
Empty Homes Strategy 2021 – 2026

Consultation Report, December 2020

Outcome of the Survey

Background

The strategy sets out the steps Southend-on-Sea Borough Council will take to reduce the number of empty homes in the borough, maximise the re-use of empty homes and tackle issues surrounding empty homes.

The Council is strongly committed to reducing the number of empty homes, facilitating and assisting the creation of good quality and affordable homes in the borough and to making best use of existing housing stock.

This strategy seeks to support Southend 2050 'Safe and Well' and 'Active and Involved' visions by contributing towards:

- People in all parts of the borough feel safe and secure at all times.
- We are all on our way to ensuring that everyone has a home that meets their needs.
- A range of initiatives help communities come together to enhance their neighbourhood and environment.



The strategy also seeks to support and complement the Council's [Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 2018–2028](#), in particular to 'prioritise the supply of safe, locally affordable homes' and 'encourage good quality housing design, management and maintenance'.

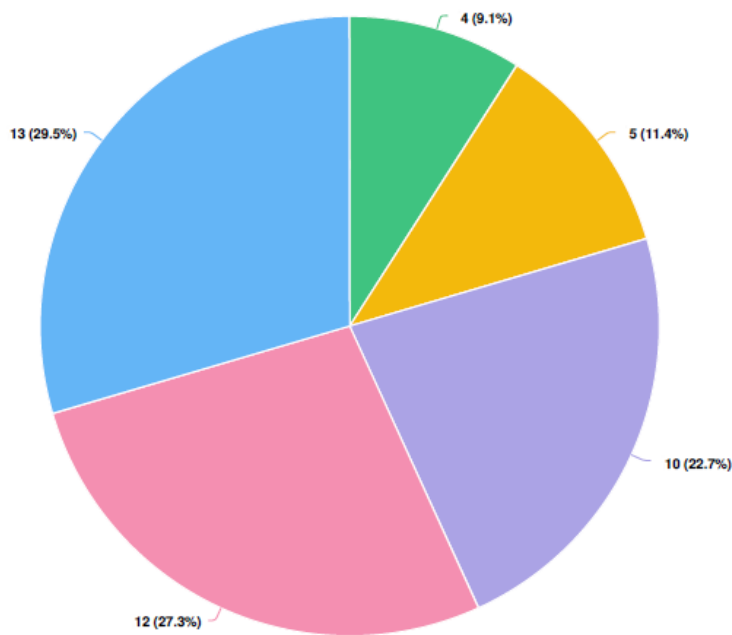
The draft strategy follows on from the Empty Homes Strategy 2015-2020, outlining the Council's continued commitment to reduce the number of empty homes in the borough, maximise the re-use of empty homes and tackle issues surrounding empty homes.

Long term empty properties are a primary focus of the strategy, as is working with owners early on to prevent properties falling into a condition of deterioration.

In doing so, the role of the Council and partners continues to be integral to the effectiveness of actions taken in relation to empty homes, utilising available resources and legislative powers to achieve this.

Response to the survey

The consultation was live from 2 November to 30 November 2020. A total of 44 people responded to the survey, of the 22 respondents that shared this information, 45.5% were male and 54.5% were female. Of which, 56.8% respondents were aged 56 or over, with a further age breakdown below.



Question options

● 26-35 ● 36-45 ● 46-55 ● 56-65 ● Over 65

Of 40 respondents who provided this information, the geographical spread by postcode was 40% SS0, 20% SS1, 7.5% SS2, 17.5% SS3 and 15% SS9.

Of the 38 respondents who provided this information, 55.3% were other, 36.8% were someone who is aware of or lives close to an empty property, 10.5% were looking to purchase and redevelop an empty property, 5.3% were property developers, estate agents or other professional with an interest in an empty property and 2.6% owned an empty property.

Feedback was given via an online survey, comprising a range of questions designed to better understand the views of borough residents and owners of empty homes in Southend in order to shape our approach going forward and ensure all relevant factors are taken into consideration.

Respondents answered a range of questions, including multiple choice and open text questions to allow for further insight of views.

Survey feedback

Survey questions and responses are outlined below. All of which include all 44 responses, unless otherwise stated.

About the strategy

1. We believe the strategy should focus on properties that have been empty for six months or more. Our aims within this will be to reduce the number of empty homes in the borough,

maximise the re-use of empty homes and tackle issues surrounding empty homes. Do you think these are the right areas to focus on?

- 90.9% yes.
 - 9.1% no.
2. What do you think we currently do well in relation to bringing empty properties back into use?
- 61.4% were not aware of the current process or strategy.
 - 11.4% noted other actions to bring back into use, including renovation and preventing property deterioration and anti-social behaviour.
 - 9.1% outlined engaging or consulting owners to bring properties back into use.
 - 9.1% nothing/not a lot.
 - 4.6% stated other reasons, including empty commercial space being let out to charities (NB. Not directly linked to this strategy as differing legislation regarding empty dwellings) and buying privately owned properties to add to council stock.
 - 4.6% as unable to comment or stating planning application turned down.
3. Which areas of work around empty homes do you think we could improve on, and how? 43 respondents provided a response which offered a total of 52 comments, themed as below.
- 26.9% comments outlining empty homes monitoring and/or an improved process, with particular focus on speeding up the process.
 - 17.3% don't know.
 - 11.5% outlined enforcement action, including internal and external works.
 - 11.5% other, including resident involvement, reviewing the planning process, provide good quality housing, ensuring empty homes don't become HMOs, utilising local apprenticeships and hostel move-on.
 - 9.6% outlined the purchase or utilisation of empty homes as council stock.
 - 7.7% stated better communication was needed, including the empty homes process and reallocations of empty properties.
 - 5.8% outlined affordable rent.
 - 5.8% outlined the utilisation of commercial/non-residential properties.
 - 1.9% highlighted to build more council homes.
 - 1.9% highlighted utilisation of partnership/investment opportunities.

Enforcement action

4. Do you think we are achieving a good balance between assisting owners of empty homes and taking enforcement action where the property is negatively affecting others and/or in poor condition?
- 59.1% no.
 - 27.3% yes.
 - 13.6% prefer not to say.
5. The draft strategy is looking to use legislative frameworks to the fullest, including enforcement action. Do you think we should be taking more enforcement action against owners of empty homes where the property is negatively affecting others and/or in poor condition?
- 86.4% yes.

- 13.6% no.

6. An Empty Dwelling Management Orders is a legal device which enables local authorities to take control and manage a residential property which has been empty for over 6 months.

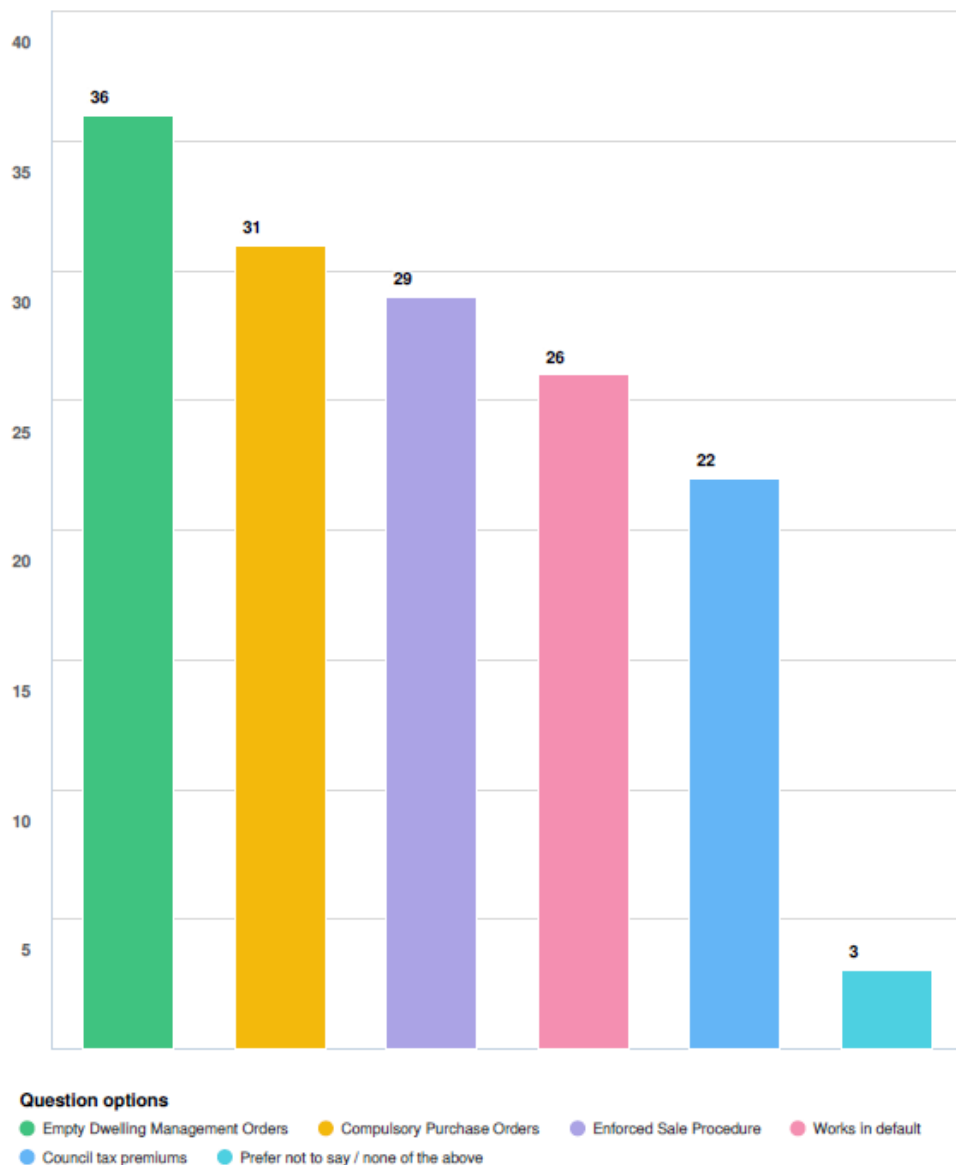
A Compulsory Purchase Order allows certain bodies, including local authorities, in certain circumstances to have a statutory right to buy a property or take it over without the consent of the owner.

An Enforced Sale Procedure enables local authorities to recover outstanding debts following actions that have resulting in a land charge against a property.

Works in Default allow the local authority to carry out works where an immediate risk is posed, such as structural damage or pests/vermin and recoup these charges to the owner.

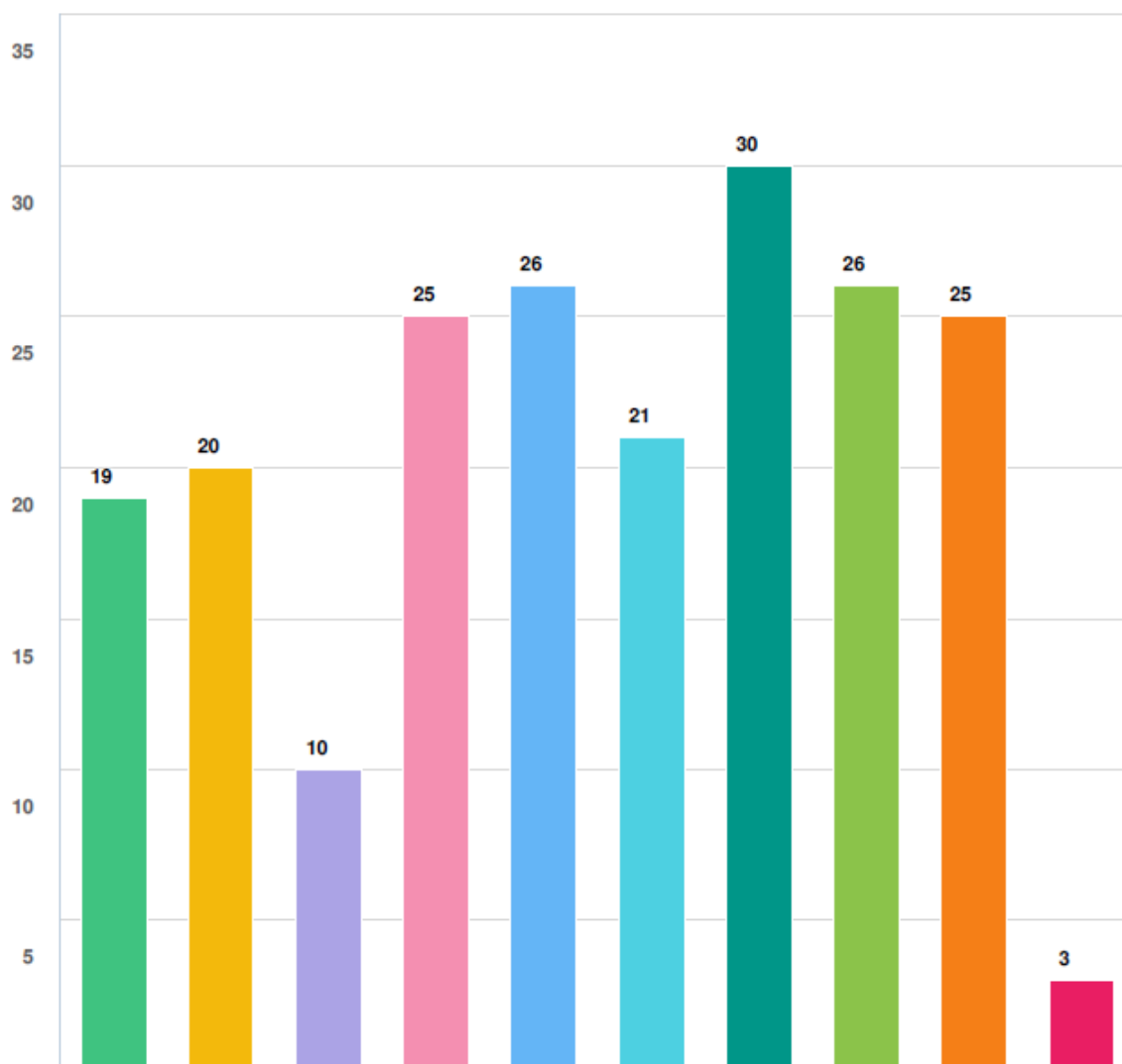
Local authorities have been able to charge a premium of 100% of the standard rate of council tax on long-term empty properties (those empty for 2 years or more). The maximum premium local authorities can charge is 200% for properties empty for 5 years or more. From 1 April 2021, the amount a local authority can charge will increase to 300% if a property has been empty for 10 years or more.

Respondents could select more than one answer.



Our offer

7. The draft strategy is looking to offer a range of incentives to support owners to bring empty properties back into use. Respondents could select more than one answer.



Question options

- Interest free loan to rent
- Interest free loan to sell
- Signposting to property tax and VAT information
- Signposting to reputable tradespeople
- Advice and guidance to support owners to achieve the Decent Homes Standard
- Signposting to find an empty property for purchase
- A free or low cost legal advice line for owners of empty properties to support bringing an empty property back into use
- An empty homes 'doctor' service to include legal and financial advice and support owners to find the right contractors
- Empty property service for residents living in a care home or long distance owner, to assist in renovation works to
- Prefer not to say / none of the above

8. Nomination rights can be used to 'nominate' applicants on the Council's Homeseekers' Register as tenants for empty (rental) homes brought back into use, allowing guaranteed rent and property maintenance for the owner, with rent charged at Local Housing Allowance rate. As part of the interest free loans to rent, we are considering attaching nomination rights. Respondents were asked if they agree with this.
- 77.3% yes.
 - 13.6% no.

- 9.1% prefer not to say.
9. Is there anything else, not mentioned already, that should be considered within the draft strategy? 15 respondents offered additional information, comprising a total of 16 themes/comments as outlined below.
- 25% noted empty homes monitoring and/or an improved process.
 - 18.8% noted help and support to empty home owners, including taking their views into consideration.
 - 12.5% noted increased provision of social/council housing.
 - 12.5% noted to be aware of fraudulent applications and/or landlords taking advantage of legal loopholes.
 - 6.3% noted enforcement action with regards to housing standards.
 - 6.3% noted to utilise commercial/non-residential properties.
 - 6.3% noted not to allow empty homes to become HMOs.
 - 6.3% noted gardening apprenticeship schemes.
 - 6.3% noted planning application process improvements.

Summary

Almost 60% of respondents felt that we weren't achieving the right balance of assisting owners of empty homes and taking enforcement action. However, just over 61% of respondents were not aware of the current empty homes process or strategy, demonstrating greater transparency and awareness of the action the Council is taking in relation to empty homes is needed.

Respondents outlined a general agreement with utilisation of legislative tools for enforcement action, with 86.4% outlining the Council should be taking more enforcement action against owners of empty homes where the property is negatively affecting others and/or in poor condition.

Empty Dwelling Management Orders, Compulsory Purchase Orders and Enforced Sale Procedures were the top three enforcement actions selected by respondents. In addition, over 75% of respondents were in agreement to attach nomination rights to interest free loans to rent, although interest free loans to rent were the third lowest incentive selected by respondents.

A free or low cost legal advice line, an empty homes 'doctor' service, advice and guidance to support owners to achieve the Decent Homes Standard, an empty property service for residents living in care or a long distance owner to assist renovation works and signposting to reputable tradespeople were the top five incentives listed by respondents.

Further information

For further information on any of the content detailed here or if you would like to discuss an empty property further, please visit the Council's Housing website <https://www.southend.gov.uk/housing-information>.