

Empty Homes Plan

2025-2030

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1. What Is an Empty Home?

There are two main types of empty homes:

Short term empty homes

These are homes that have been unoccupied for up to 6 months and are necessary for the normal operation of the housing market. They are usually in the process of being sold or let, are being renovated prior to occupation, or are awaiting probate following the death of the occupier.

Almost half of our empty homes within Sefton fall within this category and do not require intervention.

Long term empty homes

These are homes that have been empty for more than 6 months. The longer a property is left empty the more problematic it can become; it is these properties that our Plan will focus on, particularly those left empty for more than 2 years in the selective licensing and additional (HMO) licensing areas.

2. Introduction

There are approximately 4,664 (of 131,250 = 3.55%) empty properties in Sefton, of which 2,931 have been empty for more than six months (as of October 2024). Long term empty properties will almost certainly have a negative impact on the wider neighbourhood and adjacent homes.

In addition to being a potential blight and eyesore, long term empty homes represent a wasted asset that could provide a home for those in housing need. As of December 2024, there are 3,290 households on Sefton's housing register – this has grown significantly over recent years and is only set to increase.

Housing need in Sefton

Sefton's current Local Plan identifies a housing target of 11,520 dwellings over the 18-year period to 2030 (an annual average of 640 dwellings per annum). In December 2024, a revised National Planning Policy Framework was published and changes to the housing need calculations will result in a significant increase in the number of new homes required.

This Plan recognises the need to make best use of existing vacant homes to help address housing need and reduce the need for more new housing to be developed on greenfield sites.

This Empty Homes Plan represents a part of Sefton's Housing Strategy 2022 – 2027 that seeks to;

“Ensure that Sefton remains a great place to live, by providing opportunities to allow residents to access the highest quality housing appropriate for their needs.”

The Housing Strategy identifies 5 key themes, one of which is ‘Driving Housing Qualities in Sefton's communities and neighbourhoods’. One of the priorities within this theme is to;

“Focus intervention activity to help reduce the number of long-term privately owned empty properties across the Borough.”

This Plan builds on the Empty Homes Plan 2019 - 2024. It sets out clear objectives as to how the Council and its partners aim to tackle and reduce the number of long-term empty properties over the next 5 years.

3. Our Strategic Aim

Our overall strategic aim is to; focus our intervention activity to reduce the number of long-term privately owned empty properties across the borough. Tackling problematic empty properties will help improve neighbourhoods, while also increasing the number of homes available to residents in need.

To achieve our strategic aim, this Plan focuses on 3 key objectives:

- Raising awareness of long-term empty homes as a wasted resource.
- Encouraging empty property owners, particularly those who own homes in the selective and additional licensing areas, to bring properties back into use through advice and assistance, including early intervention and preventative measures.
- Utilise the full range of enforcement powers to target and bring problematic properties back into use, focusing primarily on those empty 2 years or more in the selective and additional licensing areas.

The level of success of these objectives will depend on the level of available resources such as staff and financial resources. Currently, there is limited officer time for early intervention and prevention work and limited legal support for enforcement work. This increases the importance of targeting our resources appropriately.

4. Why Do We Need an Empty Homes Plan?

Many empty homes will come back into use quickly and are a natural part of the housing market. However, not all empty properties are transactional vacancies, and the longer properties are left empty, the more problematic they become. Long term empty properties not only cause issues for direct neighbours and the wider area, but they also represent a waste of a valuable resource i.e. a home for someone in housing need.

Due to extremely limited resources currently, our actions need to be prioritised and targeted.

Prioritising our actions

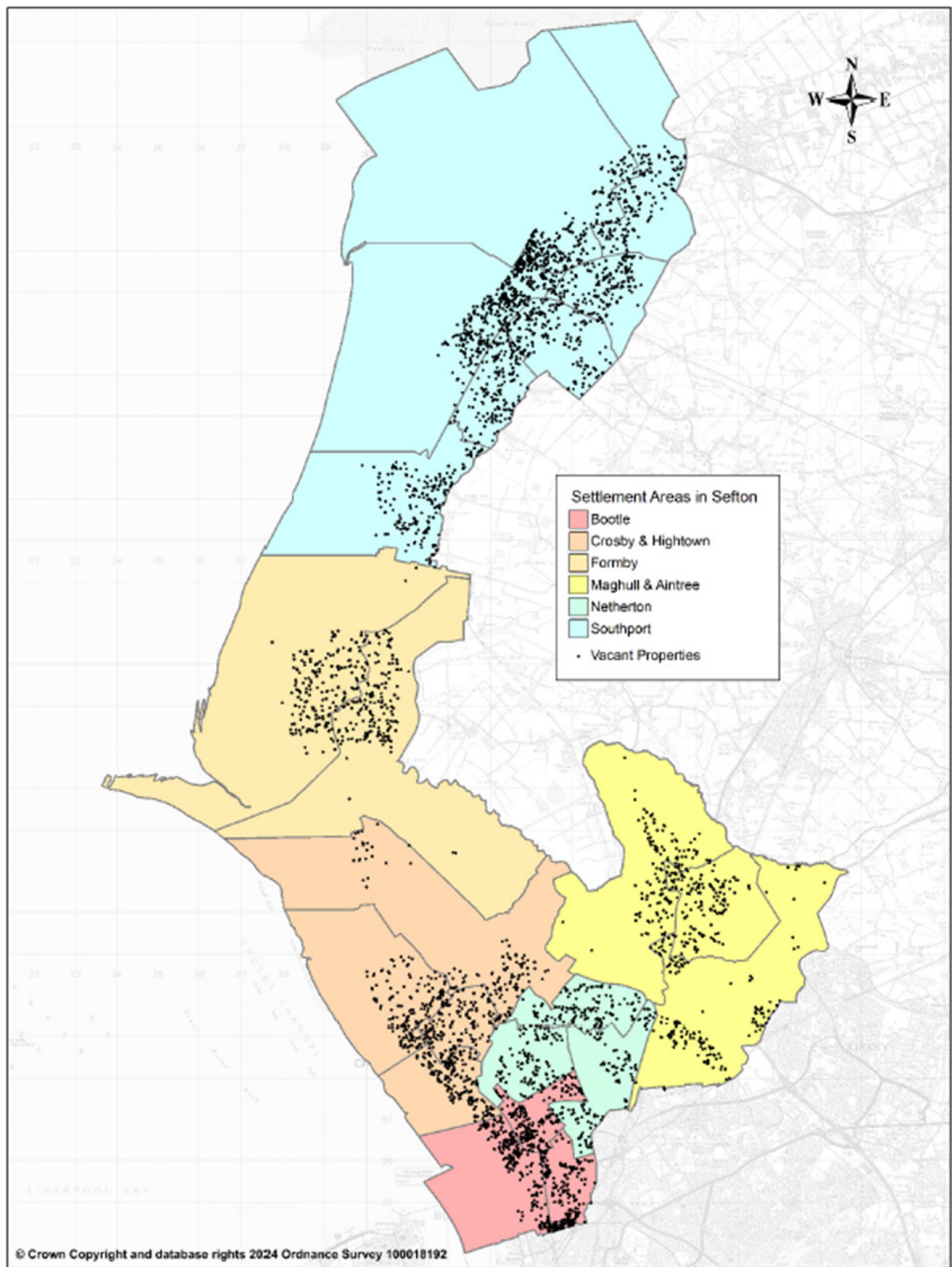
As of October 2024, there are approximately 1,400 properties in Sefton that have been empty for more than 2 years. It would be impossible to attempt to intervene in all cases and would not be a productive use of limited resources. Therefore, this Plan aims to primarily focus on those properties that have been empty for more than 2 years in Bootle and Southport, where there are high concentrations of vacant properties (see map below).

In March 2018, the Council introduced a Selective licensing scheme in Bootle and an Additional HMO licensing scheme in areas of Waterloo and Southport. These areas were chosen for licensing due to them having the greatest levels of private rented housing together with higher levels of crime, anti-social behaviour, and poor housing conditions. The aim of the licensing schemes is to improve housing for our residents and make these areas safer, more attractive places to live. The selective and additional licensing schemes were renewed in 2023 to run until 2028.

According to research conducted in 2016 by the national Empty Homes Agency, local authorities with higher levels of long-term empty homes tend to have lower house prices and more low-income households than the rest of the country. They also tend to have more pre-1919 terraced housing stock. It was also found that the neighbourhoods with the highest concentrations of empty homes tend to have higher levels of private rented sector accommodation, with a higher proportion of that accommodation not meeting the decent homes standard, and higher perceived levels of social problems.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the highest concentrations of long-term empty properties are in the licensing areas, with 2.8% empty in Bootle and 2.6% in central Southport (Sefton Council Tax October 2024), making these areas the focus of this Plan. An analysis of the levels of long-term empty homes for all areas of the borough is provided at Figure 5 below.

Map showing the distribution of vacant properties in Sefton as of October 2024.



5. Why Are Properties Left Empty?

Some of the reasons why properties are left empty for lengthy periods of time include;

- Legal reasons, such as probate and divorce
- Unable to sell due to market conditions
- Lack of funds to make the property safe and habitable
- Bought for investment and owner awaiting improved market conditions
- Owner in care or in prison
- Owner is untraceable

It is important to understand the reason why a property has been left empty allowing the best course of action to be taken and bring it back into use. The course of action taken with one property will not be suitable for all – every aspect must be considered for each case and the most appropriate tool chosen to maximise the chances of a productive outcome.

6. The Issues and Benefits

Long-term empty properties can have a negative impact on neighbourhoods and communities. They can be a magnet for anti-social behaviour, squatters, fly-tipping and other criminal activity.

These properties can quickly fall into disrepair and, in addition to the above issues, they can become a drain on the resources of the local authority and emergency services. Council tax bills often go unpaid for empty properties and the Council will need to take steps to maximise recovery of debts associated with empty properties.

Benefits of bringing a long-term empty property back into use

- Better use of the asset for owners, improving value and potential income from rent
- Provides a home for someone in housing need
- Improves the visual appearance of a street and neighbourhood
- Reduces the opportunity for anti-social behaviour and crime, making the area a safer place to live
- Makes the area a cleaner place to live, reducing the opportunity for fly-tipping
- Supports the regeneration of the wider area
- Potential increased revenue to the Council from Selective Licensing and Additional Licensing fees

7. National and Regional Context

As of October 2024, empty homes statistics show that there were 719,470 vacant dwellings in England, with 265,061 of which are long term empty homes. This data is available from the [Live Tables on Dwelling Stock published on gov.uk](#).

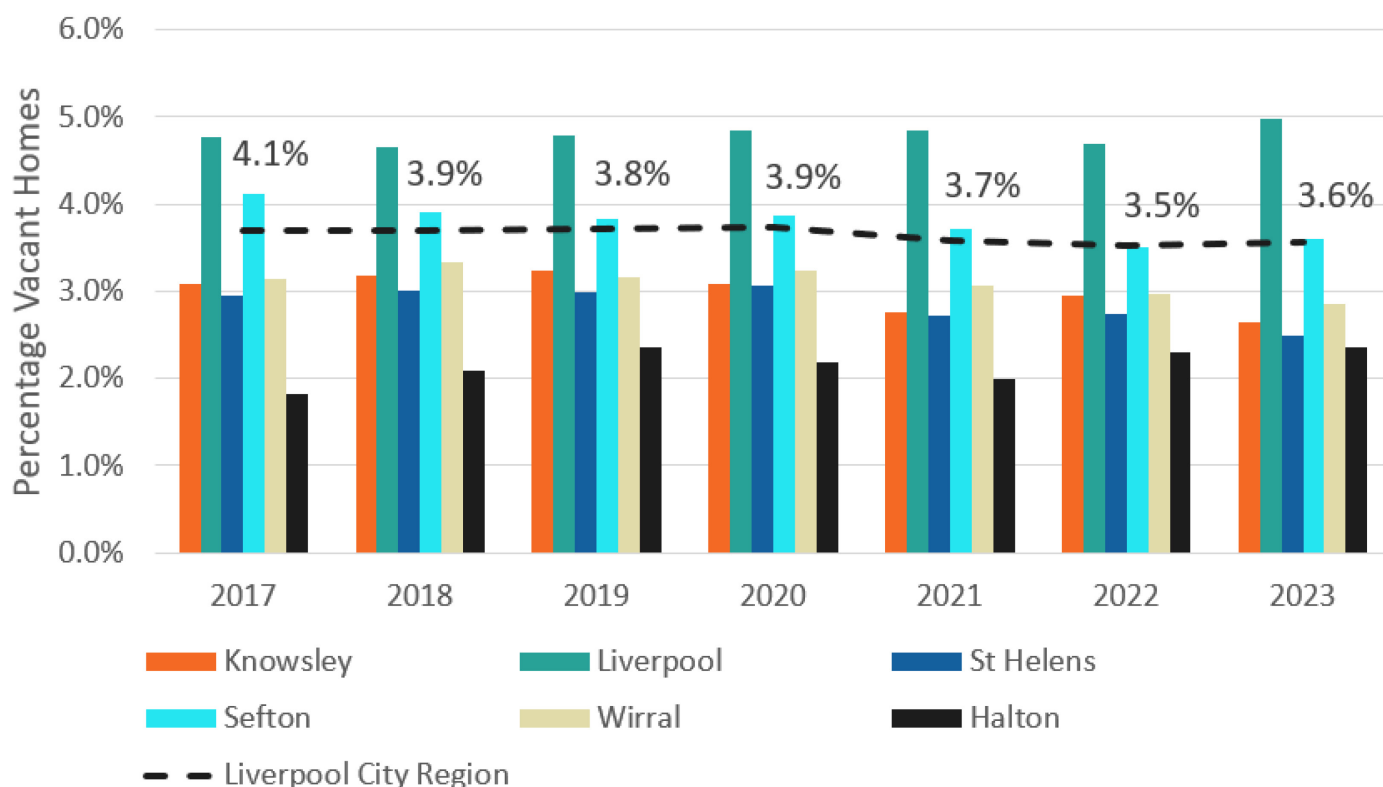
Nationally, there are 1.29 million households on local authority waiting lists (as of 31 March 2023). Re-using empty homes can provide an opportunity to increase the amount of new affordable housing stock, with the benefits of being cheaper and more environmentally friendly than building new housing stock.

In the early 2010's, a range of national incentives were introduced by Government in an attempt to tackle empty homes. This included the introduction of the New Homes Bonus (NHB) scheme in 2010, which provides local authorities with a grant for each empty property returned to use.

Another method for tackling empty homes nationally has been council tax premiums. Since national legislation was introduced in 2013, it has been possible for local authorities to charge a premium on council tax for empty homes, acting as a disincentive for an owner to leave a property empty. The decision to charge a premium and the rate of the premium is down to the individual local authorities, with the upper limits set by legislation. Sefton Council's current council tax premiums for empty homes are detailed further in this document.

The North West has the largest number of long-term empty properties in England compared to other regions, totalling 38,894. The Liverpool City Region (LCR) specifically has high proportions of empty homes in all areas, as shown by Figure 1 below. This demonstrates empty homes are not just a challenge for Sefton, but also on both a national and regional scale.

Figure 1 – Proportion of vacant homes in the Liverpool City Region 2017 - 2023



As per the latest available data, Sefton has the second highest proportion of vacant homes across all the LCR local authorities – the highest being Liverpool City Council local authority area. There has been a slight reduction over recent years in the average across the city region – this has meant Sefton’s percentage of vacant homes is currently in line with the LCR average.

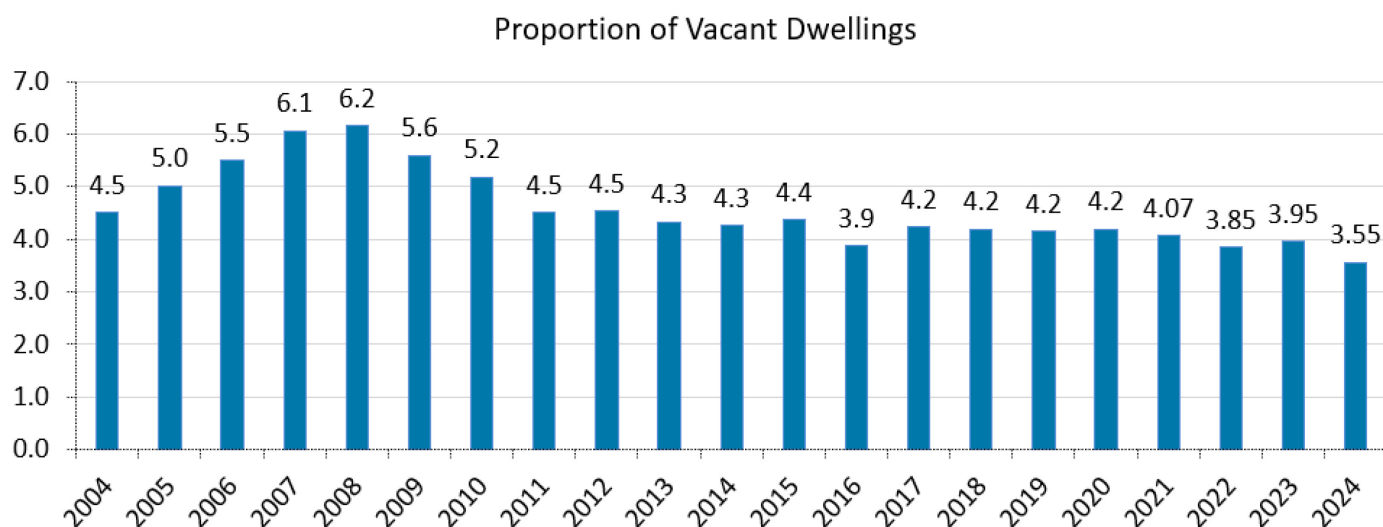
8. Empty Homes in Sefton

According to Council Tax records, there are approximately 4,664 (of 131,250 = 3.55%) empty properties in Sefton. Of these, 2,931 have been empty for more than six months (as of October 2024). This means 2.23% of properties in Sefton are classed as long term vacant.

Figure 2 below illustrates a steady decrease in the proportion of empty homes from 6.2% in 2008 to the current figure of 3.55% in 2024. Following adoption of our first Empty Property Strategy in 2009, there was a gradual decline in the proportion of empty homes, reaching its lowest at 3.6% in 2016.

Since the latest Empty Homes Plan 2019 – 2024, the decrease has been much steadier, only decreasing below 4% in 2022. Overall, the current proportion of 3.55% represents the lowest overall figure of empty homes in Sefton for a considerable number of years.

Figure 2 – Proportion of vacant homes in Sefton (October 2024).



Despite the gradual decrease in the number of vacant properties since 2008, Figure 3 below illustrates no clear trend in the proportion of long-term vacant homes since 2008. However, there is a gradual increase in the proportion in recent years, increasing from 2.1% in 2018 to 3.08% in 2023.

In the last year, there has been a significant decrease to 2.23% in 2024. Given the inconsistent nature of the figures in the past, our aim for the next few years should be to achieve a consistent decrease in this proportion.

Figure 3 – Proportion of long-term vacant homes in Sefton (October 2024).

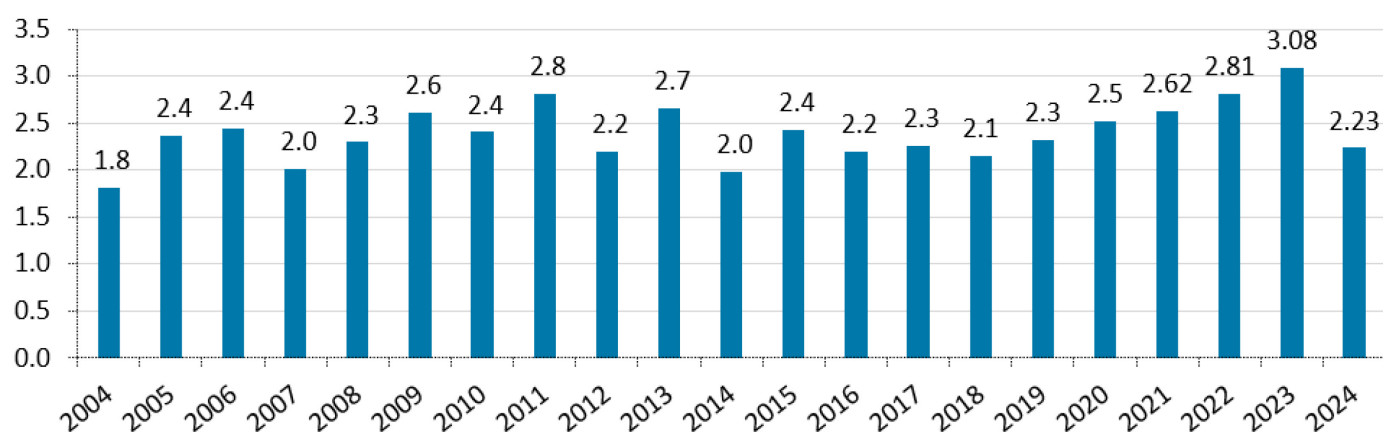


Figure 4 – Proportion of vacant homes by settlement in Sefton (October 2024).

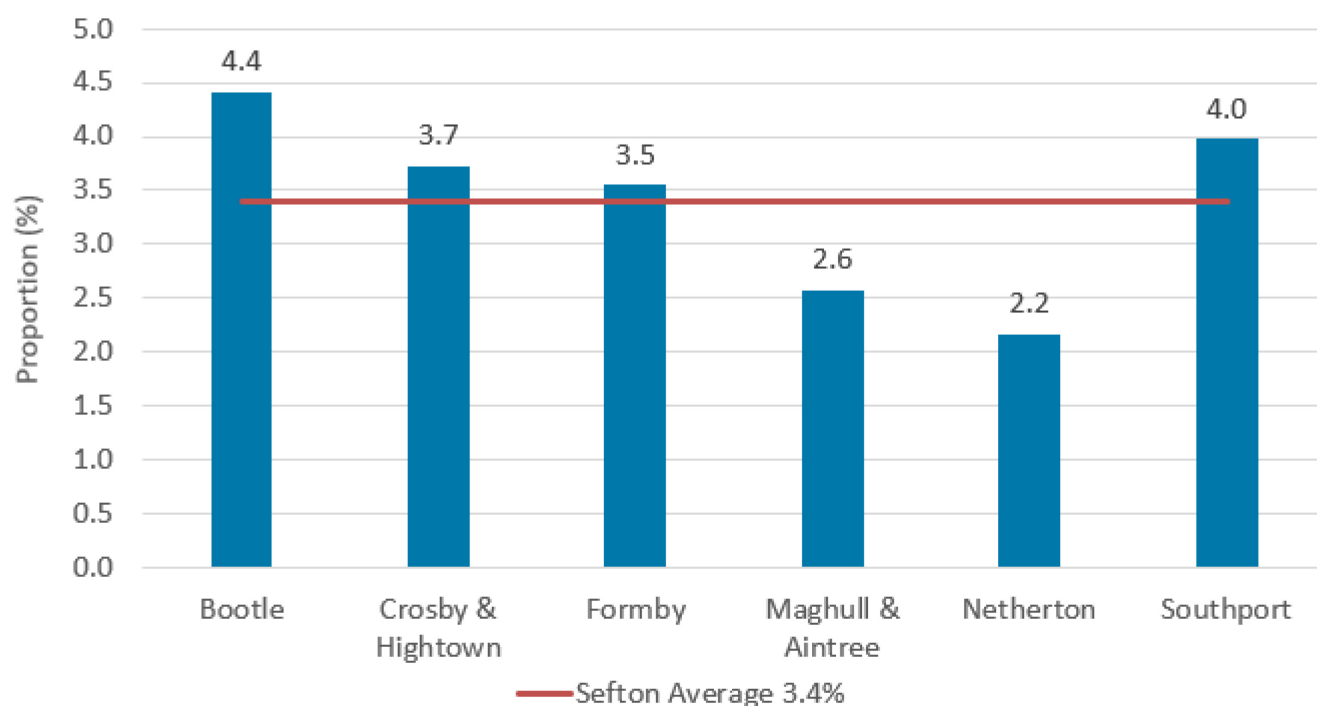


Figure 4 highlights the proportion of empty homes by settlement as of October 2024. A vacancy rate of 3% supports the frictional turnover of homes within the overall housing market and the average across Sefton at 3.4% is broadly in line with this.

Despite this, Figure 4 above demonstrates that there are clear differences in the proportion of empty homes across Sefton. Netherton has the lowest proportion at 2.2% and Bootle has the highest proportion at 4.4%.

As discussed earlier in the Plan, the two areas with the highest concentration of empty properties are Bootle and Southport.

Figure 5 – Proportion of long-term vacant homes by settlement in Sefton (October 2024).

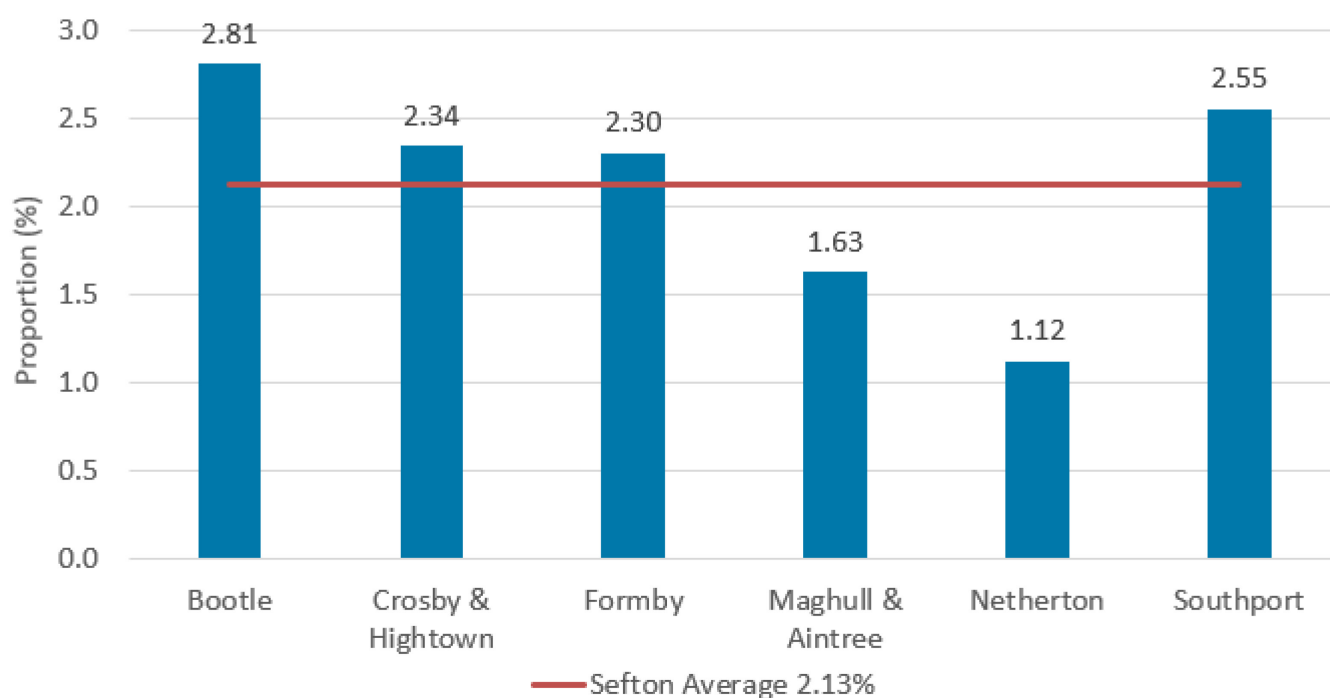


Figure 5 above highlights the differences in the proportion of long-term empty homes across Sefton. As discussed earlier in the Plan, the areas of Bootle and Southport have the highest proportion of long-term vacant homes, significantly above the Sefton average. Formby and Crosby & Hightown also have proportions of long-term empty homes above the Sefton average.

9. Bringing Empty Homes Back into Use

There are a number of pro-active and re-active methods that can be utilised by the Council to help bring empty homes back into use. These are discussed in detail below.

Advice and support

Our first approach in tackling an empty property is to contact the owner through letters. The initial letter reminds owners of their responsibilities whilst the property is empty and offers advice and assistance that may help bring their property back into use. This is then followed by a further two letters and a meeting with the owner if necessary.

The aim is to provide as much information and support as possible to the property owner to try and assist them in bringing their property back into use. Empty properties within the Selective and Additional licensing areas will be targeted with these letters.

Council tax premiums

Sefton Council currently charges a council tax premium for long term empty properties. This means that an additional amount of council tax, in addition to the standard charge, is payable when a property has been empty and unfurnished for one year or more.

- For properties that have been empty for 1 to 5 years, a premium of 100% is charged, making a total payable of 200% of the full council tax charge.
- For properties that have been empty for 5 to 10 years, a premium of 200% is charged, making a total payable of 300% of the full council tax charge.
- For properties that have been empty for 10 years or more, a premium of 300% is charged, making a total payable of 400% of the full council tax charge.

The ability for local authorities to charge these premiums for empty properties was introduced via national legislation gradually between 2019 and 2021. Sefton Council agreed to introduce these premiums to help incentivize owners to bring long term empty homes back into use.

In cases of long-term empty properties, it is not unusual for council tax demands to go unpaid and significant debts to accumulate. Debt recovery action may encourage owners of long-term empty homes to bring their properties back into use, to avoid further additional council tax charges.

There are some exceptions to the above premium charges and more detail can be found on our [council tax webpage](#).

Enforcement powers

Sefton Council will always try to encourage and work with owners to bring properties back into use. Sometimes, owners can be uncooperative and untraceable. In these cases, and where the property has caused a statutory or public health nuisance, it is necessary for Sefton Council to use the most suitable enforcement tool that will remove the nuisance and help bring an empty property back into use.

The Council can use the powers listed below to require the owner to do certain works that will remove the problem. If the owner fails to carry out these works, the Council will instruct contractors to carry out the works in default and then charge the owner for the costs.

- Under the Local Government Miscellaneous Provisions Act 1982, the Council can request that an empty property is made secure in the event it becomes insecure.
- The Prevention of Damage by Pests Act 1949 gives the Council powers to require owners to remove a rodent infestation.
- Under The Building Act 1984, the Council can require property owners to carry out repairs to dangerous buildings.
- The Housing Act 2004 affords the Council the power to service an Improvement Notice on the owner of a property. This will require an owner to bring the property up to a reasonable standard by removing any hazards.
- The Town and Country Planning Act provides a local planning authority with the power to take steps to require land to be cleaned up when its condition adversely affects the amenity of the area (this can include empty properties).
- Under the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, the Council can take action where the conduct of the owner of an empty property is unreasonable and is having a detrimental, persistent effect on the quality of life of local residents.

Enforcement action

If the above has not been sufficient and a long-term empty property continues to cause significant issues, there are a number of enforcement tools that the Council can utilise.

Enforced Sales Procedure (ESP)

The ESP is an existing power using section 103 of the Law of Property Act 1925. Although primarily designed as a debt recovery process, it provides a method for getting long term, problematic properties back into use. It has been

adopted by a number of Councils across the country as an effective way of dealing with long term empty properties.

There are many long-term empty properties in the Borough that have had legal notices served and works have been carried out in default by the Council. The costs of these works have subsequently been registered as a land charge to be recovered on the eventual sale of the property. Typically, these properties are some of the most problematic, where work in default has to be carried out on several occasions to remedy problems with the empty property. In these cases, it is often a better use of resources and more cost effective for the Council to use an ESP.

Sefton Council has successfully enforced the sale of 8 long term problematic empty homes since 2019.

Order for Sale

As discussed above, council tax often goes unpaid where there is a long-term empty property. When there are large council tax debts owing on a property, a Charging Order can be placed on the property to secure the council tax debts. Similar to an enforced sale, an Order for Sale is a court order to sell a property that is subject to a Charging Order, so the debt can be paid out of the proceeds of the sale.

An Order for sale procedure can also be used in some cases to sell a long-term empty property whereby there are outstanding nursing home fee debts owing to the Council that is secured on the property by way of legal charge. This procedure is the last resort and is only used on problematic, long-term empty properties where the owner has passed away and probate has not been progressed for a significant amount of time.

Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO)

These orders allow local authorities to secure proper management and occupation of privately owned houses that have been empty for two years or more and that have become a blight on the local neighbourhood.

The law relating to the service of EDMOs is contained in sections 133-138 of the 2004 Housing Act and associated Regulations. EDMOs are currently not a widely used tool across all local authorities. Sefton Council has not yet served an EDMO.

Compulsory Purchase Order (CPOs)

Providing there is a housing need, Local Authorities have the power to compulsorily acquire buildings and land to provide housing accommodation. A Compulsory Purchase Order can be used where owners refuse to take action to bring a property back into use, where an owner cannot be traced, or where a property has been empty for a long time and is causing a nuisance or is a danger to the public.

Due to lack of resources, Sefton Council has not yet used this tool to acquire long term empty properties and bring them back into use.

10. Review of Previous Actions

There are a couple of actions that have featured in previous empty homes plans and strategies, which are no longer active.

Matchmakers Scheme

The Matchmakers Scheme was a free service that matched owners of empty homes in Sefton with buyers. The scheme ran from 2013 to 2018 and was highly successful at the beginning. However, the number of sellers advertising their property on the matchmaker scheme decreased over time due to the way the properties were advertised for sale changed.

When the new General Data Protection Regulation came into effect in 2018, buyers were asked if they would still like and receive emails informing them of any new empty properties, but only 12% of the 'buyers' responded. Due to this low take-up the matchmaker scheme is no longer available.

Since the last Empty Homes Plan was published, we did engage with other local authorities who have operated matchmaker schemes. We received similar feedback from all that take up was low and, as a result, it was not worth the time and resource required. We may look to re-introduce a similar scheme in the future or explore developing this type of initiative on a Liverpool City Region basis with neighbouring councils.

Empty Homes Officers Action Group

An Empty Homes Officers Action Group used to meet on a monthly basis, including representatives from Housing Standards, Legal, Planning and Council Tax teams. The group no longer meet on a monthly basis, however if a problematic case arises, a cross-departmental approach is taken.

11. Summary of Actions

Our actions towards reducing the number of long-term empty homes and bringing empty properties back into use can be summarised under 3 key objectives.

Objective 1 – Raising awareness of long-term empty homes

- Raising awareness of the issue of long-term empty properties internally within the Council
- Raising awareness among residents via increased online publicity by outlining the issues associated with empty properties and possible solutions.

Objective 2 – Encourage long term empty property owners to bring their properties back into use using early intervention and preventative measures

- Proactively offer support and advice to owners of empty properties to encourage them to bring their properties back into use, prioritising long-term empty homes in the selective and additional licensing areas.
- Reactively offer support and advice to owners of problematic empty properties where Licensing Officers and Housing Practitioners are approached.
- Ensure all officers are well informed about empty homes and how to tackle them, including attending best practice groups and training sessions.
- Work in partnership with Registered Social Landlords to help bring empty properties back into use by exploring the opportunity of developing an empty properties scheme.
- Maintain an accurate database of empty properties.
- Increase understanding as to the reasons why properties are left empty, in Sefton specifically.

Objective 3 – Utilise our enforcement powers to bring problematic, long-term empty properties back into use

- Continue to utilise the enforcement powers discussed above where necessary to tackle problematic, long-term empty properties, particularly in the selective and additional licensing areas.
- Continue taking a cross departmental approach to specific cases and regularly engaging with the key internal departments regarding empty homes issues.
- Increase our readiness to utilise all possible enforcement powers where necessary.
- Actively seek additional funding to increase capacity and resource within the Housing Standards team to enforce against more empty properties.

