

## **COUNCIL ASSEMBLY**

### **(ORDINARY MEETING)**

**25 NOVEMBER 2020**

#### **LATE QUESTION**

#### **1. QUESTION FROM COUNCILLOR NICK JOHNSON TO THE LEADER OF THE COUNCIL**

Despite the 10 years of housing development boom in Southwark promoted by Labour, we have over 12,000 residents and families on the waiting list for council homes and thousands in temporary accommodation outside of the Borough. Does the Leader agree that recent 2020 data released which shows nearly a total of 6000 homes more or less empty in Southwark with a 61% increase in long term empty homes (to more than 2300 now standing empty) and even worse 600% jump to over 3600 second homes (because owners either live overseas or other reasons) – is a failure which may be a route to solving his housing problem? And what does he plan to do about it...? And will he agree to meet with me and work on this together?

Ref: <https://www.actiononemptyhomes.org/blog/will-the-last-investor-leaving-southwark-please-turn-out-the-lights-until-airbnb-is-back-in-business>

#### **RESPONSE**

Southwark Council and this Labour administration are committed to doing our part to tackling London's housing crisis and delivering high quality and genuinely affordable homes to residents across the borough.

The 6,000 figure referenced in the article from 'Action on Empty Homes' is misleading as it conflates two figures, the figure of long-term empty homes in the borough and the number of second homes. Both of these figures are based on council tax records. Work has been undertaken to reconcile figures and the rise in second home figures is a reflection of this work. Although the number of second homes is high, this is similar to other inner London councils such as Tower Hamlets (7,400), Camden (8,100) and K&C (9,000).

Of the total number of empty homes in the borough, approximately 1,300 long-term empty homes are in the private sector. While there are limits to the extent that local government can intervene in the private market, we have been as firm as we can with the levers available to us.

We already apply the maximum Council tax premium of 300% to long-term empty homes. We also use Compulsory Purchase Orders and Empty Dwellings Management Orders where appropriate. We also take

significant steps to work with landlords to encourage and support them to bring empty homes back into use. This includes providing a range of grants and support, including tenancy arrangements and administrative provision.

There are significant limitations on our enforcement powers, including both CPO and EDMOs. We have previously called on government to give councils greater powers to tackle empty homes and we will continue to lobby government on bringing forward means of managing this area more effectively.

As the largest council landlord in London we work hard to ensure that no council properties are empty for longer than absolutely necessary. The nature of the way empty homes figures are calculated means that they include homes that are in the process of undergoing significant regeneration and refurbishment work, which is the case for the majority of our long-term empty properties. Within Southwark's figures:

- 569 homes are currently in the process of being replaced with new high quality homes.
- 233 properties are being refurbished to provide high quality homes.
- A small number of properties are to be sold; a policy on the sale of voids is to be presented at Cabinet in December.

Where possible; suitable homes subject to longer-term regeneration plans will be used to house our homeless families as temporary accommodation.

The refreshed Council Plan put forward to Council Assembly includes commitment to take further action to tackle empty homes. We will be taking a report to Cabinet shortly that will set out a revised strategy to tackling empty homes, improving and strengthening the approach to capturing and tracking information on empty homes. We will continue to use a range of means including the use of grants and incentives to support owners to bring these homes back to use. We will consider purchase and repair of homes. Where possible we will aim to prioritise use of these homes for homeless families. And, in addition to the actions listed above, we will consider any and all new enforcement options.