



Empty Homes Strategy 2026-2029

For privately owned properties



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Introduction

This strategy is directed exclusively at empty properties in private ownership.

Lewisham, as well as the rest of London, is experiencing a housing crisis where demand for genuinely affordable, safe and secure housing is high. In such a context, empty properties represent a wasted housing resource. However, the impact of empty homes goes beyond being a lost opportunity for housing and can affect the fabric of local communities.

We recognise that empty homes can sometimes be a blight on neighbourhoods, contributing to anti-social behaviour, crime, and a neglected appearance that diminishes the area's appeal. These properties, while few in number, have a disproportionate impact on the quality of life in affected areas. By addressing these problematic properties, we aim to prevent empty homes from becoming a source of nuisance and ensure they contribute positively to the wellbeing and appearance of our communities.

Over the next 3 years, our key aims are to:

- Focus on identifying and addressing long-term empty homes which cause issues such as anti-social behaviour, environmental blight, or neglected appearance
- Provide residents with opportunities to report problematic empty homes in their neighbourhoods
- Offer advice and assistance to property owners to help them bring homes back into use
- Where informal approaches fail, use legal powers to address problematic properties that are negatively affecting the community
- Ensure property owners are aware of support offered by the council but also understand their responsibilities in managing empty homes
- Utilise homes brought back into use to help meet the housing needs of residents, where appropriate

By targeting our efforts on these aims we will focus on high impact interventions that address community concerns and maximise the benefits of bringing empty homes back into use. Our approach will include integrated enforcement, working collaboratively across council services and partners to tackle the wider issues associated with empty homes efficiently and effectively.

To meet the key aims identified above, the strategy is structured around three themes each supported by specific actions:

1. Identifying long-term problematic privately owned empty properties
2. Providing advice and assistance to private property owners
3. Using legal powers to bring privately owned empty homes back into use

The strategy aligns with Lewisham's overall values: **ambitious, inclusive, collaborative, accountable, and trustworthy.**

As well as having its own aims and themes, this strategy also links into:

- Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018
- Local Government Act 2003
- Housing Act 2004
- Lewisham's Housing Strategy 2020-26 - Priority 1: delivering the homes that Lewisham needs
- Lewisham's Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023–26 - Priority 2 – Accessing Accommodation
- Lewisham's Private Sector Housing Licensing and Enforcement Policy 2021
- Lewisham's Homeowner Grants Policy 2025

Definitions

There are two main types of empty home:

Short-term empty homes are those that have been unoccupied for up to six months. They are often in the process of being sold, between lettings, undergoing renovation and improvement prior to occupation or awaiting probate following the death of the occupier. Short-term empty homes are a natural part of the housing market. While they do not normally require intervention, we will carefully monitor this group of empty properties, as some may transition into long-term empty homes.

Long-term empty homes are those that have been empty for six months or longer. These properties are the primary focus of this strategy. We will continue to prioritise our resources on bringing these long-term empty homes back into use, with particular attention to those homes that have been empty for extended periods e.g. two years or more, as these homes are often the cause of problems for our residents and have the most significant impact on neighbourhoods.

We recognise that there are various reasons why homes remain empty. Our research into current empty homes identifies several common barriers that prevent owners of long-term empty homes from bringing them back into use:

- issues with inheritance and/or delays with probate
- lack of funds to carry out necessary repairs and refurbishment
- the owner may be in hospital or residential care
- the owner lacks the ability to deal with the property
- problems with achieving a sale
- problems associated with letting of properties
- problems associated with sale of properties
- owner unwilling to bring the property back into use

However, many empty properties do not cause significant issues for the community. Our strategy is, therefore, to prioritise resources on those empty homes that have the greatest negative impact on their surroundings, rather than treating all empty homes as problems requiring intervention.

Context

National context

Empty Homes remain a challenge across England, though overall numbers are significantly lower than historic peaks. In 1993, London recorded 160,500 empty homes- around 5.4% of its housing stock. Today, figures are much reduced with Council Tax data showing 87,763 empty homes in London in 2023¹ (2.3% of total housing stock) and 36,210 of these had been empty for more than six months.

While these figures remain relatively low compared to historic levels, recent years have seen a gradual increase. Nationally, around 155,000 dwellings were subject to an empty dwelling premium or reduced council tax rate in 2024, up from 115,000 in 2023². Factors such as delays in probate following death of occupants and market conditions that leave properties vacant for extended periods have contributed to this upward trend. Short-term empty homes are a normal part of the housing market, but long-term empty homes can have a disproportionate impact on communities, particularly attracting anti-social behaviour, crime and creating a sense of neglect that undermines neighbourhood quality.

This is why tackling long-term empty properties is essential. Even a small number of problematic empty homes can blight an area, reduce housing supply and increase pressure on local services. Addressing these properties helps improve community safety, maintain neighbourhood standards and bring back much-needed homes back into use. National Empty Homes Week³ highlights the positive impact of bringing empty properties back into use. Lewisham aims to use this campaign to raise awareness of the work being done and showcase the benefits it brings to residents and other stakeholders.

Bringing empty homes back into use is recognised as a key priority across the housing sector. The Greater London Authority's London Housing Strategy 2018⁴, under the priority of 'High quality homes and inclusive neighbourhoods', highlighted the need to address empty homes. Alongside that, the Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018 gave local authorities in England greater powers to apply higher council tax premiums on long-term empty homes, creating a financial incentive for owners to bring them back into use.

Recognising that tackling empty homes and bringing them back into use is a sector-wide priority, our strategy concentrates on properties that have the greatest negative impact on communities. Through a targeted and proportionate approach, we aim to reduce nuisance caused by long-term empty homes while supporting wider housing objectives.

¹ [Housing in London - The evidence base for the Mayor's Housing Strategy - London Datastore](#)

² [Council Taxbase 2024 in England - GOV.UK](#)

³ [National Empty Homes Week — Action on Empty Homes](#)

⁴ [London Housing Strategy | London City Hall](#)

Lewisham context

As of the end of November 2025, it was estimated based on Council tax records that there were 1,914 empty homes in Lewisham, with 1,210 vacant for over six months, of which 332 were vacant for two or more years. While these figures represent a small proportion of the borough's housing stock, long-term empty properties can have a disproportionate impact on neighbourhoods by contributing to anti-social behaviour, crime and a sense of neglect that undermines community wellbeing. They also represent a missed opportunity to provide much-needed housing when demand for homes remains high.

To help tackle this issue, the Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018 gave local authorities the discretion to impose council tax premiums on long-term empty homes. In Lewisham these are set as follows⁵:

- 100% surcharge (empty for over one year)
- 200% surcharge (empty for over five years)
- 300% surcharge (empty for over ten years)

These premiums are an important tool for encouraging owners to act, but financial penalties alone do not always resolve the problem. Our preferred approach is to work constructively with property owners and Lewisham has a dedicated Empty Homes Officer who actively identifies long-term empty homes and supports efforts to bring them back into use. Through our Homeowner Grants Policy, we also offer financial assistance to help owners bring empty homes back into use, enabling properties to be rented out and increasing the supply of good-quality housing for residents.

Although this strategy focuses on privately owned empty homes, we also recognise the importance of tackling empty homes within social housing. Empty properties in this sector often arise due to estate redevelopment, major refurbishment, or disposal. For council homes, we prioritise refurbishment and work to reduce void times, with specific targets in place to ensure properties are reoccupied promptly. We also collaborate with housing associations to monitor their empty homes, understand the challenges they face in bringing properties back into use, and provide support where possible.

Empty homes, whether private or social, represent lost housing potential and can negatively affect neighbourhoods. This strategy is specifically aimed at privately owned empty properties since established processes to manage voids and return homes to use already exist for social housing, whereas private homes can often remain empty for longer without intervention. By concentrating on privately owned homes that have been empty the longest and cause the greatest impact, we aim to reduce nuisance, improve community safety, and bring much-needed housing back into use for Lewisham residents.

⁵ [Lewisham Council - Empty properties](#)

Values and Themes

Values

This strategy will align with the Lewisham values in the following ways:

- **Ambitious** – we will take a proactive approach to identifying and tackling long-term empty homes, using all available tools to bring properties back into use and help meet the housing needs of residents
- **Inclusive** – we will make it easy for residents to report problematic empty homes and ensure their concerns are acted upon, so everyone can benefit from safer, well-maintained neighbourhoods
- **Collaborative** – we will work closely with partner agencies and residents to identify empty homes and with homeowners to provide advice and assistance, avoiding enforcement where possible and promoting shared solutions
- **Accountable** – we will monitor progress against actions set out in this strategy and take responsibility for continuous improvement in how we manage empty homes
- **Trustworthy** – we will act fairly and consistently, using legal powers only when informal approaches have been exhausted and remain open about how we prioritise action against empty homes

Themes

Our approach to reducing privately owned empty homes is structured around three key themes:

- **Theme 1** - Identifying long-term problematic privately owned empty properties
 - ensuring we use both proactive and reactive methods to identify empty homes
- **Theme 2** - Providing advice and assistance to private property owners
 - engaging with property owners and offering high-quality advice and assistance to avoid enforcement action where possible
- **Theme 3** - Using legal powers to bring privately owned empty homes back into use
 - using the range of formal actions to bring empty homes back into use where informal methods are not successful

For each theme, we outline our strategic direction and set out the further actions required to strengthen our approach and achieve these objectives.

A summary of the identified actions can be found in Appendix 1.

Theme 1 – Identifying long-term problematic privately owned empty properties

Empty homes can be difficult to identify, so we will adopt both a proactive and reactive approach to identifying, prioritising, and monitoring long-term empty homes. Our efforts will focus on a range of activity, including:

- Council tax information – this is the principle source for identifying privately owned empty homes. When a home becomes empty, its council tax status changes. When combined with property ownership details this allows us to identify which owners to engage with where a property causes concern
- Data driven identification – in addition to council tax records, we will leverage multiple data sources such as ASB, complaints and stock condition survey to proactively identify long-term empty homes. Through analysing patterns, we can help detect homes that are vacant and are likely to cause issues and enhance our ability to intervene earlier and offer solutions
- Multi-agency reporting – council officers and partner organisations, such as the Police, Fire Authority and local ward Councillors provide valuable information on problematic empty homes. This multi-agency approach will help us to identify properties linked to vandalism, fly-tipping, crime, squatting, drug misuse, and anti-social behaviour, enabling us to target homes that are creating a nuisance
- Public reporting – Reports from residents are another important source of information, especially when properties begin to negatively impact neighbourhoods. Acting on these reports enables us to respond quickly to local concerns, engage with residents, aiding investigations into ownership and circumstances surrounding empty homes

While it is important to identify the number of empty properties, to fully resolve the issue it is essential to deepen our understanding why homes are being left empty so we can provide targeted support to help landlords return them to use quickly and prevent more homes from becoming empty and causing issues for the community. However, we cannot intervene in every case, so we will clearly define how we prioritise homes for action, considering factors such as environmental impact, social and health concerns, neglected appearance, and the length of time the home has been empty.

Further actions to improve

- Use council tax records and other data sources to proactively identify homes which are left empty and are likely to cause issues
- Improve opportunities for residents to report empty homes of concern in their neighbourhoods
- Publicise more and expand options for reporting problem empty homes online and via email
- Contact owners of empty homes identified through data and reporting to better understand the reasons for the property being left empty

- Work with partners to explore additional methods for identifying problematic empty homes
- Maintain an up-to-date record of reported empty homes, ranking them in terms of priority for action including understanding the reason for emptiness, and monitoring progress

Outcomes

- Have a dependable oversight of empty privately owned properties in the borough
- A clear and consistent approach to prioritising empty homes
- Improved understanding by the public as well as internal and external council partners on how to report empty homes

Theme 2 – Providing advice and assistance to private property owners

One of the most important steps in preventing empty homes from causing issues in the community is engaging with property owners and offering high-quality advice and assistance. In many cases, owners may simply need guidance, financial support to make repairs, or help finding a suitable buyer or tenant for their home.

Where we can locate owners of problematic empty homes, we will begin with an informal approach, offering advice, financial incentives, and the opportunity to develop a joint action plan. When owners are receptive to this approach, enforcement action is typically not required, and empty homes can be brought back into use quickly.

Examples of financial support include the Empty Homes Grant⁶ to help eligible empty property owners undertake repairs, improvements or conversion works to bring long term empty properties back into residential use. Recipients must offer nomination rights to the council on completion of works for the duration of the 5-year grant condition period.

Where homes can be brought back into use, the priority will be to support housing needs such as temporary accommodation and private rented sector discharge⁷. Each property will be considered on its own basis to determine the most suitable use.

Further actions to improve

- Improve the information available on the council website to ensure empty homeowners are fully aware of their responsibilities and the support and assistance available through the council
- Increase access to information and advice about empty properties, including offering more face-to-face contact with owners
- Provide financial assistance and incentives, such as the Empty Homes Grant, as an alternative to formal enforcement, helping eligible empty homeowners undertake repairs, improvements, or conversion works to bring long-term empty homes back into residential use
- Promote the council's Private Sector Leasing and Private Managed Accommodation schemes to aid in tenanting the property and as a condition of some grants and loans, helping to ensure that homes brought back into use and contributing to meeting the needs of households with acute housing need

Outcomes

- Increased awareness by property owners of advice and assistance available
- Decrease of overall empty homes in the borough
- Reduced empty homes causing a statutory nuisance

⁶ [Lewisham Council - Empty property grant](#)

⁷ This is the way in which the Council can discharge the main housing duty under s.193 Housing Act 1996 by arranging an offer of suitable accommodation in the private rented sector

Theme 3 – Using legal powers to bring privately owned empty homes back into use

Working with empty homeowners is always our preferred approach. However, there are occasions when formal action is necessary to achieve compliance or to allow the local authority to intervene and address problems or nuisances affecting the wider community.

Within our established processes Council Tax premiums automatically apply and will continue to be adopted, up to 300 per cent, for 'long-term empty dwellings' as per the Council Tax policy.

Formal legal action is considered as a last resort, only pursued when other forms of engagement have been exhausted or when a property poses a serious risk.

Examples of formal action include:

- Enforced Sale Procedure – Enforced sale is a procedure that allows local authorities to recover any debt, which has been secured by means of a charge on the property. For empty homes this applies when the council has to undertake statutory work, such as clearing pests or making an unsafe structure safe, on an empty property as the landlord hasn't actioned the work and then subsequently refuses to reimburse the council for it
- Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMO) – To apply for an Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) to enable the local authority to take over the management of eligible empty homes, to bring them back into use
- Other legal powers are available, details of which can be found in Appendix 2

Where homes can be brought back into use, the priority will be to support housing needs such as temporary accommodation and private rented sector discharge. Each property will be considered on its own basis to determine the most suitable use.

Further actions to improve

- Ensure enforcement actions are only utilised when informal approaches have been exhausted
- Develop a clear way to prioritise empty homes that require legal enforcement
- Continue to adopt higher Council Tax surcharges, up to 300 per cent, for 'long-term empty dwellings'
- Utilise the most appropriate enforcement approaches to bring them back into use
- Utilise the most appropriate enforcement approaches to minimise the impact of nuisance empty homes

Outcomes

- Decrease of overall empty homes in the borough
- Reduced empty homes causing a statutory nuisance
- Enforcement works delivered in a timely and efficient manner

Monitoring the strategy

This strategy falls under the responsibility of the Housing Strategy Division. It is responsible for agreeing, monitoring, promoting and reviewing its implementation, and drawing up an action plan to support the strategy working with teams across the Housing Directorate.

Housing Directorate Management Team are responsible for agreeing the action plan. The Director of Housing Strategy will have oversight of the action plan progress.

The strategy will be reviewed after 12 months to assess outcomes and measure progress against targets.

New: Empty Homes Strategy 2026-2029 (v 1.0)	
Date approved: 21/01/2026	Effective date: 02/02/2026
Approved by: Mayor and Cabinet	
Policy owner: Director of Housing Strategy	

Appendix 1 – Action plan summary

Theme 1 – Proactively identify long-term problematic privately owned empty properties	
<u>Actions</u>	
	Use council tax records and other data sources to proactively identify homes which are left empty and are likely to cause issues
	Improve opportunities for residents to report empty homes of concern in their neighbourhoods
	Publicise more and expand options for reporting problem empty homes online and via email
	Contact owners of empty homes identified through data and reporting to better understand the reasons for the property being left empty
	Work with partners to explore additional methods for identifying problematic empty homes
	Maintain an up-to-date record of reported empty homes, ranking them in terms of priority for action including understanding the reason for emptiness, and monitoring progress
Theme 2 – Providing advice and assistance to private property owners	
<u>Actions</u>	
	Improve the information available on the council website to ensure empty homeowners are fully aware of their responsibilities and the support and assistance available through the council
	Increase access to information and advice about empty properties, including offering more face-to-face contact with owners
	Provide financial assistance and incentives, such as the Empty Homes Grant, as an alternative to formal enforcement, helping eligible empty homeowners undertake repairs, improvements, or conversion works to bring long-term empty homes back into residential use
	Promote the council's Private Sector Leasing and Private Managed Accommodation schemes to aid in tenancy the property and as a condition of some grants and loans, helping to ensure that homes brought back into use and contributing to meeting the needs of households with acute housing need
Theme 3 – Using legal powers to bring privately owned empty homes back into use	
<u>Actions</u>	
	Ensure enforcement actions are only utilised when informal approaches have been exhausted

Develop a clear way to prioritise empty homes that require legal enforcement
Continue to adopt higher Council Tax surcharges, up to 300 per cent, for 'long-term empty dwellings'
Utilise the most appropriate enforcement approaches to bring them back into use
Utilise the most appropriate enforcement approaches to minimise the impact of nuisance empty homes

Appendix 2 – Legal powers and requirements

There are several legal powers available to support addressing long-term empty homes which cause issues such as anti-social behaviour, environmental blight, or neglected appearance. These include, but are not limited to:

Problem	Legislation	Power Granted
Dangerous or dilapidated buildings or structures	Building Act 1984, Sections 77 and 78	Require the owner to make the property safe (section 77) or enable the Local Authority to take emergency action to make the building safe (section 78) (<i>may include demolition of whole or part, see also section 80</i>)
Unsecured properties posing a risk of unauthorised entry	Building Act 1984, Section 78	Allows the Local Authority to fence off the property (where there is a risk of trespass, vandalism, arson or similar)
	Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1982, Section 29	Requires the owner to take steps to secure a property or allow the Local Authority to board it up in an emergency
Unsightly land & property affecting the amenity of an area	Town & Country Planning Act 1990, Section 215	Require the owner to remedy the condition of land causing harm to the amenity of the neighbourhood because of the state of the gardens or the external appearance of a property
	Public Health Act 1961, Section 34	Require the owner to remove waste from the property
	Building Act 1984, Section 79	Require the owner to take steps to address a ruinous or dilapidated property adversely affecting the amenity of an area
Vermin (where present or likely to be attracted)	Public Health Act 1961, Section 34	Require the owner to remove waste so that vermin is not attracted to the site

	Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949, Section 4	To require an owner to take steps to keep land free from rats and mice
Blocked or defective drainage or private sewers	Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976, Section 35	Require the owner to address obstructed private sewers
	Building Act 1984, Section 59	Require the owner to address blocked or defective drainage
	Public Health Act 1961, Section 17	Require the owner to address defective drainage or private sewers
Statutory Nuisance (repair, dampness, refuse)	Environmental Protection Act 1990, Sections 79, 80	Require the owner to take steps to abate the nuisance or carry out works where a premises is in such a state as to be prejudicial to health or a nuisance (e.g. causing dampness to a neighbouring property)
	Building Act 1984, Section 76 (accelerated Statutory Nuisance procedure)	Council's notice of intention to remedy where a premises is prejudicial to health or a nuisance, and where there would be unreasonable delay if section 80 Environmental Protection Act 1990 were used
Breach of Housing Health and Safety Rating System Standards	Housing Act 2004, sections 11, 12	If the Housing Officers assess that there are Category 1 breaches of the housing health and safety rating system then Compliance Notices may be served for rectification of these breaches
Enforcement Orders for Empty Properties		
Debt owed against property	Law of Property Act 1925, section 103	A local authority can force the sale of a property to retrieve a debt owed through an Enforced Sale

Homes empty for over 2 years and causing nuisance in the community	Housing Act 2004, sections 132 to 138	To apply for an Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) to enable the local authority to take over the management of eligible empty homes, to bring them back into use
Long-term empty homes where no traceable owners, or where all efforts to return the property to use have been exhausted	Housing Act 1985, sections 17	To seek to acquire a property under a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO)