

Southwark Empty Homes Action Plan

2024 update

This is an update of the October 2021 action plan which sets out Southwark Council's zero tolerance approach to long term empty homes and sets out plans to bring empty homes quickly back into use. We will work closely with our residents and property owners while taking firm action where required.

One page summary of the Southwark Empty Homes Action Plan

This table is a one page summary of the full action plan which is included towards the end of this document.

Taking a zero tolerance approach to long term empty private sector homes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Applying full council tax to all empty homes and applying the maximum premiums for long term empty homes• Using compulsory purchase powers with dedicated funding.• Using enforcement options where an empty property is a statutory nuisance
Working with residents and property owners to quickly bring empty homes back in to use
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Raising awareness and provide advice on the options to bring properties back into use• Providing enhanced grants and loans to bring properties back in to use• Encouraging property owners to let their homes through the council's social lettings agency to homeless families with a clear offer• Contacting developers of newly developed empty homes with the offer of leasing to the council• Making it easier to report empty homes
Improving our understanding of private sector empty homes to better target action and support
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Contacting owners of empty homes on the council tax database to improve our understanding of the reasons for this, and what additional support would help return the property to use.
Campaigning for more resources and more effective powers to tackle empty homes in the private sector
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Demanding flexibility to charge unlimited council tax premiums (we were also initially calling for a reduction in the initial 2 year period, and flexibility to charge premiums on second homes and furnished homes, which has now been introduced)• Demanding increased resources for grants and loans• Calling for simpler and swifter powers around CPOs and EDMOS• Calling for planning powers to revert property to the local authorities housing supply where vacant
Reducing the number of empty council homes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Setting ambitious targets for quickly turning around major and minor council empty properties as they become vacant• Where possible, using council homes which are empty due to impending redevelopment as temporary accommodation.

The problem of empty homes and limited powers

London is in the midst of a housing crisis. At a time when tens of thousands of families across the capital are reliant on temporary accommodation or on waiting lists for a suitable home, it has never been more important to tackle the issue of empty homes, with numbers of empty homes rising across London and the country.

Empty housing in Southwark, as across London, is a problem predominantly driven by the private sector. The overwhelming majority of empty homes are privately owned where there are limited powers to tackle this. As a council we recognised the scale of this problem and are committed to clamping down on empty homes which are a needless waste and a lost resource, particularly in an area where there is high demand and significant levels of housing need. Empty homes can also create a serious blight on a neighbourhood by creating environmental problems with pests and as places of anti-social behaviour.

The council is committed to 'Take action to reduce the number of empty homes in our borough, so more local people can move into them', as set out in Southwark's Borough Plan. In February 2021 Cabinet agreed actions to be included in this Empty Homes Action Plan. The full report is available online [here](#). The council will use all powers available, while recognising that these are extremely limited and we need significant changes at a national level to support our ambitions. In March 2022 Cabinet agreed additional funding for Private Sector Empty Homes and changes to loans and grants. The full report is available [here](#).

Part 1 of the following action plan sets out Southwark Council's zero tolerance approach to long term empty homes in the borough. There is simply too high a demand for housing for it to be acceptable that properties are left empty for long periods of time. We plan to use all the powers available to us as cost efficiently as possible to deter landlords from leaving properties empty, while at the same time working proactively with landlords and residents to bring properties back into use as quickly as possible. We know in many cases people may just need advice or some financial support to make the required repairs, or to find a suitable buyer or tenant. We have conducted further research to increase our understanding of the reasons properties are being left empty and what further support may be required to assist landlords to quickly return properties to use.

While we are committed to use all the powers, buttons and levers available to us, our powers are limited. There is more that needs to happen at a national level to give local authorities the powers to truly tackle this problem, and therefore the following action plan sets out how we will lobby for further powers and resources in this area.

However we also recognise there is more as a council we can do to reduce the number of empty homes we manage. While there are valid reasons for many of these being vacant there is more we can do to reduce the number of empty homes, through speeding up re-letting times and reducing the number of homes which are empty as part of regeneration schemes. This is set out in Part 2 of the action plan.

How many empty homes are there?

There are many different definitions of empty homes and a variety of sources of data, which all have some limitations. The simplest way to compare empty homes is to focus on the council tax data. This is the method we have used for the purposes of this report. However, to a large extent this does rely on self-reporting of the relevant council tax status of a property by the tenant or owner.

Each property is either classed as being an empty home or an empty home with a premium applied for properties which are empty for over 2¹, 5 or 10 years, provided they are unfurnished. This gives a total of 4,580 empty homes in October 2023. Of these 1,153 had been empty for over 2 years. This total empty homes figure had increased from 4,416 in October 2021. However council tax records show this number had fallen to 4,040 by April 2024. Most of the change in these figures is within the short term vacant figures. A higher figure of 5,143 empty homes is given on MHCLG Live Table 615 for the October 2023 figure. This includes an additional 563 homes which were empty but in exempt classes as detailed in a table below.

Property category	Oct 2020	Oct 2021	Oct 2022	Oct 2023	Dec 2023	April 2024
Empty with zero council tax discount (plus for April 2024 those empty 1-2 years with a 100% premium as per footnote 1)	2,711	3,185	2,634	3,427	3,097	2584 +668
Empty for 2-5 years with 100% premium council tax	795	940	896	802	750	564
Empty for between 5 years and 10 years with 200% premium council tax	214	251	282	331	389	203
Empty for over 10 years with 300% premium council tax (introduced in April 2021)	N/A	40	47	20	20	21
(Total with a premium)	1,009	1,231	1,225	1,153	1,159	1,456
Total empty and substantially unfurnished (with or without a premium)	3,720	4,416	3,859	4,580	4,256	4,040
All vacant dwellings from Live Table 615 ² - Includes the exempt classes below	4,218	4,976	4,452	5,143	N/A	N/A

¹ Reducing to one year from 1st April 2024 using new powers in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-dwelling-stock-including-vacants>

Property category	Oct 2020	Oct 2021	Oct 2022	Oct 2023	Dec 2023	April 2024
Dwellings on the valuation list in exempt classes (included in the empty homes total in Live table 615)	October 2020	October 2021	October 2022	October 2023		
Class B: Unoccupied property owned by a registered charity	63	83	56	63		
Class E: Empty property previously occupied by a person now residing in a care home, hospital or hostel.	35	31	30	30		
Class F: The council tax payer has died	308	363	393	285		
Class G: Occupation prohibited by law	57	54	83	145		
Classes D,H,I,J,K,L,Q covering issues such as prison, hospital, held for minister of religion, personal care, students, mortgagee in possession and bankruptcy	35	29	31	40		
Total in exempt classes	498	559	593	563		

The following table breaks each category down by tenure. It should be noted that this is a snapshot of time which does not exactly match the snapshot above as reported above as the reports were run off at slightly different times. There can be delays for people to notify council tax as they move in to properties. There is also a regular process of reviewing the data on council properties to correct issues and anomalies that arise, such as from the self-reporting of information by residents.

As of October 2023, there were 148,886 homes of all tenure types in Southwark, therefore taking the total figures in the following table for December 2023, there was an approximate 4.5% vacancy rate in the borough including second homes and empty but substantially furnished properties. Further information by tenure is included in the following sections.

Primary liable party as recorded on council tax (right) and empty homes category (below)	2021 (October)			2022 (September)			2023 (December)		
	Private and registered providers	Council including non-active ³	Overall total	Private and registered providers	Council including non-active ³	Overall total	Private and registered providers	Council including non-active ³	Overall total
Empty no premium (less than 2 years)	2,613	637	3,250	1,806	852	2,658	1,944	1,153	3,097
100% premium (empty 2-5 years)	362	570	932	289	602	891	283	467	750
200% premium (empty 5-10 years)	53	194	247	55	223	278	74	315	389
300% premium (empty over 10 years)	16	24	40	15	32	47	16	4	20
Total premium (empty over 2 years)	431	788	1,219	359	857	1,216	373	786	1,159
<i>Proportions of total premiums by tenure</i>	35%	65%	100%	30%	70%	100%	32%	68%	100%
Total empty unfurnished	3,044	1,425	4,469	2,165	1,709	3,874	2,317	1,939	4,256
<i>Proportions of total empty unfurnished in each tenure</i>	68%	32%	100%	56%	44%	100%	54%	46%	100%
Second homes	476	0	476	445	0	445	432	0	432
Furnished, but unoccupied	2,724	21[2]	2,745	2,395	15	2,410	2,035	10	2,045
Uninhabitable	10	0	10	14	0	14	14	0	14
Total empty homes including unfurnished and second homes etc.	6,254	1,446	7,700	5,019	1,724	6,743	4,798	1,949	6,749
<i>Proportions of grand total empty in each tenure</i>	81%	19%	100%	74%	26%	100%	71%	29%	100%

Up to now we were prohibited by legislation from applying a council tax premium on properties which were furnished but unoccupied. Following legislation that came into effect on 26 October 2023 councils will also be able to charge a 100% premium council tax on empty furnished and second homes. Councils planning to implement this premium must advertise this determination one year before it comes into effect on 1 April 2025. Further information on how Southwark will implement this change is provided in a later section.

³ This includes properties which are unavailable for letting due to redevelopment, major refurbishment, disposal or non-housing use. This information is split down in the section of this action plan specifically on empty council properties.

What lies behind these numbers?

- Southwark is a leading borough in terms of the delivery of new homes of all types but this does temporarily increase the number of empty properties, however most of these are then let or sold and therefore do not become long term empty properties. If any properties do remain empty the council works with the owner to explore other ways of bringing these into use.
- Some properties may be deliberately left empty as investment opportunities.
- There is an increased churn associated with having a significant private rented sector, larger than many boroughs.
- In figures for previous years, the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in many students not renting in the private rented sector while their courses moved online. In addition there was some evidence of an initial decline in demand in the private rented sector in London, with many households choosing to move further out given the opportunities presented by home working.
- When a resident passes away, it can take some time for a property to then be brought back to use, especially through probate proceedings.
- There are a high number of empty properties situated within large scale regeneration schemes such as at Aylesbury Estate. There are also some blocks which need to be temporarily vacated where fire risk assessment work or other essential safety work is conducted which identifies a need to take corrective action such as at Ledbury Estate and Marie Curie.

PART 1 – TACKLING PRIVATE SECTOR EMPTY HOMES

The main focus of the Southwark Empty Homes Action Plan is on the private sector as the overwhelming majority of empty homes are privately owned. In Southwark, privately owned and housing association empty homes account for about 71% of all empty homes including second homes and furnished homes. Practically all furnished empty homes are also in the private sector, and there were also 432 second homes in the private sector. Up until now we have been unable to charge a council tax premium on these properties. This is changing following the new Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023. This will allow councils like Southwark new powers to help tackle these types of empty properties for empty properties vacant for over a year, rather than 2 years, it will also allow a 100% council tax premium to be charged on empty furnished homes and second homes. The Cabinet Report “The Council Tax Base for 2024-25” set out how Southwark Council plans to make use of these new powers that we have been calling for. New actions have been added to this plan. The Cabinet report is available online at:

<https://moderngov.southwark.gov.uk/documents/s117664/Report%20Council%20Tax%20Base%202024-25.pdf>

The council has adopted a zero tolerance approach to long term empty properties. While the council’s preference is to work constructively with landlords and residents to bring properties back into use, the council is committed to providing disincentives for properties to be left empty, such as applying the maximum permissible council tax premium, and through enforcement action where property owners are unwilling or unable to bring their homes back into use.

There are a number of means to bring empty homes back into use from informal measures to the use of enforcement powers, which includes Enforced Sales, Empty Dwelling Management Orders and Compulsory Purchase Orders. Many of these are extremely complex and time consuming and while we will not shy away from pursuing such measures where necessary, we will also lobby for simplification of the powers, and for further powers and funding to enable further action to be taken.

Taking a zero tolerance approach to long term empty private sector homes

Action	Officer lead	CMT lead	Targets	Comments	PRAG
Use of council tax powers					
Continue not to offer council tax discounts on empty and unfurnished homes. The full charge is payable unless they are exempt.	Norman Lockie, Head of Income Operations	Clive Palfreyman	In operation	As introduced in April 2016	Complete
Continue to apply a 100% additional council tax premium for properties empty for over 2 years	Norman Lockie, Head of Income Operations	Clive Palfreyman	In operation	As introduced in April 2019	Complete
Start to apply the 100% additional council tax premium for properties empty for over 1 year (double council tax utilising new powers in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023).	Norman Lockie, Head of Income Operations	Clive Palfreyman	April 2024	As detailed in the Cabinet Report “The Council Tax Base for 2024-25” from 5 th December 2023	On track
Contact property owners of homes vacant for between nine months and a year to remind them of the upcoming one year premium and to sign post towards advice to help bring properties back into use.	Norman Lockie, Head of Income Operations	Clive Palfreyman	December 2024		On track
Continue to apply a 200% additional council tax premium for those empty for over 5 years	Norman Lockie, Head of Income Operations	Clive Palfreyman	In operation	As introduced in April 2020	Complete

Continue to apply a 300% additional council tax premium for those empty for over 10 years	Norman Lockie, Head of Income Operations	Clive Palfreyman	In operation	As introduced in April 2021	Complete
Start to charge a 100% premium on furnished empty and second homes by April 2025 (utilising new powers in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023).	Norman Lockie, Head of Income Operations	Clive Palfreyman	April 2024 April 2025	To advertise the determination a year prior to implementation as required by law Implement the new premium	On track
Further consider use of Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs)					
Explore use of EDMOs for properties which are empty for over two years	Sajda Munshi, PSH & Adaptations Manager	Strategic Director of Housing	April 2023	36. Officers met with a number of local authorities. It is clear that implementing EDMOs (Empty Dwelling Management Orders) poses significant challenges. This includes but is not limited to: a substantial workload due to the complexity, numerous exclusions, risk of cases being overturned at the Residential Property Tribunal (RPT), challenges working with the owners, who can apply to end the EDMO at any time. We also have to obtain their consent before for letting a property which is difficult is owners are untraceable or uncooperative. There are also issues with substantial repairs costs. The recovery of costs is uncertain, with the majority only becoming recoverable upon the future sale of the property. As a result, unless changes are made nationally, we have decided to focus on using alternative means to bring	Complete

				homes back into use and powers of enforcement such as CPO's.	
Use of compulsory purchase order (CPO) powers where other options have failed					
Creation of an 'Empty Homes CPO Fund' dedicated to deployment where all other options have failed to bring empty homes back into use		Strategic Director of Housing / Clive Palfreyman	April 2022	A capital allocation of £2m was agreed by Cabinet in March 2022 to provide funding to compulsory purchase (CPO) long-term empty homes. This will be a revolving fund as costs will be recouped from the sale of the properties.	Complete
Use of CPO for longer-term empty homes that are having a significant environmental impact	Sajda Munshi PSH & Adaptations Manager	Strategic Director of Housing	Ongoing	The existing Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) policy is under review. Eight vacant, long-term properties have been identified for assessment and corporate surveyors are currently evaluating them. A comprehensive assessment of the identified properties will be conducted to establish a priority order for addressing them. Two properties will be identified for targeted intervention. Authorisation will be sought for purchase by agreement to the property owners, contingent upon the owner being contactable, as this streamlines the process, preventing the need for a CPO and expediting proceeding. If purchase by agreement proves unattainable due to uncontactable or uncooperative owners, a CPO will be pursued.	Ongoing
Use of enforcement powers					
Using enforcement powers as appropriate where an empty property is a statutory nuisance –	Emma Trott, Housing Enforcement	Strategic Director of Environment,	Ongoing	Where an empty property is causing a statutory nuisance to a neighbouring property the Housing Enforcement	Ongoing

linking landlords to other support and options available to bring properties back into use.	& Licensing Manager	Neighbourhoods and Growth		<p>service can take formal action to require the owner to resolve the problem causing the nuisance. For example this could be a leaking roof near a party wall which is making the wall damp within the neighbouring property. This action cannot require the owner to bring their property back into use but will ensure they are taking responsibility for any nuisance caused to neighbouring properties. To fall within the definition of statutory nuisance, an issue needs to be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a nuisance • posing a threat to health <p>One property in 2022/23 was served a notice for a statutory nuisance which the council prosecuted against for non-compliance. There is currently one live case in 2024.</p>	
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Working with residents and property owners to quickly bring empty private sector homes back in to use

Action	Officer lead	CMT lead	Targets	Comments	PRAG
Explore offering enhanced grants tied to long-term leasing					
Review levels of grant and loans offered to property owners to help bring homes back in to use	Sajda Munshi, PSH & Adaptations Manager Dave Hodgson,	Strategic Director of Housing	October 2021	The review completed. The outcome of the review was that individual grants & loans needed to increase to take account of the increase in building costs and to incentivise	Complete

	Director of Asset Management			landlords/property owners to complete repairs/ improvements.	
Review funding for grants and loans as required	Sajda Munshi, PSH & Adaptations Manager	Strategic Director of Housing	March 2022	The review completed and these changes and additional funding were agreed by Cabinet in March 2022. Cabinet agreed to increase the annual capital funding available for grants to refurbish empty homes from £95k to £400k, and to increase the annual capital funding available for loans to refurbish empty homes from £62k to £700k. To support the expanded programme two additional officers will be recruited. Further details are in paragraphs 22-26 of the report .	Complete
To publish an enhanced offer for grants and loans by the end of the year.	Sajda Munshi, PSH & Adaptations Manager	Strategic Director of Housing	December 2022	Complete	Complete
Incentivise property owners to let their homes through the council's social lettings agency to homeless families⁴					
Develop a standard maximum offer of how much we will pay for renting empty properties, expectations of rents, letting terms etc. and publicise all the benefits that are available as part of the	Karen Shaw, Head of Housing Solutions	Strategic Director of Housing	December 2022	Grant levels have been publicised. Articles have been included in Resident E-News, Southwark Life and information has been updated on the Southwark website. Information is shared with empty home property	On target

⁴ The social lettings agency offers a guaranteed rent paid even if the property is empty, regular property visits to ensure the tenant is looking after it, a lease of up to five years, full management of all tenant issues including day to day repairs, guaranteed vacant possession at the end of the lease, and no fees or charge for the service. Please see this webpage for more information about the social lettings agency. <https://www.southwark.gov.uk/home-owners-services/private-home-owners-and-landlords/earn-money-from-your-property>

offer, through a variety of media channels.				owners as they are identified by council tax. A joint leaflet was produced.	
<p>Introduce new Private Rented Sector Licensing Schemes to include an exemption for properties let via the council's social lettings agency. The landlord can let their property through the agency and receive guaranteed rent without having to apply and pay for a license acting as an additional incentive for landlords to sign up to the agency. The exemption should be highlighted in promotional materials for the agency.</p> <p>Introduce a Gold Standard Charter Membership Scheme to recognise good landlords. The scheme should also offer an additional discount to licensing fees for any member who has signed up to the Council's Finder's Fee Scheme.</p>	Emma Trott, Housing Enforcement & Licensing Manager	Strategic Director of Environment, Neighbourhoods and Growth	<p>Phase 1 licensing schemes and Gold Standard Charter - March 2022</p> <p>Phase 2 licensing schemes - November 2023</p>	<p>Phase 1 of the new Private Rented Sector Licensing Schemes were approved by cabinet on 19/10/2021. The schemes include HMO licensing borough wide and selective licensing for single family properties in 5 wards and started on 1 March 2022.</p> <p>Phase 2 of the new Private Rented Sector Licensing Schemes were approved by cabinet on 6/12/2022 and approved by DLUHC in May 2023. The schemes started on 1 November 2023 and include selective licensing for single family properties in a further 14 wards.</p> <p>All new schemes include the exemption for properties let via the council's social lettings agency.</p> <p>The Gold Standard Charter offers 50% off of part B of the licensing fee for members signed up to the Finder's Fee scheme.</p>	Complete
Use council tax empty homes information to identify newly developed homes which are sitting empty	Norman Lockie, Head of Income Operations	Clive Palfreyman	Quarterly, starting with a new formal process from	A new process has been formalised where council tax run the reports and the data is used to identify newly developed properties which are vacant and potentially available for let. This is	Ongoing

			October 2021	then shared with council officers in the regeneration team.	
Contact developers of newly developed empty homes with the offer of leasing to the council to let to homeless households.	Neil Kirby, Head of Sustainable Growth, Karen Shaw , Head of Housing Solutions	Steve Platts Strategic Director of Housing	Quarterly	On receipt of the council tax information, regeneration officers will contact the developers of new units to understand the reasons for any vacancies and to suggest leasing to the council on standard terms and rents.	Ongoing
Raise awareness and provide advice on options to bring properties back in to use					
Organise an empty homes publicity drive, as part of the housing crisis campaign	Louise Neilan, Head of External Affairs	Althea Loderick	October 2021	We will use all appropriate and effective council channels to ensure the public are aware of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how to report empty homes, • the costs of leaving homes empty, both to owners and the wider community • incentives to bring properties back into use 	Ongoing
Improve the council's web pages on the support and assistance for bringing empty homes back into use including better linking to the information about council tax premiums which will be charged as per the next action	Sajda Munshi, PSH & Adaptations Manager, Richard Selley, Director of Customer Experience	Strategic Director of Housing	October 2021	Complete	Complete
Ensure the council's council tax webpages about empty properties	Laurence Fleming	Clive Palfreyman	October 2021	A web link has been inserted to ensure a joined up approach.	Complete

and second home discounts links to the webpage above about bringing empty properties back into use.	Service Development Officer Richard Selley, Director of Customer Experience				
Making it easier to report empty homes					
Establish an empty homes reporting telephone line through the council' switchboard	Dominic Cain Director of Exchequer	Clive Palfreyman	October 2021	There is an existing empty homes reporting telephone number. A new flowchart has been provided to help the call centre better assign calls to the appropriate team. We will continue to explore methods to make reporting of empty homes easier.	Complete
Improve options for the reporting of empty homes online and via email	Dominic Cain Director of Exchequer	Clive Palfreyman	November 2021	The existing web form is in place and receives hits daily. The Digital team will work with Resident Services to review the web form. Amendments to the page and appropriate automatic routing will be constructed where appropriate. The review will explore automatic filtering to the correct team. A process map and scoping is required to explore other options. Longer term actions could include an online app for reporting empty homes. There are currently similar apps on the market so the council will explore whether it is beneficial to purchase an app or develop a new app.	Ongoing

Improving our understanding of private sector empty homes to better target action and support

Action	Officer lead	CMT lead	Targets	Comments	PRAG
Improve the data on empty homes					
Contact owners of empty homes on the council tax database to improve our understanding of the reasons for this, and what additional support would help return the property to use.	Norman Lockie, Head of Income Operations	Clive Palfreyman	December 2021	<p>An empty homes audit was completed. Owners of empty homes were contacted to check if the property was still empty, why, and what additional assistance may be required to bring the property back into use. The council has received the final report. More than 2,000 owners of empty properties were surveyed to find out why homes were empty, future intentions concerning the property, and support required from the council. There were 290 responses received to the survey - a 14% response rate, which is positive in terms of this type of survey. 54% indicated that the home was not empty or being used as a second home. Of the owners that said the home was empty 34% indicated that they will be selling the property. 48% of owners indicated that work was needed before selling or letting the home.</p> <p>In 2023 5,540 correspondence was sent out to empty home owners. Approximately 580 responded, this led to 199 having empty status removed. The top changes were 71 properties were rented out, 63 owners had moved</p>	Complete

				back in to their properties, 12 properties had been sold and 6 were awaiting sale.	
Conducting pilots exercise to improve the reporting of empty homes.	Norman Lockie, Head of Income Operations	Clive Palfreyman	TBC	<p>This action was agreed in response to the survey above. Following this the council has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Run a targeted campaign against 450 properties empty for longer than 6 months. 103 responses have been received so far and the results are being analysed. This has been in conjunction with the empty property team • Used the temporary accommodation income database to understand which LBS properties are being used for this purpose and whether or not it ties in with Council Tax data • The council has introduced an automated process to identify owners of empty property who stop paying and then contact them to identify the reasons and offer help where appropriate. • Council tax are working with Ascendant Solutions to identify properties recorded as empty which may no longer be empty. This utilises real time sales and rental transactions data from various sources in real time to show changes at previously empty property. 	Ongoing

A new empty homes board					
Introduce a cross council empty homes board to meet bi-annually to agree and review the action plan	Robert Weallans, Housing Strategy Manager	Strategic Director of Housing	May 2021	The board has been set up and has met a number of times to agree this action plan and to coordinate workstreams across the council. The board will continue to meet to review the action plan as required and to monitor progress towards delivery of the actions, and to track the number of empty homes.	Complete

Campaigning for more resources and more effective powers to tackle empty homes in the private sector

In recognition of the limited powers the council has to tackle empty homes, the council will campaign for the following changes to legislation and national policy, working with the Mayor of London and London Councils.

Action	Officer lead	CMT lead	Targets	Comments	PRAG
Establish a thorough, consistent and long term public affairs plan, engaging both the Mayor of London, Greater London Assembly and London Councils in order to influence government policy towards empty homes and relevant local authority powers	Joseph Brown Cabinet & Public Affairs Manager	Althea Loderick	Ongoing	The Corporate Public Affairs Plan is in place. They are producing a script for those speaking to key external people. This will be sent out to the Directors Forum imminently. Current asks include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost effective enforcement powers, such as simplifying EDMO and CPO procedures, such as allowing for community impact and housing need to be accepted reasons to seek enforcement actions. • New planning powers to allow Local Authorities to revert property to local authority's affordable housing 	Ongoing

				<p>supply where it remains empty following completion. Current planning powers do not allow for planning consent to require homes to be occupied. If new powers are introduced the council will quickly implement these new powers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater flexibility over council tax premiums on empty homes - Government should allow unlimited council tax premiums on empty homes. • We had been calling for greater flexibility to enable local authorities to charge the premium on homes empty for less than 2 years, as well as the ability to charge premiums on second homes and other furnished empty properties. These changes were included in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023. • Increased resources for grants and loans 	
Work with partners from across the third sector to support and develop policy, campaigns and relevant other work streams, including organisations such as Action on Empty Homes	Joseph Brown Cabinet & Public Affairs Manager	Althea Loderick	Ongoing	The council has reached out to Action on Empty Homes and the council remains keen to work together where possible.	Ongoing
Ensure any related government consultation responses set out our clear asks	Perry Singh, Strategy and Business Support Manager	Strategic Director of Housing	As required	The council has met with MHCLG and DWP to discuss the issues with powers such as CPOs and EDMOs and remains in dialogue on these issues. The lobbying points will be used in all housing consultations as appropriate.	On target

PART 2 – REDUCING THE NUMBER OF EMPTY COUNCIL HOMES

While the issue of empty homes is concentrated in the private sector, about a quarter of empty 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 new homes programme (such as shared ownership properties).

According to the December 2023 council tax records there were 1,949 empty properties where the council was recorded as the primary liable party for the council tax (not just council rented).

As of December 2023 there were 227 active general needs voids, 87 of which were minor voids and 140 were major voids. Most of these are in work in progress. The vast majority of voids are non active voids. According to the Voids Team records there were 1,098 non active general needs voids (after cleansing the awaiting demolition figures) broken down as follows:

	Demolition	Disposal	Refurbishment and FRA type 4 safety works	Other ⁵	Total
Total	866	37	148	47	1,098

Most of the non-active voids are involved with major regeneration schemes or where major investment or fire safety work is required. With the regeneration voids, 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 figures shortly once demolition gets underway. Some of the key examples of these regeneration or structural issue voids are:

- Aylesbury Estate – The vast majority of the long term empty properties are linked to the Aylesbury Estate regeneration. In January 2024 this accounted for 713 voids of which 600 were vacant for over two years. This regeneration has run in phases

⁵ Other (most of these are used as short term emergency accommodation TA by legal disrepair, area management, cleaners mess room etc)

which has resulted in many homes needing to be vacated and sitting vacant prior to demolition. To reduce the number of vacant homes some of these homes have been used as temporary accommodation. The majority of the voids are in Padbury, Wendover, Winslow and Ravenstone as this is the next phase of the regeneration (phase 2b) for which the council are obliged to provide vacant possession to Notting Hill Genesis. The rehousing and purchasing of leasehold properties can take a very long time and it has not been possible historically to move all tenants simultaneously into new homes. Vacant properties are being used for temporary accommodation where possible.

- Ledbury – Ledbury - In 2021 due to structural issues, in consultation with residents a decision was made to demolish the four tower blocks at Ledbury Estate, consisting of 224 homes. The tower at Bromyard House has now been demolished and work has commenced to provide 45 council homes, 15 homes for leaseholders and 20 private for sale units, as part of Phase 1. The work is scheduled to complete in April 2026. The three remaining towers form Phase 2 of the project, and there are currently 20 secure tenants, 15 leaseholders and 104 temporary accommodation residents across the three towers, leaving 29 void properties. Once Phase 1 is complete, the 20 tenants and 15 leaseholders will relocate to Phase 1, those in temporary accommodation will need to be re-housed and work will then commence on Phase 2, to provide 215 council homes and 65 private for sale, due for completion in May 2030.
- Tustin Estate and Hillbeck Close Estates - In March 2021, residents voted in favour of demolishing and rebuilding the low-rise buildings in a residents' ballot. The programme comprises the demolition of 249 homes (200 council rented and 49 leasehold)
- Maydeu House – This comprises of 143 units which were vacated by the Council between 2010 and 2015 in order to facilitate a programme of asbestos removal, heating works and replacement of bathrooms and kitchens which was determined too intrusive to carry out with residents in situ. Following an options appraisal in 2011, further consultation led to a decision in 2012 to undertake a major refurbishment. In 2018 planning permission was granted to refurbish the building and add 5 storeys of accommodation on the roof. Following procurement, a contractor was appointed to finalise the costings and design in 2020. During this period, further surveys identified additional structural and fire prevention issues which needed to be addressed in the works contract. Cabinet approved the demolition of Maydeu House in February 2023. A demolition contractor has been appointed and works are due to commence in April and will take 55 weeks to complete. Following the demolition we will be looking at providing new housing on the site.
- Marie Curie – In May 2021, the council informed residents in Marie Curie that they needed to move out to carry out major essential works, including fire safety improvements to their homes and block. Marie Curie is a 16 storey block of 98 two bedroomed maisonettes. In January 2024 this accounted for 77 voids.

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 programme, the temporary accommodation strategy for the scheme is reviewed and additional homes brought back into use.

The action plan contains targets to return council homes to use. The monitored target for major voids for 2023/24 is based on new voids. In December 2023 this was running at 101.68 days against a target of 100 days. The previous target in the action plan was against all major

voids. This is running at 184 days. Letting some of the long standing major voids affects turnaround time. 2 new contractors have been brought in to deal with backlog.

The monitored target for minor voids for 2023/24 is based on new voids. As of December, this was running at 71 days against a target of less than 28 days. The overall average for minor voids is running at 77.91 days.

Between April 2023 and December 2023 161 minor voids and 312, major voids were let. There were also 40 non active, 210 new build/ buy backs and 44 sheltered lets. Therefore there was a total of 767 lets. There were an additional 515 temporary accommodation estate voids lets.

Voids remain a priority and works are monitored closely to ensure properties are turned around as quickly as possible.

The optimum number of all voids should be rolling at about 100. Therefore the council is working hard to reduce the number of voids. Actions to reduce the number of council empty homes includes:

- Working with contractors to ensure all empty homes are brought back into use. Two additional contractors have been brought in to focus on complex long standing and Temporary Accommodation voids. A new KPI for Contractor's performance monitoring has been developed to ensure targets are met.
- Managing the impact of an anticipated 450 additional new homes programme voids.
- Continuing to review regeneration projects to maximise the use of our stock and ensure properties are used as TA where demolition/development work is not imminent.
- Rolling out a new IT system, as part of the repairs improvement plan. This will allow for enhanced functions for monitoring works from specifications through to completions, including detailed monitoring on financial completions.
- There are over 40 sheltered voids awaiting let. We are raising the profile of sheltered voids, and increasing take up by improvements and service upgrades to the schemes including improving digital accessibility and assistive technology. The council is also making direct offers to homeless households where appropriate.
- A reduction of work in progress voids
- Reviewing key to key time including a review of processes, work content, roles and responsibilities, resources etc
- A contractor management review driving improved contractor controls and commercial performance.
- Restructuring the voids service to return to a 'one' manager service provision, centralised under Asset Management. This will aid capacity and direction, and negate the need for hand offs.
- Reviewing the lettable standard, decorations are no longer carried out in General Needs or Temporary Accommodation properties. Instead, decoration packs are given to each new householder. Sheltered housing and Extra Care properties continue to be decorated
- Increased resources, as it is anticipated that there will be an estimated two years' worth of voids in a 12 month period, a number of extra voids works contracts were let in October 2023. This significantly increased the contractor resource to deliver the service.

- Improving processes to delay new build properties being added to the VOA database through more accurate completion notices, and to ensure properties are removed where demolition notices are in place, or exempted where possible, on regeneration schemes. This includes gathering information on the demolition notice or refurbishment, the occupancy rates and access to the building where they are already empty.
- Disposing some long term voids - The disposal of a number of long term empty council properties is due to be officially agreed by February 2024. The disposals programme will remove about 20 long term empty council properties.

Reducing the number of empty council homes

Action	Officer lead	CMT lead	Targets	Comments	PRAG
Setting targets for returning empty council homes ('voids') to use					
Average relet time, void date to let date (calendar days) new major voids general needs voids <100	Cheryl Russell, Director of Resident Services	Strategic Director of Housing	2023/24	<p>The monitored target for major voids for 2023/24 is based on new voids. In December 2023 this was running at 101.68 days against a target of 100 days.</p> <p>The previous target in the action plan was against all major voids. This is running at 184 days. The performance on these are still being affected by the impacts of the covid pandemic. 2 new contractors have been brought in to deal with backlog.</p> <p>Voids remain a priority and works are monitored closely to ensure properties are turned around as quickly as possible. Please see the text above for details on our plans to address this.</p>	Amber

Average relet times, void date to let date (calendar days) new minor general needs voids <28 days	Cheryl Russell, Director of Resident Services	Strategic Director of Housing	2023/24	The monitored target for minor voids for 2023/24 is based on new voids. As of December, this was running at 71 days. The overall average for minor voids is running at 77.91 days. Please see the text above for details on our plans to address this.	Red
Maximise use of empty homes designated for redevelopment					
Review use of lettings on the Aylesbury Estates and Ledbury redevelopment as part of the empty homes awaiting redevelopment in the Temporary Accommodation Supply Action Plan	Abi Oguntokun, Area Manager	Strategic Director of Housing	Ongoing	All properties on regenerations schemes are reviewed on an ongoing basis responding to any potential changes in phasing.	Ongoing