparency:** Reduces accountability and policy focus.

These issues make it harder to:

- Accurately quantify the problem.
- Target interventions effectively.
- Measure policy impact or progress.

5. How could the Mayor and/or government reduce the level of empty homes in London?

Mayor/government could help by taking below actions:

Policy & regulation

- Increase Council Tax premiums further for long-term empty properties.
- Strengthen and simplify EDMOs and CPO processes.
- Introduce stricter rules on overseas ownership or under-occupation.

Data & transparency

- Create a London-wide empty homes database.
- Standardise definitions and reporting across boroughs.

Incentives & funding

- Provide grants or low-interest loans for bringing empty homes back into use
*look at the [No Use Empty Kent](#) programme
- Support borough enforcement teams with additional funding.

Strategic leadership

- Set clear reduction targets for empty homes across London.
- Encourage partnerships with housing associations to refurbish and manage properties.

Planning & taxation reform

- Discourage land banking and prolonged vacancies through planning conditions or taxes.

Additional questions for London boroughs:

6. What are the main challenges in tackling empty homes in your borough?

Key challenges include:

- **Limited staff and funding** to proactively investigate and enforce action on empty properties.
- **Complex ownership situations** (e.g. probate, absent landlords, overseas owners).
- **Lengthy legal processes** for tools like EDMOs and CPOs.
- **Properties tied up in long-term redevelopment or planning delays.**

- **High-value market dynamics**, where owners are less responsive to financial penalties.
- **Data inaccuracies** which make it difficult to prioritise cases effectively.

7. How do you measure the level of empty homes in your borough and what are the challenges in doing this?

We rely on:

- **Council Tax records** (empty and long-term empty classifications).
- **Electoral roll and housing data matching**.
- **Local intelligence** (e.g. officer inspections, complaints).

Challenges include:

- **Time lag in Council Tax data** not reflecting real occupancy.
- **Misclassification** (e.g. second homes vs empty).
- **“Hidden empties”** where homes are technically occupied but rarely used.
- **Data fragmentation** across council systems and departments.

8. What changes or resources would allow you to better address empty homes in your borough?

- **Increased funding** for dedicated empty homes officers and enforcement teams.
- **Enhanced data-sharing powers** (e.g. linking HMRC, utility, and Land Registry data).
- **Access to capital funding or revolving loan funds** to refurbish properties.
- **Stronger financial penalties or taxation powers** to incentivise action by owners.
- **Simplification of EDMO and CPO processes** to make them faster and less resource-intensive.

9. Are there any specific challenges around empty social housing in your borough, and what action are you taking to bring these homes back into use?

- **Void turnaround delays** due to repairs backlogs or contractor capacity.
- **Funding constraints** for bringing homes up to standard.

- **Complex cases** (e.g. safeguarding, hoarding, or major structural works).
- **Lettings system pressures** and allocation delays.

Actions taken:

Typical actions:

- Dedicated voids reduction programmes to minimise turnaround times.
- Performance targets for void periods.
- Investment in repairs and maintenance capacity.
- Review of allocations processes to speed up re-letting.
- Partnerships with contractors or housing associations.

10. How could the GLA and/or government better support local authorities to tackle empty homes?

Funding and resources

- Providing ringfenced funding for empty homes work and enforcement.
- Expanding grant/loan schemes to bring properties back into use.

Data and coordination

- Developing a London-wide empty homes database.
- Improving data sharing across public bodies.

Strategic leadership

- Setting clear targets for reducing empty homes across London.
- Sharing best practice across boroughs.

Policy and legislative support

- Simplifying and strengthening **EDMOs and CPO frameworks**.
- Allowing **greater flexibility over Council Tax premiums** or introducing new taxes on vacant homes.

London Borough of Redbridge

1. How would reducing the number of empty homes help to tackle the housing crisis in London?

Reducing empty homes in Redbridge by adding what was once an empty property into the market without the need to rely on new builds. It frees up homes which can be utilised by the vulnerable out of expensive temporary accommodation. It can act as a money saving measure for the Council as it reduces the demands of expensive temporary housing budgets.

2. What are the key factors driving the increasing levels of empty homes in the capital?

Key factors include:

- Damage by tenants requiring costly repairs
- Increased costs of building materials and contractors
- Difficulty/delays procuring contractors
- Difficulties selling properties- influenced by political uncertainty, falling house prices, economic pressures (Middle East conflict, cost-of-living crisis, and job insecurity), rising mortgage rates. (One person losing their mortgage can cause a whole chain to collapse, so more than one transaction is affected). Also specific issues such as difficulties/cost of extending leasehold to make property more marketable, also requirement for EWS1 certificates (formal assessment of a building's external wall system -including cladding, insulation etc to evaluate fire risk, primarily used to reassure lenders and facilitate property transactions)-with a shortage of inspectors (as well as fraudulent certificates leading to some certificates being withdrawn)
- Time taken by Land Registry for first registration and other updates
- Increased time to obtain grant of probate
- Many landlords leaving the sector and selling up due to uncertainty of impact of Renters Rights Act
- Potentially the requirement in the Renters Rights legislation to wait a year before renting again, if the property does not sell could increase numbers of empty properties

- Numbers of unoccupied unfurnished properties (as recorded by Council Tax) may have increased if owners have recategorized from second homes to avoid the premium rate on council tax which may be applied to second homes straight away (as opposed to “long term empty properties” where the premium can only be applied after a minimum of 12 months)

3. How effective are the mechanisms available to boroughs to tackle empty homes?

The implementation of the empty homes project can lead to high costs in terms of repairs due to high material and labour costs. Legal roadblocks such as probate can slow the process and leave homes stuck in limbo. These require an intensive time and effort expenditure on the part of the enforcing authority. Staffing is also a key factor that influences turnaround.

4. What are the challenges with the monitoring and transparency of empty homes in London and how do these challenges impact efforts to address the issue effectively?

The introduction of premium rate of council tax after 12 months (instead of 2 years) could mean it is less likely that people will highlight their property as empty with Council Tax. There is a financial incentive to say a property is back in use when it isn't. Whilst there are possible exceptions to the premium rate this requires provision of supporting evidence which has an impact on Council resources in reviewing and assessing the information.

If properties are under reported as empty they then go under the radar, it hides the problem, it does not get addressed and owners can potentially miss out on help available.

5. How could the Mayor and/or government reduce the level of empty homes in London?

Provide sufficient funding, speed up legislation to help tackle empty homes and tighten Council Tax loopholes on landowners who falsely claim a home is occupied or in use to avoid fees.

6. What are the main challenges in tackling empty homes in your borough?

Main challenges are:

- The increasing numbers of empty properties

- Limited officer capacity -meaning time spread thinly over ever larger case load
- Resident expectations-in terms of what Council can do and when- regarding empty home nuisance issues and also how/when empty properties may be returned to use
- Increasing complexity of cases
- Sometimes there is a perception that a property is wilfully empty through a deliberate strategy such as “land banking” for example, whereas the reality in many situations is that there is a human story and difficulties to overcome to help a property return to occupation
- Partner services within the Council are also under pressure
- Locating and engaging with some property owners
- Diminishing funds for Empty Property Officer post and for Empty Property Grant
- Lack of shortlisted and “approved” contractors to do repairs and project manage renovations in conjunction with Empty Property Grant and also to support Empty Dwelling Management Orders, for owners who do not have the time, inclination or know-how for renovations
- Complex legislation around Compulsory Purchase Orders and Empty Dwelling Management Orders in particular
- Local Housing Allowance is significantly below market rate which means a reluctance for landlords to rent/lease to the Council. Also there are perceptions about tenants on welfare benefits with respect to payment of rent and possible damage to property
- Trespassing (“squatting”) in empty properties-often cynically exploiting empty homes which are not well maintained perhaps where the owner has died or gone into care

7.How do you measure the level of empty homes in your borough and what are the challenges in doing this?

Council tax data is a useful framework which enables properties to be identified by time unoccupied/unfurnished, also properties empty due to probate awaited or resident in care, also second homes. As with any data, there are risks that it is not kept updated. The application of the premium rate of council tax after 12 months could mean that owners are reluctant to report their property as empty and may be creative in trying to show it is occupied when it is not, in order to avoid the doubling of council tax. (The

converse argument is that the application of the premium creates earlier scrutiny/checks for accuracy).

Information also comes from complaints and reports -which are encouraged by the Council-from residents, other services, Councillors, MPs as well as Empty Property Officer observations whilst out in the borough.

There are challenges around verifying information-sometimes all is not as it seems at face value. For example, properties are sometimes judged to be empty based on their condition and there may be a vulnerable resident with safeguarding needs.

There are many sources of information but it can be time consuming to make a thorough and accurate assessment, which is required in some cases. There are some situations where it is not clear cut as to whether a property is occupied or not.

8.What changes or resources would allow you to better address empty homes in your borough?

- Additional Empty Property Officers
- Additional funding for Empty Property Grants, also for Empty Property Loans.
- A London wide scheme for loans could be helpful or a toolkit to help set up a borough loan scheme
- A London wide shortlist of approved contractors to survey, renovate, project manage works to enable properties to return to occupation, in conjunction with Empty Property Grant, or Empty Dwelling Management Order
- Simplified legislation-Compulsory Purchase Orders and Empty Dwelling Management Orders in particular
- Building on the newly introduced Empty Homes Network Roundtable events, which have been useful to focus on London empty property issues
- More recognition-and accompanying support-for the potential/value in returning empty homes to use rather than building new homes

10.How could the GLA and/or government better support local authorities to tackle empty homes?

Please see Q8 above

London Assembly Housing Committee Call for Evidence – LB Waltham Forest response

Introduction: The Housing Committee at the London Assembly is currently undertaking an investigation into empty homes in London.

Terms of Reference:

- Understand the scale of the problem of empty homes in London and to what extent this is contributing to the city's housing shortage.
- Identify the key factors driving the increasing number of empty homes, including both social housing and privately-owned properties.
- Examine how boroughs are addressing empty homes, assess the effectiveness of these approaches, and determine what additional support is needed to bring empty homes back into use.
- Scrutinise the Mayor's work to reduce empty homes in London, including the commitments and policies set out in the London Housing Strategy, the London Plan, and acquisitions through the Affordable Homes Programme.
- Explore what further action the Mayor, boroughs and central government could take to reduce the number of empty homes in London.

Key issues:

1.What are the key factors driving the increasing levels of empty homes in London and to what extent is this contributing to the city's housing shortage?

The following key factors are increasing the levels of empty homes in Waltham Forest for privately owned properties, such as:

- Negative experiences of renting to tenants and increasing pressures on landlords.
- Greater opportunities to invest financially in a property, rather than receiving lower levels of interest from a savings account.
- Lack of government-led education about Capital Gains Tax following the sale of a property.
- Attitudes of residents aged 70 and over in respect of selling or letting out an empty home for rent.

Within Waltham Forest, a key issue identified is that many owners are uncertain about how to manage Capital Gains Tax (CGT) following the sale of a property, which can contribute to homes remaining empty. To address this, the Empty Homes Team Manager undertakes targeted educational and awareness-raising work, helping residents understand their CGT obligations and supporting them to confidently navigate the process.

Following the Grenfell tragedy, the London Borough of Waltham Forest welcomes the Building Safety Act 2022 and the wider regulatory changes. However, this has meant that the increase of the compliance in adhering to the more significant fire safety elements or major component changes means that it is taking at least six months for void council properties to become a lettable property. Previously, the turnaround time for this was three months on average.

Properties within a high-rise building (HRBs) which require major works or any fire safety repairs, require a gateway application. Gateway applications are estimated to have a turnaround time of 12-16 weeks and are at a significant cost just for submission.

Significant structural works for void properties are delivered by a planned programme of works, which is dependent on the rising renovation costs in London.

2. How effective are the mechanisms available to boroughs to monitor and address empty homes?

The mechanisms currently available to boroughs are of limited effectiveness in both monitoring and addressing empty privately rented sector homes:

- **Council Tax premiums have limited behavioural impact** - although boroughs can apply premiums of up to 300% on long-term empty properties, this has not consistently incentivised owners to bring homes back into use. Owners either absorb the additional cost or avoid declaring the property's true status in many cases.
- **Monitoring systems rely heavily on self-reporting, leading to incomplete data.** Council tax records depend largely on information provided by owners or tenants. This creates significant gaps, as there is little incentive to report a property as empty, resulting in underreporting and an incomplete understanding of the scale of the issue.
- **There is reduced capacity for proactive investigation and enforcement powers.** A reduction in funding from central government has significantly weakened boroughs' ability to verify property occupancy through on-the-ground checks. As a result, councils are increasingly dependent on passive data sources, reducing accuracy and limiting early intervention. The majority of London Boroughs do not have an Empty Homes Officer or team due to this. The London Borough of Waltham Forest can fund the Empty Homes Team Manager through income generation, and officer resource to inspect and take Part 1 action.
- **A lack of standardisation across boroughs restricts overall effectiveness.** Different boroughs use varying methodologies to identify and track empty homes, and there are no consistent performance

indicators. This leads to fragmented data, makes benchmarking difficult, and limits the ability to implement coordinated, pan-London responses.

While existing mechanisms provide a framework for action, their effectiveness is constrained by data limitations, reduced enforcement capacity, and inconsistent approaches across boroughs.

3.To what extent are homes purchased by investors or second homes contributing to rising levels of empty homes in London?

Investors and second homes are not a significant factor in the increase in privately rented empty properties in Waltham Forest. Instead, most empty homes reflect long-term ownership patterns and individual circumstances, particularly where properties have been inherited or owners have moved out of the borough.

4.Given the increasing number of empty homes in London, to what extent has the Mayor acted on his commitments to reduce the level of empty homes in the London Housing Strategy 2018?

The level of delivery against the London Housing Strategy for empty homes appears limited, specifically considering the continued increase in empty homes across London from 2018-2025:

- **Lack of sustained or replacement strategies:** prior to 2018, there were more targeted national interventions and funding streams in place to tackle empty homes, most notably the Homes and Communities Agency's Empty Homes Programme and the Clusters of Empty Homes Programme. Since these funding streams were discontinued, there has been no equivalent level of national investment to support the reuse of existing housing stock. As a result, Waltham Forest and other boroughs are now largely reliant on limited local funding and enforcement tools, which significantly constrains their ability to intervene at scale and bring empty homes back into use.
- **Reliance on council tax premiums has not been effective:** the main policy lever in recent years has been the increase in council tax premiums on empty homes. In practice, this has had limited impact, with many owners choosing to absorb the additional cost rather than bringing properties back into use.
- **Strategic focus has shifted towards new supply:** the Mayor's priorities have largely centred on increasing new housing supply. While this is important, it has reduced the focus on making better use of existing stock, including bringing empty homes back into occupation.
- **Limited visible coordination or leadership on empty homes:** there has been no clear, consistently applied pan-London approach to addressing empty homes since the publication of the 2018 strategy.

This has resulted in boroughs largely working in isolation, with no strong strategic direction at a London-wide level.

The MHCLG Council Taxbase statistics show that empty homes in London have risen from around 58,000 in 2016 to over 105,000 in 2025, with long-term empty properties more than doubling over the same period. The fiscal measures introduced have not been sufficient to drive a meaningful reduction in empty homes.

5.What more could the Mayor and Government do to tackle empty homes in the capital?

There are several areas where the Mayor and Government could take further action to support boroughs in tackling empty homes across London:

Reinstating targeted grant funding for empty properties would provide a practical incentive for owners to bring homes back into use. This could help address both financial barriers and more complex issues such as sentimental attachment, which can delay decisions to sell, let, or refurbish inherited homes.

There is also a strong case for strengthening and streamlining enforcement powers. Simplifying the compulsory purchase process and reducing the qualifying period for Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs) would make these tools more responsive and impactful. However, it is important to recognise that enforcement action remains resource-intensive, and without additional funding, many boroughs will continue to face challenges in using these powers at scale.

The development of a London-wide empty homes register would improve the consistency and accuracy of data. While some data is already collected, it is not currently comprehensive or standardised, limiting its usefulness for intervention.

Increased investment in staffing and capacity is essential. Dedicated funding for empty property officers, alongside training and professional development, would strengthen local authority capability. Many boroughs do not have sufficient dedicated resource due to wider budget pressures, which constrains proactive engagement and enforcement.

Overall, a combination of funding, improved legal tools, better data, and strengthened local capacity would significantly enhance the ability of boroughs to bring empty homes back into use.

Reviewing the gateway process for applications relating to void council properties would help ensure it is more efficient, streamlined and cost-effective.

Currently, delays at approval stages have extended average void turnaround times from 3 to 6 months, which has delayed the re-letting of much-needed housing for Waltham Forest residents on the Housing Register.

A more proportionate and risk-based approach to approvals would enable quicker decision-making, particularly for routine works, while still maintaining appropriate oversight for higher-value or complex cases.

In addition, there are challenges relating to the interpretation of building safety requirements in higher-risk buildings (HRBs). In some cases, contractors are making commercial decisions to refer all void works in HRBs to the Health and Safety Executive, even where this is not a statutory requirement. This practice is contributing to avoidable delays in the re-letting process. Providing clearer guidance and targeted training for contractors on the Building Safety Act would help ensure proportionate compliance, reduce unnecessary referrals, and maximise turnaround times for void council properties in HRBs.

An efficient and proportionate gateway process alongside improved understanding of regulatory requirements would help minimise void periods, reduce costs to local authorities, and support better outcomes for residents.

6.How could reducing the number of empty homes help tackle the housing crisis in London, especially the availability of temporary accommodation?

Reducing the number of empty homes could help tackle the housing crisis in Waltham Forest, if these homes are used to increase the supply of temporary accommodation or affordable private rented accommodation. This would reduce reliance on more expensive forms of temporary accommodation.

There is also an opportunity to use empty homes more proactively as part of a preventative approach. Where properties can be made available more quickly, they could support earlier interventions to prevent homelessness and enable more timely placements. This would help to reduce the length of time households spend in temporary accommodation and ease pressures across the system.

Reducing the turnaround time for void council properties is equally significant in making best use of existing stock. The current six month relet period limits the Council's ability to respond to demand. Improving this would increase the availability of settled social housing for those on the Housing Register and support a more efficient flow through the system.

Increasing the number of homes available within the borough would also help reduce the need for out of borough placements, enabling more households to remain in their local communities.



London Rebuilding Society

Empty Homes Programme

London's housing crisis

- There are over 1 million empty homes in England
- 303,185 are long term empty (more than 6 months)
- London has:
 - 161,116 empty dwellings an increase of 138% in 10 years
 - 47,287 in long term empty homes
- 1 in 45 people in London are homeless
- 202,587 people recorded as homeless in the city
- 300,000 people are trapped in temporary accommodation in England, many more rough sleep
- In 2023/24 London Borough's daily temporary accommodation spend was £4m per day



Bringing empty homes back into use

- The government target of £1.5m new homes must secure affordable homes
- Bringing wasted empty homes back into use for people in need of affordable housing must be part of that target
- Retrofitting and refurbishing empty homes creates warm, secure health homes fit for the future, reducing household energy costs
- Bringing existing homes back uses between 50-80% less embodied carbon than building new homes
- A partnership between trusted social enterprise, and local authorities using blended finance is one way to do this
- London Rebuilding Society (LRS) and its partners have the track record and expertise



Wraparound service

- LRS and its partners provides a wraparound service turning wasted empties into much needed affordable tenancies:
 - Raises funds
 - Manages and delivers affordable loans
 - Provides financial assessment and advice
 - Support accessing grant
 - Property and energy advice survey
 - Employs contractor at no risk to landlord
 - Project manages fixed price contract
 - Delivers refurb and essential retrofitting to reduce energy costs and carbon footprint
 - Oversees contracting with letting agency



Impact and benefits

For tenants

- Quality housing – warm, safe dry and energy efficient
- Energy advice
- Secure tenancy
- Programme grants and loans do not affect benefits or entitlements
- Affordable rents
- Managed tenancies via LA / agents

For Local Authorities

- Reduces waiting lists
- Reduces temporary accommodation costs
- Leverages grants, and maximises public and private investment
- Enhances London's substandard housing stock
- Addresses fuel poverty
- Green retrofit measures reduce carbon emissions
- Takes pressure of local authority budgets

For homeowner

- Removes burden of wasting asset
- Increases property value
- Rental income once loan is repaid
- Single point of contact
- Access to empty homes grant
- Removes contracting and borrowing risk
- Energy advice
- Programme grants and loans do not affect benefits or entitlements



How it Works

- ✓ Partnering with boroughs to identify homes
- ✓ With or without borough / other grant
- ✓ Provides affordable secured loans to owners
- ✓ Delivers guaranteed property services and end-to-end project management
- ✓ Improved home leased to the Council for a minimum 5-year term
- ✓ Loan is repaid from the rental income - voids are dealt with under agreement with agent
- ✓ Once loan is repaid (charge is lifted), council has first option to buy property to increase social housing



LRS Empty Homes Fund 2012-14

Case study: Peter

“My house is back to its former glory. It was a burden before but now I know that it’s providing a home to a family in need, and it’s also increased in value. A real win-win situation.”



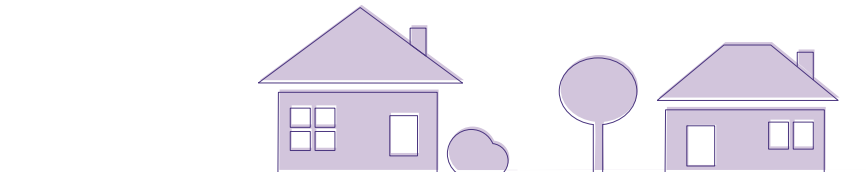
Lead Partner: London Rebuilding Society (LRS)

- Established 2000, social enterprise providing finance, access to finance, support and contracting
- Loans and wraparound service to bring empty homes back into use in London 2012-14 - 33 units completed
- Delivered successful government funded scheme to provide solar for homeowners in London
- Home Improvement Scheme – a unique integrated solution for older homeowners living in homes in disrepair, refurbishing and retrofitting
- Specialises in refurbishing and retrofitting housing for people in need



Outputs

- Families removed from temporary accommodation
- Significantly reduced waiting lists
- 180 properties brought back into use for families in need
- 400+ units/bedrooms brought into use for affordable tenancies
- £8.4m loans to empty homeowners
- Complete green retrofit to refurbished homes, reducing carbon emissions

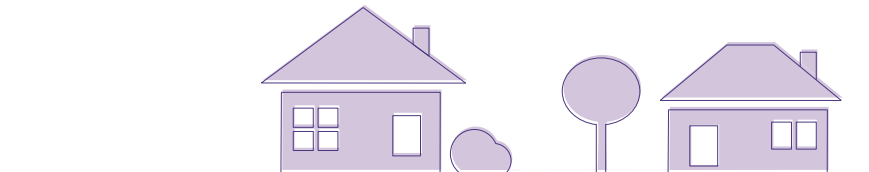


Contact

Naomi Kingsley, Chief Executive



www.londonrebuilding.com



**London Assembly Housing Committee
Call for evidence – empty homes**

Submission by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea on 7 July 2026

The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the London Assembly Housing Committee's call for evidence on empty homes. As a borough with exceptionally high housing demand, limited land availability, and a significant proportion of high-value residential property, the Council recognises the importance of making effective use of existing housing stock to support residents and address wider housing pressures. The Council also recognises the practical and policy limitations on local authority intervention.

The most recent Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Council Taxbase data indicates that there are approximately 1,700–1,800 long-term empty homes in RBKC, defined as properties unoccupied for more than six months. This represents around 2% of the borough's total housing stock, which is broadly consistent with wider London trends.

1. How would reducing the number of empty homes help to tackle the housing crisis in London?

Reducing the number of empty homes would help to address London's housing shortage to an extent, given the imbalance between housing demand and supply.

For the private sector, bringing long-term empty homes back into use – particularly those held vacant due to disrepair, ownership issues or underutilisation – can contribute to increasing housing supply. However, this requires a targeted approach that recognises the varied and often complex reasons for vacancy and supports owners to take appropriate action.

In the social housing sector, there is scope for landlords to reduce void times through more efficient asset management and lettings processes. It is also important that social landlords address long-term empty or hard-to-let stock, including properties requiring significant capital investment. In some cases, this may involve refurbishment to bring properties up to standard; in others, disposal may be the most pragmatic option to unlock resources for reinvestment in the wider housing stock.

Beyond increasing supply, reducing long-term empty homes also helps to address wider community impacts, including antisocial behaviour and deterioration of the local environment. Bringing these properties back into occupation supports stable, well-maintained communities.

2. What are the key factors driving the increasing levels of empty homes in the capital?

The prevalence of empty homes in London is driven by a combination of structural, legal and market factors. It is important to recognise that many empty homes are not intentionally withheld but are vacant due to practical constraints. Key drivers include:

- Extended refurbishment or redevelopment, particularly where significant works are required
- Market conditions and uncertainty, affecting decisions to let, sell or redevelop
- Delays in probate and inheritance processes
- High-value investment dynamics, particularly in central London
- Regulatory and cost pressures, affecting the viability of letting or refurbishment
- Complex ownership arrangements, including offshore structures
- Second homes and intermittent occupation, contributing to higher recorded vacancy rates.

In RBKC, these factors are particularly pronounced given high property values, the international nature of the housing market, and the prevalence of complex ownership structures. This underlines the need for responses that are targeted and proportionate, focusing on long-term problematic vacancies rather than short-term or unavoidable causes of emptiness.

3. How effective are the mechanisms available to boroughs to tackle empty homes?

Local authorities have several mechanisms available to address empty homes, including Council Tax premiums, Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs), and Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs). These tools form an important part of the overall approach, but their effectiveness varies in practice:

- Council Tax premiums can provide a useful financial incentive to bring properties back into use. However, in high-value areas, their impact can be limited where owners are less sensitive to additional costs
- EDMOs are rarely used due to the high evidential thresholds, administrative complexity, and length of the legal process involved
- CPOs can be effective in addressing the most problematic long-term empty properties but are resource-intensive and time-consuming.

Overall, existing powers are valuable but not always sufficiently flexible or proportionate to address complex cases in high-value boroughs. A balanced approach – combining incentives, support for owners, and targeted enforcement – remains most effective.

4. What are the challenges with the monitoring and transparency of empty homes in London and how do these challenges impact efforts to address the issue effectively?

Effective action to bring empty homes back into use is constrained by limitations in data and transparency:

- Council Tax data does not always accurately reflect property occupancy
- There is no comprehensive, real-time dataset on empty homes
- Opaque ownership structures, including properties held through offshore entities
- Inconsistent definitions of “empty” across datasets and agencies
- Lack of infrastructure to take over the management of the EDMO.

These challenges hinder accurate identification, prioritisation and enforcement, and can lead to underreporting of vacancy levels.

5. How could the Mayor and/or government reduce the level of empty homes in London?

The Mayor of London and central government have an important role in strengthening the framework for addressing empty homes. Key actions could include:

- Ensuring any additional regulatory measures are proportionate and targeted, focusing on genuinely long-term vacant properties rather than those empty for legitimate or short-term reasons
- Providing incentives for property owners to bring homes back into use
- Expanding and strengthening Council Tax powers and property-based levies
- Improving transparency through enhanced property ownership registers
- Increasing funding and capacity for local authorities
- Reviewing the existing legislative framework to reduce unnecessary complexity and enable more efficient use of existing powers.

6. What are the main challenges in tackling empty homes in your borough?

RBKC faces a number of specific local challenges in tackling empty homes:

- High property values, reducing the impact of financial incentives and penalties
- Complex ownership structures, including corporate and offshore arrangements

- Lengthy and resource-intensive legal processes (e.g. EDMOs and CPOs)
 - Limited staffing capacity and resources
 - The diversity of reasons for vacancy, many outside local authority control.
- 7. How do you measure the level of empty homes in your borough and what are the challenges in doing this?**

RBKC uses a combination of data sources to measure the level of empty homes, including:

- Council Tax records
- Electoral register data
- Internal service data, including information from housing and environmental health.

However, there are a number of challenges:

- Properties that are technically recorded as “occupied” but are rarely used in practice
- Short-term or intermittent occupancy patterns
- Data inaccuracies and delays.

These factors make it difficult to determine the true scale of empty homes within the borough.

8. What changes or resources would allow you to better address empty homes in your borough?

To strengthen the Council’s ability to address empty homes, it would benefit from:

- Increased funding for enforcement and investigative work
- Enhanced data-sharing powers across agencies and sectors
- Simplified and accelerated legal processes
- Greater flexibility in applying financial penalties
- Investment in data integration and digital tracking tools.

9. Are there any specific challenges around empty social housing in your borough, and what action are you taking to bring these homes back into use?

RBKC aims to maintain low levels of long-term voids within its social housing stock, underpinned by its voids and lettings policy.

Some challenges can affect turnaround times in individual cases, such as properties requiring major repairs or compliance works, particularly where significant investment is needed to meet current safety and quality standards; and the need for specialist adaptations, for example to meet the needs of vulnerable tenants, which may extend void periods.

The Council continuously looks to improve the way it works to ensure that void times are minimised and it makes the best use of its housing stock.

RBKC will consider options for its long-term empty social housing stock which requires significant capital investment and decide whether the best value for money option is to dispose of this to unlock resource for investment into its wider housing stock.

In addition, registered providers operating within the borough manage their own housing stock and have their own processes in place to bring vacant homes back into use. These measures aim to minimise void periods while ensuring properties meet required standards.

10. How could the GLA and/or government better support local authorities to tackle empty homes?

The GLA and/or government could support local authorities in the following ways:

- Increased and targeted funding for empty homes initiatives
- Development of more integrated data systems for tracking empty homes
- Support for legal and upfront costs associated with CPO and EDMO processes
- Clear national policy direction on long-term vacant high-value properties
- Investment in education, professional training and capacity-building to support a better understanding of available options.

Conclusion

Tackling empty homes is an important component of addressing London's housing shortage. While RBKC is committed to maximising the use of existing housing stock, improved data and increased resourcing are needed to deliver sustained progress. This should be achieved through a balanced approach that supports responsible property ownership while addressing long-term vacancy. Stronger collaboration between boroughs, the GLA, and central government will be essential to achieve this.

Environmental Health and Housing Needs
Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea

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**Southwark Council response to the London Assembly Housing Committee -
call for evidence - empty homes in London**

7th July 2026

1. How would reducing the number of empty homes help to tackle the housing crisis in London?

Increase housing supply

Every property returned to use provides additional accommodation in an environmentally sustainable way, without consuming land or requiring major new infrastructure. This is particularly important in London, where housing need significantly outstrips supply. Empty homes can often be returned to occupation more quickly than delivering new-build housing.

However, it is important to recognise that not all empty homes represent an immediately available housing solution. Many long-term empty properties require extensive refurbishment, and modernisation works before they can be safely occupied. In some cases, the cost of refurbishment may exceed what is financially viable for social housing providers or local authorities. Consequently, while reducing empty homes can increase housing supply, it should be viewed as one part of a wider housing strategy rather than a standalone solution.

2. What are the key factors driving the increasing levels of empty homes in the capital?

A key issue is affordability pressures and access to finance

High construction costs, inflation, borrowing costs and contractor shortages have significantly increased the cost of refurbishing vacant properties. While many boroughs offer grants and loans to support owners, funding assistance is typically intended as a contribution towards overall refurbishment costs rather than full project funding.

As a result, owners often need access to additional finance, savings, commercial lending or remortgaging to deliver works. Some properties therefore remain empty because owners are unable to secure the level of investment required to make refurbishment viable.

Southwark has sought to overcome some of these barriers through an in-house management scheme, where refurbishment works can be supported through a combination of grants and top-up loans. In return, the property is made available to the Council as temporary accommodation for an agreed period, maximising the level of financial assistance available whilst helping to address homelessness pressures.

But homes can be left empty for a multitude of reasons which are not always financial. This can include personal issues such as ill health and/or capacity issues. There can be complex disputes involving litigation. And there can be other non-financially motivated issues. Therefore, a range of solutions and support is required.

3. How effective are the mechanisms available to boroughs to tackle empty homes?

Local authorities have a range of powers available, including:

- Council Tax premiums
- Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)
- Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs)
- Enforced Sale procedures
- Housing Act powers
- Planning and environmental enforcement powers
- Grants and loans to support refurbishment

However, while these powers are valuable, their practical effectiveness is often limited for the following reasons:

Financial incentives are generally effective

Financial assistance programmes frequently achieve positive outcomes by helping owners overcome refurbishment barriers. Southwark's Empty Homes Programme has supported numerous properties back into occupation through grants and loans, including homes used for temporary accommodation and owner occupation.

Enforcement powers are important but resource intensive

Compulsory purchase powers remain an important tool for addressing the most problematic long-term empty homes. However, they are complex, costly and lengthy processes requiring detailed evidence gathering, legal resources and often several years to complete. They are therefore best used as a last resort rather than a large-scale solution.

Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)

Although EDMOs were introduced specifically to bring long-term empty homes back into use, their effectiveness in London has been limited.

Southwark Council has not utilised EDMOs. A key reason is that much of Southwark's housing stock is older and often requires significant investment before it can be occupied. Under an EDMO, councils are required to recover their expenditure through rental income within prescribed periods. Given the scale of refurbishment

often required, the potential rental income would frequently be insufficient to recover the costs incurred, making the use of EDMOs financially unviable.

This highlights a wider challenge for London boroughs, particularly in areas with older housing stock and high refurbishment costs, where EDMOs do not always provide a practical solution despite the policy intention behind them.

Council Tax premiums have strengthened incentives

Recent legislative changes have given councils greater flexibility to apply Council Tax premiums to long-term empty homes. These have provided additional incentives for owners to engage and bring properties back into use. However, for some owners particularly those holding high-value assets the financial impact may still be insufficient to change behaviour.

4. What are the challenges with monitoring and transparency of empty homes in London?

A significant challenge is accurately identifying which homes are genuinely empty and why.

Limitations of Council Tax data

Most empty homes statistics rely on Council Tax records. While useful, these do not always capture the full picture. Some properties may be occupied intermittently, registered as second homes, under renovation, subject to probate or incorrectly classified. Conversely, some vacant properties may not be accurately identified

Inconsistent reporting across boroughs

Different authorities may apply slightly different approaches to data collection, verification and investigation. This makes meaningful comparisons and strategic planning more difficult at a London-wide level.

Resource constraints

Monitoring empty homes is labour-intensive and requires regular property inspections, ownership tracing, data validation and case management. Many boroughs have relatively small empty homes teams managing large caseloads

The result is that policymakers may underestimate the true scale, causes and geographic concentration of empty homes, making it harder to target resources effectively.

5. How could the Mayor and/or Government reduce the level of empty homes in London?

Expand and increase flexibility of financial support

Financial assistance programmes remain one of the most effective ways of supporting owners to bring long-term empty homes back into use.

Southwark has seen increased investment in its Empty Homes grants and loans programme in recent years, resulting in increased owner engagement and a notable uplift in applications and approved projects. This demonstrates that when funding is available, owners are often willing to invest in bringing properties back into occupation

Whilst increased funding is welcome, consideration should also be given to providing greater flexibility in the financial products available. This could include:

- Higher maximum loan levels where refurbishment costs are significant.
- Greater flexibility around equity-based lending.
- Enhanced support for temporary accommodation leasing models.
- Funding products targeted at properties requiring substantial renovation.

Providing a broader range of financial solutions would allow boroughs to respond more effectively to differing property types and owner circumstances.

Incentivise responsible landlords and investment in housing

Alongside enforcement measures, policymakers should consider creating stronger incentives for responsible landlords and property owners who actively contribute to housing supply.

Potential measures for consideration include:

- Reviewing taxation arrangements relating to additional residential properties.
- Examining the impact of mortgage interest relief restrictions on property investment decisions.
- Exploring targeted tax incentives linked to bringing long-term empty homes back into occupation.
- Providing financial incentives for landlords who lease properties through council-supported schemes or make homes available for temporary accommodation.
- Encouraging investment in refurbishment and improvement works through enhanced capital allowances or tax relief mechanisms.

Any such measures would need to be carefully designed to ensure they support the delivery of additional occupied housing whilst continuing to discourage speculative vacancy and "buy-to-leave" practices.

Support council acquisition programmes

Government could establish a dedicated fund enabling boroughs and housing associations to acquire long-term empty properties and return them to affordable housing use. Evidence presented to the London Assembly suggests this could be a relatively quick and cost-effective way of increasing supply

6. What are the main challenges in tackling empty homes in your borough?

Many cases involve complex personal, legal or financial circumstances, including probate delays, disputed ownership, absent owners, lack of funding, ill health, or properties requiring substantial refurbishment.

A significant number of long-term empty homes are in poor condition and require extensive investment before they can be occupied. Although Southwark provides grants, loans and other forms of support, financial assistance is generally a contribution towards overall costs and owners often need access to additional finance to make projects viable.

The Council must therefore strike a balance between encouraging and supporting owners to return properties to use, whilst reserving enforcement action for the most problematic cases. Enforcement options such as Compulsory Purchase Orders can be effective but are resource intensive, legally complex and can take several years to progress.

7. How do you measure the level of empty homes in your borough and what are the challenges in doing this?

The primary source of data is Council Tax records, supported by local intelligence, customer reports, site visits, Land Registry information, planning records and information held by other council services.

While Council Tax data provides an important baseline, it has limitations. Empty homes data can fluctuate frequently and may not always reflect the circumstances on the ground. For example:

- Properties undergoing refurbishment may be recorded as empty.
- Probate cases may remain empty for extended periods due to legal processes.
- Some empty properties only come to the Council's attention following complaints from neighbours or local residents.

As a result, empty homes work requires substantial verification and investigation to ensure that resources are focused on genuinely long-term vacant properties where intervention is appropriate.

8. What changes or resources would allow you to better address empty homes in your borough?

The key change to better address empty homes would be increased financial support for the provision of additional grants and loans to property owners to bring back properties to use where works are expected to be expensive due to the complexity of the required works, as described. Further support for the acquisition of empty homes for refurbishment and return to use by social landlords would also be highly beneficial, either as social rent homes or as temporary accommodation, given the significant pressures in the sector.

9. Are there any specific challenges around empty social housing in your borough, and what action are you taking to bring these homes back into use?

As stated in the Southwark Empty Homes Action Plan, (<https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/documents/s131816/Southwark%20Empty%20Homes%20Action%20Plan.pdf>) the issue of empty homes is concentrated in the private sector, about a quarter of empty homes (including empty furnished homes) have Southwark Council as the primary liable party for the council tax. The vast majority of these are related to ongoing estate redevelopment, major refurbishment, disposal or non-housing use. This includes properties built for sale as part of the new homes programme (such as shared ownership properties).

Most of the non-active vacant homes are involved with major regeneration schemes or where major investment or fire safety work is required. With the regeneration scheme vacant homes, some of the properties are effectively uninhabitable but there are strict rules about what can be removed from the council tax property list on which these figures are based. Many of these are expected to be removed from the empty homes figures once demolition gets underway.

The council is keen to make best use of these empty properties. It conducts frequent review of empty homes on regeneration schemes to ensure empty properties are used as temporary accommodation for as long as possible. Where there are delays to the regeneration programme, the temporary accommodation strategy for the scheme is reviewed and additional homes brought back into use.

The Southwark Empty Homes Action Plan sets out the many actions Southwark Council is taking to reduce the number of empty social rent homes. Some of these actions include plans to reduce relet times, streamlining the end to end process management of properties as they become vacant, increasing the number of contractors focused on complex vacant home cases and allocating work through the Plentific Market Place platform, closer working with utility companies to resolve supply and meter issues, using regeneration homes as temporary accommodation,

better promotion of sheltered housing opportunities and disposing of a limited number of long term council voids where these are not economically viable for the council to bring them back to use, which also provides a receipt to help fund the council's new homes programme.

10. How could the GLA and/or government better support local authorities to tackle empty homes?

The GLA and Government could further support local authorities by providing increased long-term funding for dedicated empty homes services, enabling councils to undertake proactive casework, enforcement activity, undertake works in default and support interventions. Additional financial assistance to help owners bring properties back into use, particularly where significant refurbishment costs are a barrier, would also be beneficial.

There is also scope to strengthen the legislative framework available to councils. This could include simplifying and accelerating enforcement processes, improving access to ownership and contact information, and reviewing taxation and regulatory measures to provide stronger incentives especially in the case for landlords to return long-term empty homes to occupation.

Additional funding for Council Tax inspection and verification activity would help improve the accuracy of empty homes data. Local authorities rely heavily on Council Tax records to identify and monitor empty properties, and dedicated resources to investigate occupancy status, verify exemptions and validate records would support more effective targeting of interventions and provide a clearer understanding of the scale of the issue.

Local authorities would also benefit from improved access to utility consumption data, where appropriate safeguards are in place, as this can help identify potentially unoccupied properties and support the verification of empty homes records. Enhanced data-sharing arrangements between local authorities would be equally valuable, particularly where property owners are registered at addresses in other boroughs. Better cross-borough information sharing would assist councils in locating owners, coordinating interventions and improving engagement with long-term empty property cases.



Established in 2001, the Empty Homes Network is the prominent voice, support and resource community for empty homes officers and practitioners across the country. With over 1000 members and subscribers, the Network's aim is to support councils in bringing empty homes back into use, through the sharing of best practice methods, hands-on experience, and tools to develop effectiveness and efficiency.

Formed as a non-profit organisation, the Empty Homes Network lobby and campaign for service improvement and assist those with the least capacity and experience to gain confidence, whilst at the same time ensuring that those who are more experienced have a platform to share, develop and innovate. We support policymakers in formulating approaches and frameworks by offering insight at an operational level, all with the aim of adequately equipping councils with the tools required to engage, encourage and enforce where needed.

In addition to our online platform, The Empty Homes Network host an annual national conference bringing together practitioners, experts, and policymakers to share first-hand their experiences and relevant case studies. Our conference has grown year on year, highlighting the importance and willingness of councils to allocate and dedicate resources to the issue, albeit one that is not a statutory function.

In recent years, the Empty Homes Network have expanded their development opportunities for councils through their training and consultancy services. Aimed at empty homes officers and practitioners of all experience levels, their courses offer an introduction into the subject of empty homes from a practitioner's point of view and provides a foundation level approach for delegates to use in their roles. We also source courses in specialist areas for the benefit of our members, in topics such as probate legalities and hoarding.

Our consultancy services are specifically tailored to meet an authority's specific needs. These include a full empty homes service review, enabling the council a fresh perspective and opportunity to assess where best practice or policy improvements can be made; a challenging case appraisal, offering a practical action plan of next steps in dealing with difficult empty homes cases; and empty homes strategy writing and refreshing, for those authorities who are looking to take their first, or next step in developing their policy and procedures. The Empty Homes Network have also worked with authorities to produce investment proposals for new initiatives such as grants, loan and leasing schemes.



Adam Cliff is the Executive Director of the Empty Homes Network, where he has supported local authorities and officers in tackling empty homes since 2019.

With over 15 years' experience as an Empty Homes Officer, Adam is recognised as a leading voice in the field, advising councils nationwide and contributing policy recommendations to bodies including the Local Government Association. His recent work includes developing training and guidance to help officers maximise local impact and national visibility on empty homes.

A strong advocate for empowering councils with practical tools and strategies, Adam's commitment has helped drive the Network's growth and influence in recent years. He holds a degree in Property Development and Architectural Design, with his thesis entitled '*Empty Homes Under the Hammer*' exploring government powers and approaches to bringing empty properties back into use.

Question 1:

How would reducing the number of empty homes help to tackle the housing crisis in London?

Reducing the number of empty homes would not, on its own, solve London's housing crisis, but it can make a meaningful and immediate contribution to easing housing need, increasing effective supply, reducing neighbourhood blight, and improving public confidence in the housing system.

London is facing acute housing pressures while a growing number of homes remain unused. The 2025 figures show 161,116 empty homes, second homes and unoccupied exemptions in London, representing 4.18% of the capital's housing stock. Within this, 81,812 are recorded as empty homes, including 47,864 long-term empty homes. This means that a significant number of existing homes are not contributing to meeting housing need at a time when households face homelessness, overcrowding, temporary accommodation pressures, and severe affordability challenges.

From the perspective of the Empty Homes Network, reducing empty homes should be understood as part of a wider housing supply strategy. Bringing an existing home back into use can often be faster, less carbon-intensive and less politically contentious than delivering a new-build home. It can also provide direct local benefits: reducing anti-social behaviour, improving street condition, supporting neighbourhood confidence, and preventing decline in surrounding property conditions.

The greatest benefit would come from focusing on long-term empty homes. Short-term vacancy is a normal part of the housing market, but the growth in long-term empties shows homes becoming "stuck" through disrepair, ownership complexity, probate, stalled refurbishment, financial difficulty, or deliberate underuse. In London, long-term empties have increased by 23% in a single year, and by 43% since 2021. This is no longer simply a turnover issue; it is a structural housing problem.

For policymakers, the key point is that every empty home brought back into use represents housing need met without waiting for a new planning consent, major infrastructure, or long delivery pipeline. Where properties can be acquired, leased or converted into affordable housing, temporary accommodation, supported housing or key-worker accommodation, the public benefit is even greater.

Reducing empty homes would also improve fairness. In a city where many households cannot access secure housing, properties left empty for extended periods undermine public confidence. Empty homes are a visible sign that the housing system is not using its existing stock efficiently. Tackling them would demonstrate that public authorities are acting not only to build more homes, but also to ensure that existing homes are used responsibly.

This is why the Network's 3-Point Plan calls for empty homes to be recognised as a vital housing resource, supported by a national strategy, local duties, better Council Tax mechanisms and improved enforcement powers.

Question 2:**What are the key factors driving the increasing levels of empty homes in the capital?**

The increase in London's empty homes is caused by a combination of market, legal, financial, social and administrative factors. There is no single cause, and therefore no single solution.

First, London's high-value housing market creates conditions in which some owners can afford to leave homes unused. In some parts of the capital, particularly high-value central boroughs, homes may be held as investment assets, second homes or low-use properties. The increase in second homes from 48,830 in 2024 to 55,978 in 2025 points to the continuing role of secondary ownership and investment behaviour.

Second, long-term vacancy is increasingly structural. London's long-term empty homes rose from 38,879 in 2024 to 47,864 in 2025. This suggests that more homes are not simply passing through normal market turnover but are becoming trapped in extended vacancy. Causes include stalled refurbishments, unresolved planning issues, ownership disputes, absent or disengaged owners, and properties requiring significant investment before they can be occupied.

Third, legal and life-event-related causes are significant. The exemption data shows that deceased-owner properties remain the largest unoccupied exemption category in London, with 14,071 Class F exemptions in 2025, around 60% of all unoccupied exemptions. Probate delays, inheritance disputes and estate management issues can all leave homes empty for extended periods. Care-related exemptions also demonstrate the links between housing, ageing, adult social care and family decision-making.

Fourth, safety, disrepair and redevelopment issues are increasingly important. Class G exemptions, where occupation is prohibited, reached 3,354 homes in 2025, more than 50% higher than in 2023. This likely reflects building safety issues, dangerous structure concerns, cladding remediation, enforcement restrictions and stalled redevelopment activity.

Fifth, financial pressures are an emerging factor. Repossessed properties in London rose to 617 in 2025. While still a smaller category, this increase may indicate mortgage stress, lender processes and wider cost-of-living pressures contributing to vacancy.

Finally, capacity constraints within local government also contribute to the problem. Empty homes work is not a statutory function, and practice varies considerably between authorities. Some boroughs have skilled officers, active data systems and intervention pathways; others have limited capacity and can act only reactively. This inconsistency allows some long-term empty homes to remain unaddressed for too long.

The Network's position is that these drivers require a coordinated response: national strategy, local action, Council Tax reform, stronger data-sharing, and empty-homes-specific enforcement tools.

Question 3:**How effective are the mechanisms available to boroughs to tackle empty homes?**

The mechanisms available to boroughs can be effective in individual cases, but they are not currently sufficient to deliver a consistent, strategic or large-scale reduction in empty homes across London.

Boroughs have a range of tools: owner engagement, advice, signposting, Council Tax premiums, grants or loans where available, enforcement notices, works in default, enforced sale, compulsory purchase, and Empty Dwelling Management Orders. In practice, most successful empty homes work begins with engagement. Skilled officers can often resolve cases by understanding the owner's circumstances, identifying barriers, and helping move the property towards sale, letting, occupation or refurbishment.

Council Tax premiums are a useful and increasingly used mechanism. In London, 25,668 properties were subject to the empty homes premium in 2025, more than double the 2021 figure. This shows that boroughs are identifying more long-term empty homes and applying fiscal pressure more widely. However, the continued rise in long-term empty homes shows that taxation alone is not enough. Premiums can prompt some owners to act, but for high-value London assets the additional charge may not be a sufficient deterrent. In other cases, owners may be unable, rather than unwilling, to act.

Existing enforcement tools are important but limited, as most were not designed specifically to secure occupation of empty homes. Enforcement can address disrepair, nuisance or hazards, but it does not automatically bring a home back into use. Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO) are the closest empty-homes-specific tool, but they remain underused often because of the perception of being too complex, resource-intensive and financially risky for councils. Under an EDMO, local authorities have to fund refurbishment and management costs upfront, before recovering income, which can deter action.

There is also a capacity problem. Empty homes work requires investigation, tracing owners, negotiation, legal knowledge, housing expertise, Council Tax data, property inspection and enforcement confidence. Many boroughs do not have the dedicated resource needed to sustain this work at scale.

The Empty Homes Network's 3-Point Plan therefore argues that current mechanisms need to be strengthened. Specifically, it recommends: a duty to investigate and act on long-term empty homes; a national and local empty homes strategy framework; better use and reinvestment of Council Tax premiums; and new or reformed enforcement tools, including improved EDMOs, an enforcement fund, and an Empty Dwelling Sale Order or compulsory sale-style mechanism for the most entrenched cases.

Question 4:

What are the challenges with the monitoring and transparency of empty homes in London, and how do these challenges impact efforts to address the issue effectively?

The main challenges are inconsistent data, limited access to Council Tax information, definitional problems, weak reporting on outcomes, and lack of transparency about what happens after a property is identified.

Council Taxbase data is valuable, but it is not a complete and accurate operational tool. It records categories such as empty homes, second homes and exemptions, but it does not show why a property is empty, whether it is being actively investigated, whether the owner is engaging, or whether the property has returned to use because of council intervention.

Definitions also matter. Short-term empty homes, long-term empty homes, second homes and exempt unoccupied homes are distinct categories, but properties can move between them. Owners may dispute classifications, and some properties may be removed from Council Tax banding altogether, reducing their visibility within the data. In London, where ownership structures can often be complex, the challenge is particularly acute.

There is also inconsistency between boroughs. Some have strong working relationships between empty homes officers and revenues teams, while others treat these functions separately. Where officers cannot access relevant Council Tax information quickly, investigation is slowed or stops altogether. Where they cannot update or challenge account information based on evidence, records may remain inaccurate.

Transparency is also limited because current reporting tends to measure the number of empty homes, rather than the effectiveness of intervention. Policymakers need to know not only how many empty homes exist, but how many have been brought back into use, by what means, over what timescale, and with what public cost or benefit.

Poor data also affects delivery. It makes it harder to prioritise cases, target resources, identify repeat patterns, justify investment, evaluate Council Tax premiums, and compare performance between boroughs. It also weakens accountability: authorities with effective services are not always recognised, while authorities with limited activity are not always visible.

The Network's 3-Point Plan directly addresses this. It recommends a dedicated national reporting mechanism requiring authorities to report activity and outcomes on long-term empty homes brought back into use with intervention. It also recommends read-only access to Council Tax accounts for relevant officers, greater autonomy for empty homes officers to supply evidence for account changes, and clearer mechanisms for classifying properties accurately.

For London, the GLA could play a valuable role by creating a London-wide empty homes data framework, bringing together borough-level figures, intervention outcomes, second home data, exemptions, enforcement activity and case studies. This would support better targeting, stronger scrutiny and more consistent practice.

Question 5:**How could the Mayor and/or government reduce the level of empty homes in London?**

The Mayor and government should treat empty homes as a strategic housing supply issue, not a marginal enforcement matter. The response should combine leadership, funding, legal reform, data improvement and borough capacity-building.

First, government could introduce a statutory duty on local housing authorities to investigate and act on long-term empty homes. This would create consistency across boroughs and ensure empty homes work is not dependent on local discretion, political priority or short-term resource availability.

Second, the Mayor could develop a dedicated London Empty Homes Strategy, aligned with the London Housing Strategy, London Plan and Affordable Homes Programme. This would set out clear ambitions for reducing long-term empty homes, improving borough capacity, supporting acquisition and reuse, and targeting high-impact categories such as long-term empties, second homes, probate cases and stalled refurbishments.

Third, Council Tax premiums could be made to work harder. Premium receipts should be linked directly to empty homes activity and reinvested into services that bring homes back into use. The Network's 3-Point Plan recommends that the ability to charge premiums should be tied to a fit-for-purpose empty homes strategy, and that councils be rewarded for homes brought back into use through intervention. In London, the Mayor could encourage or require a consistent approach through funding agreements, best-practice guidance and transparent reporting.

Fourth, government should consider reforming exemptions and discounts that allow properties to remain outside effective action or charging for too long. This should include time limits or periodic review for indefinite exemptions, a probate application time limitation, and stronger mechanisms for councils to challenge inaccurate classifications.

Fifth, boroughs need better data powers. Relevant officers should have read-only access to Council Tax accounts, the ability to supply evidence for account changes, and clearer routes to work with Land Registry, banks, mortgage lenders, utility companies and other bodies with an interest in a property.

Sixth, enforcement powers could be modernised. EDMOs should be simplified and made available after six months of vacancy, with financial safeguards for councils. Government should create a national enforcement fund to reduce the financial risk of works in default, EDMOs and other interventions. A new Empty Dwelling Sale Order or compulsory sale-style power should be introduced for the most entrenched cases where owners will not engage, and all voluntary routes have been exhausted.

Seventh, the Mayor and government could create an acquisition and loans programme. A London Empty Homes Acquisition Fund would allow boroughs, housing associations and community-led housing bodies to acquire empty homes for affordable housing, temporary accommodation or specialist housing. A loan fund could help owners who want to act but cannot finance refurbishment.

Finally, there could be a national incentive programme for owners. Some owners are not speculative investors but are stuck because of probate, care, debt, disrepair or family complexity. Incentives such as legal-cost support, reduced tax liabilities on sale to councils, or grants linked to affordable reoccupation could accelerate action.

The Network's position is that London does not need symbolic action; it needs a practical delivery framework. The Mayor can provide leadership, coordination, funding alignment and transparency. Government can provide the statutory duty, fiscal reform and enforcement powers. Boroughs can deliver the casework, engagement and enforcement. Together, this would turn empty homes from a missed opportunity into a meaningful part of London's housing response.

London Assembly Housing Committee

Call for Evidence: Empty Homes

June–July 2026

Written Evidence Submission

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Date submitted: June 15, 2026

This evidence is submitted in a personal academic capacity. The views expressed are those of the author alone and do not represent the position of any institution or employer. The author consents to this submission being published with their name and institutional affiliation.

About the Author

Dr Jonathan Bourne is an honorary researcher at University College London and the founder of the AI Datalab THE 3TC. He has researched low-use properties (commonly referred to as ‘empty homes’) and offshore-owned properties in the UK for the last 10 years. He developed a method of pre-anonymising sensitive data that allows councils to release detailed housing data without breaching the Data Protection Act. Using this data, he showed that the value of low-use properties could be measured relative to properties with a permanent resident. His publications on the topic of housing include Bourne 2019; Bourne, Ingianni, and McKenzie 2023; Atkinson et al. 2024 and most recently Bourne, Ingianni, and McKenzie 2026. His work has been covered by national and international press, and used by local government, NGOs and political campaigns. He ensures all code and data is available online to reduce barriers for anyone who may want to make use of it.

Executive Summary

- The majority of low-use properties in London are high-value, privately owned leisure-related investments.
- Low-use properties are concentrated in the most expensive parts of London, but their impact on housing demand and pricing ripples out
- Lack of detailed data hampers understanding, constructive debate and effective evidence-based policy making
- Data and methods are available, and the Mayor’s office is ideally placed to create a highly transparent ‘empty homes’ data hub.

General Questions

Q1. How would reducing the number of empty homes help to tackle the housing crisis in London?

Previous research by Sá 2016; Guerrieri, Hartley, and Hurst 2013 suggested that concentrations of housing demand caused by market forces have some degree of ripple effect on housing prices as those who would otherwise be resident in the area are pushed out. My own research (Bourne 2019; Bourne, Ingianni, and McKenzie 2023) has found that low-use properties (commonly referred to as ‘empty homes’) in London tend to be concentrated in parts of the city that already have high market demand. This suggests that these concentrated pockets of emptiness could be pushing up house prices for Londoners more broadly. As such,, reducing the number of empty homes could help prevent housing price spikes and lower prices across the capital.

As an example, Figure 1 shows a 2023 map of London from the perspective of 3 different types of property associated with emptiness: Low use (empty homes), Airbnb properties, and Offshore owned properties. The last panel, ‘unconventional property’, shows the combination of all three types. The figure shows that empty homes in London are concentrated in the more high-value areas. This pattern of empty homes concentrating in more expensive areas is found at multiple scales, as shown in Figure 2. The Figure shows the distribution of properties with no permanent resident across the local authority of Kensington and Chelsea, concentrated in the most expensive parts of the borough.

Q2. What are the key factors driving the increasing levels of empty homes in the capital?

Underlying reasons for empty property in London appear to be related to the financialisation of the London housing market Fernandez, Hofman, and Aalbers 2016 and the use of property as ‘Leisure related investments’ Paris 2009. Leisure-related investments lie on a scale between pure investment and purely emotional, though in London, the value is tilted more towards investment. This is similar to other Global cities Such as New York, Vancouver, Singapore and Hong Kong.

Within the UK, we see a pattern whereby low-use property increases at the low and high ends of the affordability scale. That is in areas where highly deprived, derelict property is present; as housing demand increases, derelict properties are renovated and occupied. As housing pressure moves to the upper end of the market, low-use properties are again on the rise as leisure-related investments appear. This creates a ‘U’ shaped low-use pattern. However, London does not exhibit the same low-use behaviour. It appears that housing pressure in London is so high that the Capital has a hockey-stick shape: the most affordable parts of the city have very little low-use property. As we move up the scale of market

The distribution of the property types across London

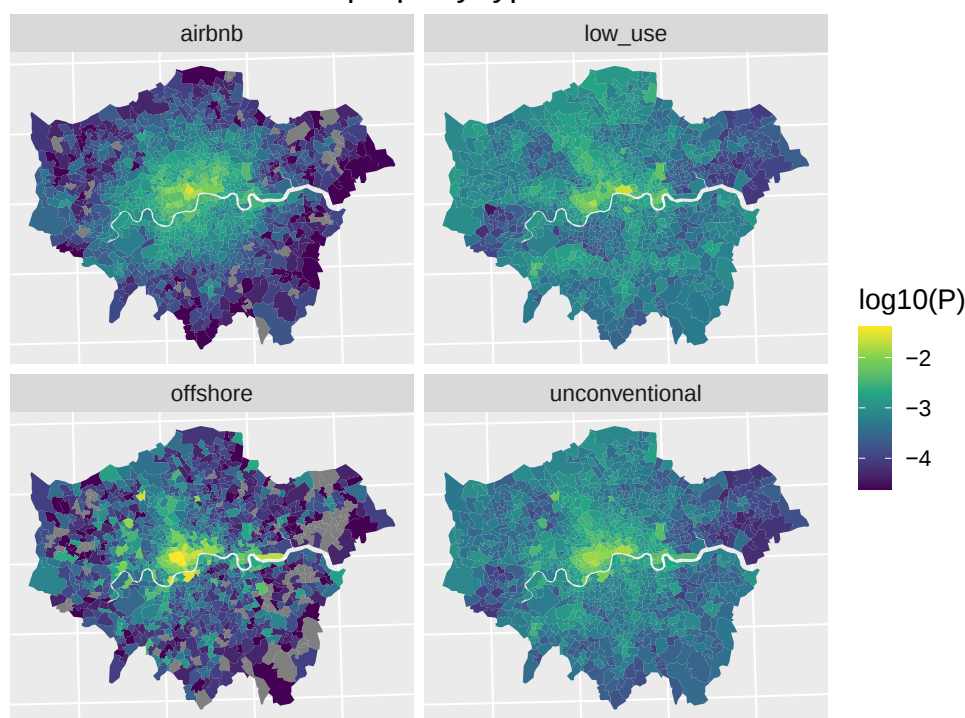


Figure 1: We see across different types of unconventional residential property that there are concentrations in the most expensive and central parts of the Capital.

prices, we see low-use increasing before increasing dramatically at the upper end of the market. This pattern is shown in Figure 3.

Q3. How effective are the mechanisms available to boroughs to tackle empty homes?

Currently, the focus of the Mayor's Office and local authorities, with regard to low-use property, appears to be on renovating derelict properties and getting them back into use. I cannot comment on the effectiveness of this strategy as I am not clear what the volume of this type of property is. Based on the data I have analysed, I believe the volumes are low relative to the deliberately low-use type of property.

The other alternative is to charge a premium on council tax on empty properties. However, these premiums are in the hundreds of pounds, which is often dwarfed by the total property value and the annual gains such properties make. For example, In 2019 when Figure 2 was created low-use properties in Kensington and Chelsea were worth approximately £500k more than properties with a permanent resident in the same borough.

As such, it does not appear to me that borough strategies can have a significant impact on the total volume of low-use properties.

Low Use percentage by LSOA in Kensington and Chelsea

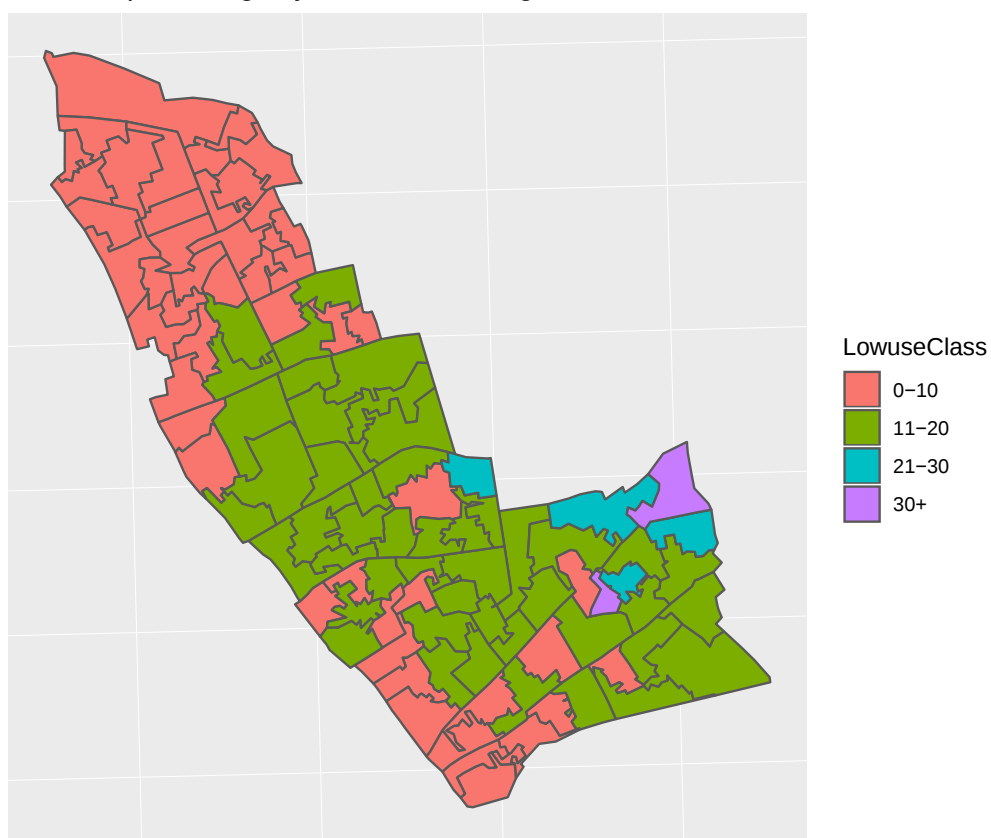


Figure 2: Map of Emptiness in the London Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. Colours show the percentage of low-use properties.

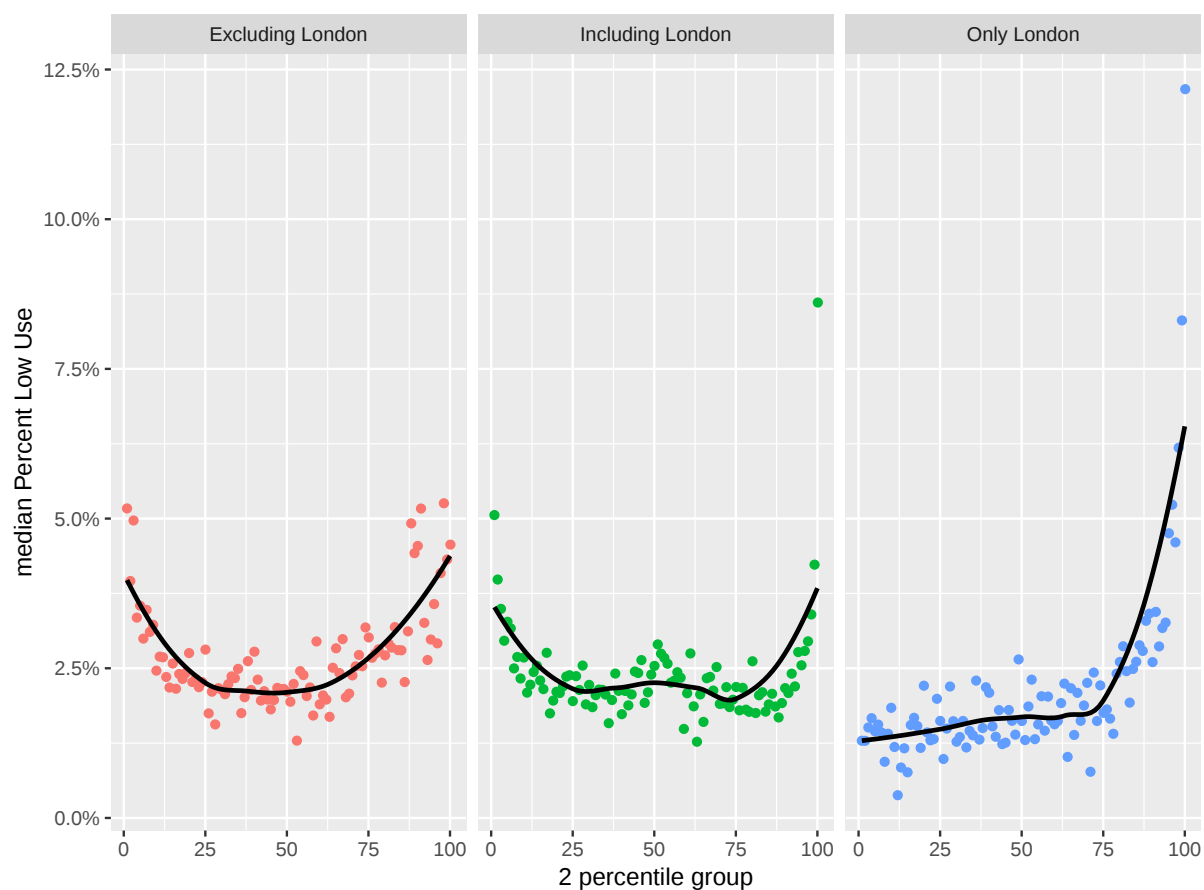


Figure 3: Exploring the relationship between housing affordability and and low-use percentage. It is clear that London does not follow the same pattern as the rest of England and Wales.

Q4. What are the challenges with the monitoring and transparency of empty homes in London, and how do these challenges impact efforts to address the issue effectively?

Publicly released information is only at the local authority level, which does not provide sufficiently detailed information for insightful spatial analysis. In addition, in England and Wales, the definition of "empty" is not clearly defined, and councils use different terms and approaches.

To obtain detailed low-use information, each local authority needs to be sent an individual freedom of information request. These requests are almost always erroneously rejected as breaching the Data Protection Act, and take several rounds of discussion before the data is released. As a result, getting this data takes a long time and is not available as a time series, which would allow much more insightful analysis and causal conclusions.

The situation in England and Wales contrasts with that in Scotland, which regularly releases whole-country data using a unified system of definitions. Allowing for robust evidence-based responses to low-use hotspots based on the needs of the local community.

The Mayor's office has an opportunity to lead the way in England and Wales, demonstrating the value of transparency in low-use property. As a branch of government, the Mayor's office can access data at the address level, enabling it to trivially create a harmonised London-wide database of low-use and related properties. By working with the local authorities or the Valuation Office Agency, the Mayor's office could create a low-use property portal providing housing data as downloadable files, via a dashboard, with maps, or a similar approach.

Q5. How could the Mayor and/or government reduce the level of empty homes in London?

My specialist area is in handling and processing complex data to make it usable by policy makers but I am not an expert in policy myself. As such I would suggest that by ensuring policy makers have access to consistent, detailed historical data on low-use properties, the Mayor's office can ensure that there is a foundation for debate to find the most impactful, evidence-based policy, to improve housing opportunities for all Londoners.

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