

Repurpose Empty Building into Social Homes Campaign

With a waiting list of 5,000 in need of social housing on the Wirral do our abandoned buildings represent a solution?

A cost-of-living crisis characterised by a national shortage of social rent properties, rising private rents and a consistent net positive inflation since 2021 has seen UK households' monthly outgoings soar, with the Office for National Statistics noting that 56% reported an increased cost of living in July 2026 compared with the previous month, owing most significantly to increased food, fuel and gas and electricity costs; with a 39.3% increase in food prices between January 2021 and June 2026. Many Wirral households are all too familiar with this national crisis, forced into further monthly expenses by local changes in council tax reductions policy, pushing more and more people into situations of need and through Wirral Foodbank's doors. Whilst the foodbank remains a vital resource to combat hunger in the short term, Wirral Foodbank's primary goal is greater; to provide longer-term solutions to end food poverty and, in doing so, eliminate the need for the foodbanks entirely.

The first step towards this goal is to identify the main causes of food poverty. By doing so we can campaign to raise awareness about these issues and find pathways to eliminate them... this is where Wirral Community Advocates come in. As a community campaigners group consisting of a range of people with lived and learned experience of using the foodbank, Wirral Community Advocates is a key local resource to help alleviate poverty by identifying and addressing its root causes from the perspective of people that genuinely understand what it is to be in such situations of insecurity. Those working with Wirral Foodbank have noticed a recurring theme when discussing the causes of food poverty with those relying on foodbank services, namely increased complaints of issues relating to housing. In fact, high rents and evictions due to rent arrears forcing individuals into unsuitable, often temporary, accommodation and situations of homelessness represent the third biggest theme discussed by Wirral Foodbank's users. When reflected upon by Wirral Community Advocates, its campaigners, almost all of whom have experienced housing problems in the local area, unanimously agreed to focus their efforts on a campaign to rectify the shortage of genuinely affordable housing on the Wirral, with the long-term goal of reducing dependence on emergency resources like foodbanks. As a result they created the Empty Buildings campaign, on which they are working currently, focusing on the identification and conversion of long-term empty properties into social housing.

To truly understand the importance of this campaign a vital distinction must be made to differentiate between two concepts under the commonly misunderstood umbrella of "council housing". When we think of council housing it is easy to fall into stereotypical thinking about a wide system of affordable, basic homes offered by the local authorities for a monthly rent considerably lower than private rents or the "market rent" of the property (i.e. the average going rate for rent for a similar property in an area). Whilst not entirely false, there is more nuance when referring to financially accessible housing. Currently there are two types of reduced-rate housing; "affordable housing", referring to properties rented to individuals deemed eligible by the council at any reduced rate provided it does not exceed 80% of the market rate; and "social housing", properties rented at a reduced rate established by a formula, taking into account local

income and typically working out at around 50% of the market rate. Social housing represents the only genuinely affordable housing in the UK as, due to a range of factors including the area in which the property is located and average local income, so-called “affordable” properties remain out of reach for many. Social rent is set according to a formula controlled by the central government relative to national average rent, relative county earning, the number of bedrooms and relative property value. In other words, social rent works out at a rate local people can genuinely afford having considered regional variations in property value and the cost of living, yet there are not enough fairly priced properties for those who need them.

To put this into context the Office for National Statistics reported that the average monthly private rent on the Wirral in July 2026 was £852 (representing a 6.8% increase from June 2026), with the average monthly rent for a one-bedroom property being £567. Without local councils or housing associations offering reduced rents (either at an “affordable” or “social” rate), local people can benefit from the LHA (or Local Housing Allowance; i.e. the housing benefit rate for private tenants). The LHA rate is often frozen by the national government meaning that it very rarely matches actual local rents. For example, the weekly LHA for a one-bedroom property on the Wirral for the 2026-27 period is £97.81, or £391.24 per month, despite the average private rent for a local one-bedroom property costing over £175 more each month than this housing allowance accounts for. Many people simply cannot afford private rent and must therefore turn to “affordable” property schemes for more financially accessible housing.

As mentioned previously, an affordable rent must not exceed 80% of the market value. Considering this, we can estimate that affordable rent for an average Wirral property in July 2026 could legally have cost up to £681.60 (with “affordable” one-bedroom properties costing up to £453.60 per month). At first glance these appear to be decent reductions, however after other monthly expenses (energy costs, phone and wifi bills, clothing, household maintenance, food, taxes, leisure, etc.) they no longer seem so “affordable”, especially considering local changes to the means-tested council tax reduction scheme. Until 31 March 2026 Wirral Council offered a maximum reduction of 82.5% to Council Tax bills, but since April 2026, this maximum reduction was capped at 50%, meaning that Wirral residents experiencing poverty and receiving the maximum council tax reduction faced a minimum monthly increase of £45.15 in further expenses due.¹ Considering that standard monthly universal credit for a single person aged 25 or over is £424.90 and for a couple living together, where either is aged 25 or over, is £666.97 for both individuals we can see how the rent for even a one-bedroom “affordable property” leaves an insufficient amount for other expenses. As one former homeless project manager and member of Wirral Community Advocates describes, it is this “market driven system [in which] we see ever-increasing house prices and rents, well out of reach of ordinary people” which forces

¹ Approximation based on information provided by Wirral Council “*Working Age Council Tax Reduction Scheme 2026-27 ‘Summary Guide’*” <https://www.wirral.gov.uk/files/wirral-council-tax-reduction-guide-april-2026.pdf/download?inline>. For residents in the lowest Council Tax band (Band A), the annual charge for 2026-27 is £1,667.06. Applying the new maximum reduction (i.e. 50%), the maximum reduced annual payment is £833.53, meaning the current (post-April 2026) maximum reduced monthly payment is £69.46 (833.53÷12). Pre-April 2026 the maximum reduction was 82.5%, therefore using the same annual Council Tax figure (£1,667.06) and applying the 82.5% reduction, the maximum reduced annual payment was £291.74 and £24.31 per month (291.74÷12), meaning a monthly increase of £45.15 (69.46-24.31) compared to pre-April 2026.

many Wirral residents into situations of inadequate temporary accommodation and the “physical and emotional complications attached to overcrowding, couch surfing, rough sleeping and insecurity”. In July 2026 there were 968 active cases of homelessness on the Wirral and 188 households registered as living in temporary accommodation. Whilst both of these figures represent the positive action of Wirral Council to reduce housing uncertainty compared to the 1,026 active cases of homelessness reported in March 2025 and the 213 families living in temporary accommodation in March of 2026, there remains a great distance to go to eliminate housing uncertainty. Despite having such a lengthy waiting list for social housing and the second largest housing stock in the Liverpool City Region (LCR), the proportion of homes privately owned on the Wirral is higher than the LCR average, with only 15% of its homes socially rented.

Having said this, the government is currently working towards mitigating the effects of the housing crisis with a recent pledge to end rough sleeping which, if successful, shall put an end to the most severe type of housing insecurity, in addition to the allocation £39bn for the construction of 300,000 new "social and affordable houses" over the course of 10 years (30,000 new homes per year) in the 2025 Spending Review. Having completed the construction of 32,243 new social and affordable homes completed between April 2025 and March 2026, the government is well over its pledge of 30,000 new properties, suggesting it is meeting its affordable housing commitments. However, it is worth highlighting that only 9,381 of those properties completed were for social rent.

Wirral Council has made similar pledges to build more social and affordable homes, recognising the need for the construction of at least 687 new affordable homes in its 2026-31 Housing Strategy (comprising properties for both affordable and social rent as well as “affordable ownership” programmes, only designating 240 new properties a year for social rents) and has pledged to regenerate the left bank of the peninsula assuring the construction of at least 1,000 new affordable homes through “developer obligations” by 2040. Whilst hopeful to see the government acknowledging the need for more affordable permanent accommodation on both a national and regional level, it is clear these pledges focus more explicitly on building new homes in the broader, more lucrative category of “affordable” housing over social housing, which as discussed earlier, is far from affordable for many.

In light of this housing crisis, Wirral Community Advocates has turned its attention to long term empty homes (or LEHs, legally defined as “substantially unfurnished homes, liable for Council Tax, that have been empty for more than six months.”²) In other words, an LEH is a home that is empty for no good reason (legitimate reasons include short periods of vacancy due to gaps between lets or the temporary unavailability of the homeowner, if taken into care or sent to prison for example). Action on Empty Homes reports there were over 2,000 such LEHs on the Wirral in 2025, with Wirral Foodbank’s own research suggesting at least 673 have been empty for over 2 years. Such properties represent a vital resource underutilised by the local authorities

to shorten the waiting list for social housing by increasing the housing stock, thus helping the local authorities meet their optimistic pledges to create more genuinely affordable homes.



General map of empty buildings on the Wirral, created by a volunteer for Wirral Foodbank

Not only can the conversion of LEHs help the council address the high demand for social housing, there is also evidence to suggest that it can save money in the long run for both the local authorities and the current owners of the properties. Shelter's 10-City Plan to Rapidly Convert Empty Homes into Social Rent Homes uses Liverpool as one of its case studies to demonstrate how a new government could feasibly rapidly convert empty homes into social rent homes at a lower cost than building new ones. The study reveals that, using cost-modelling of average LEH prices across different Local Authority District areas within England, "converting homes costs comparatively less to central government, with required grant funding on average 20% below the usual cost to deliver social rent homes". Furthermore, providing more social housing to those that need it will reduce the amount of Wirral residents relying on emergency resources like temporary accommodation (greatly costly to the authorities, costing the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority £3.2m between April 2024 and March 2025). LEH owners can also financially benefit from the conversion of their properties as it costs around £12,000 a year to keep such properties empty, through lost rental income as well as council tax, insurance and utility charges. Beyond financial benefits, members of Wirral Community Advocates have highlighted the value of having a fixed, affordable address from which to manage healthcare needs, access training and employment opportunities and contribute to society. Imagine how difficult it would be to keep up with regular doctors' appointments, job interviews, and work commitments without knowing where you will be sleeping that night and from where you will have to travel the next day. In order to successfully move on from homelessness and other

traumatic events and successfully reintegrate into society, those affected need the consistent, affordable accommodation that a social home can provide.



Wirral Community Advocates Campaign poster demonstrating the potential value of Charter House, an empty building in Wallasey.

Historically, Wirral Borough Council has recognised the value of such resources, having brought 250 long term empty buildings back into use from 2020-2025 however the empty property grant that funded these projects ceased in March 2025, therefore Wirral Community Advocates are working to bring attention and funding back to these valuable resources, with campaigns to bring back a dedicated National Empty Homes Programme in England (like that of 2012-2015) and expand the devolved powers of local authorities to issue Empty Dwelling Management Orders and urge them to use more funding from the Social and Affordable Homes Programme to convert empty properties into social homes.

You can view more information about the work of the campaign group at the following URL, <https://wirral.foodbank.org.uk/support-us/campaign/convert-empty-buildings> and you can report any vacant properties you are aware of to Wirral Council here, <https://www.wirral.gov.uk/housing/information-and-advice/empty-properties>, to bring them back into use. After all, what else is the use of 2,000 long-term empty homes on the Wirral when 5,000 local people are being forced to wait for suitable and dignified accommodation due to a lack of housing stock?

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