

**Tuesday 12th March 2024****Re: Additional Powers for Councils Dealing with Empty Homes**

Dear Rt Hon Michael Gove MP,

Last week marked National Empty Homes Week, an opportunity to demonstrate the great work that councils and communities are doing to bring wasted empty homes back into use, and to take action on empty homes which negatively impact neighbourhoods. With two-thirds of the £4.2bn Housing Infrastructure Fund remaining unspent, cash-strapped councils are now turning to new methods to combat growing housing pressures – namely by calling on the government to give us more powers to deal with empty properties and holiday homes. While we welcome the tentative steps announced in this week's Spring Budget to bring the Furnished Holiday Lettings Scheme to an end, there is much more work to be done to tackle the chronic shortage of housing in every part of the country.

The UK is in the grip of a housing crisis where the demand for homes is outstripping the supply. Analysis by City Hall last year revealed that an estimated £20bn worth of property is sitting vacant across the capital. This is a staggering level of wasted resource in the face of one of our biggest political emergencies in history. Despite increasing the supply of new homes more than anywhere else in the UK in the past financial year, Brent is not immune from the housing crisis. In 2023, it was identified that around 250,000 properties in England have stood empty for more than 6 months. 1,859 of those are in Brent. This includes 1,557 empty for up to two years, 227 empty between two and five years, 44 empty over two years, and 31 empty over ten years. With housing shortages across the country, we must act and encourage those who own empty properties and second homes to make best use out of them.

With the powers afforded to local authorities in the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023, we were able to take steps to tackle ongoing issues around vacant properties and second homes in Brent. Since April 2019, the council has charged a council tax premium of 100% on a property that has been empty for two years. This rises to 200% after being empty for five years, and 300% after a property has been empty for more than ten years. Bringing empty homes back into use can play a key part in local strategies to meet housing need. Not only are empty homes a wasted resource, they are often the subject of complaints and frustration for communities, as well as being a catalyst for crime and degradation.

Alongside increases to council tax on empty properties, we will also be charging a premium on second homes from April next year. In December 2023, 163 properties in the borough were identified as second homes. Second homes, for the most part, tend to be underutilised and unoccupied. By hitting landlords and property owners who leave their much-needed properties languishing empty for years on end with higher taxes, we can remain committed to reducing the number of empty properties in Brent.

Like our colleagues in Southwark, we can offer generous grants and incentive schemes to help owners bring these properties back into residential use. In fact, a family of five recently moved into a converted empty property with disabled access after the landlord received an empty property grant from the council. We want to make this a reality for more families across the borough, but with ever-tightening council budgets, we cannot do this alone. We are therefore joining the calls of local authorities across the country requesting more powers to deal with empty homes.

Discretions afforded to local councils are the best way to put power back into the hands of communities and local leaders who know the issues we face and how best to resolve them. The housing crisis means we simply cannot afford to let good homes sit empty while thousands of people are crying out for a roof over their heads. The log jam in the social rental sector, high costs in the private rental sector, and the chronic undersupply of housing nationwide have forced councils across England to find temporary accommodation for tens of thousands of people. Brent currently supports around 148 households a week with their housing issues. If the current trend continues, we could see a 22% increase in homeless applications this year compared to two years ago. A new drop-in centre for single households, The Turning Point, which the council opened in Harlesden last autumn, sees more than 200 people through its doors seeking housing advice each week.

We are therefore calling for:

1. **Financial levers to implement even higher rates of Council Tax on long-term empty homes:** Standard council tax rates often don't incentivise owners to fill vacancies quickly. Councils should be empowered to levy a premium council tax – higher than the current restrictions – on properties empty for extended periods. This financial pressure would nudge owners towards renting or selling.
2. **Expanded Use of Empty Dwelling Management Orders (EDMOs):** EDMOs currently allow councils to manage and rent out empty properties for a set period. Empowering councils to issue EDMOs on a wider range of vacant properties, with shorter waiting periods, would expedite the process of getting homes back into use.
3. **Streamlined CPO process:** In extreme cases, where an empty property negatively impacts the community (e.g., vandalism, security risk), councils should have a faster and more streamlined CPO process. This would allow them to acquire the property, renovate it if necessary, and then sell or rent it out.
4. **Additional funding to provide financial and practical support services:** Brent offers support services for property owners facing genuine challenges in bringing their homes back into use. This can include financial assistance with repairs, navigating probate issues in cases of inheritance, or connecting them with reputable property management companies. But tightening budgets means our assistance is limited.

We don't doubt that you agree: tackling the housing crisis demands a multi-layered approach. Councils, closest to the communities they serve, are uniquely positioned to identify vacant properties and understand local needs. But the financial and legislative powers bestowed by national Government would unlock the opportunities we need to do this even more effectively. We welcome your consideration of the above calls. Let's work together to resolve this crisis.

Yours sincerely,



**CLLR MUHAMMED BUTT**

**Leader of Brent Council**



**CLLR FLEUR DONNELLY-JACKSON**

**Cabinet Member for Customers,  
Community and Culture**



**CLLR PROMISE KNIGHT**

**Cabinet Member for Housing,  
Homelessness and Renters Security**