

LONDON'S DEAD SPACES: BRINGING THEM BACK TO LIFE



A briefing by Sian Berry AM
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June 2022



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SUMMARY

This short briefing contains new research using data from London's borough councils showing how many of our publicly owned buildings are lying unused and empty in our communities.

The results of this work estimate that close to 800 council-owned buildings, green spaces and facilities are empty, neglected or not in their normal use across the city.

In my discussions with Londoners, and in listening exercises conducted by London Green Party, the problem of empty and neglected facilities has come up repeatedly in the past year. Our citizens are acutely aware that community spaces and buildings in their local area, which they see every day, are left empty.

They have called these 'dead spaces' – a reflection of the strong feelings people have when they see this kind of wasted opportunity on their doorsteps.

I wanted to find out more about the extent of this problem, examine what is being done already to help, and think about ways in which local, regional and national government could do more to bring these dead spaces back to life.

With my team, I have looked at existing programmes aimed at recovery from the pandemic, and at supporting high streets and businesses, and I have summarised them here.

I have also spoken with community groups, small businesses, community interest companies and landlords about possible solutions they are trying, and looked again at ideas I have put forward before, including a wider People's Land Commission for our city.



"A rise in unused empty spaces – including homes, shops and disbanded community hubs."

"Feels like such a waste when there are so many people in need of accessible homes or community spaces."

Comments made by Londoners during listening work by London Green Party

It is clear from this work that London's local communities and those who represent them are full of ideas that could make use of dead spaces and bring them back to life.

The Mayor, local councils and national Government should all do more to map and document these broader opportunities, expanding funding programmes and projects beyond high streets – and fixing legislation where needed – to help to revive the huge variety of dead spaces.

This should include not just projects for pandemic recovery or to support people in need, but to rebuild local services hit by cuts and to reduce our impact on the world.

Sian Berry AM
June 2022

LONDON'S COUNCIL-OWNED DEAD SPACES IN 2022: OUR RESEARCH

To create a snapshot of London's dead spaces my team has obtained new data on the number of council-owned buildings and spaces that are currently out of normal use.

We submitted a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to all 33 local authorities in London asking for details of the buildings and facilities they own that are not in normal use.

We asked for the size of each space, the reasons for it being out of use and the length of time, and whether it was being put to temporary 'meanwhile' use or occupied by property guardians.

We received a response to our request from all but one council, but eight refused to provide any data, citing exclusions under FOI legislation.¹

The total number of dead spaces we received information about was 442 from 25 boroughs, an average of 24. **The total across London would be 781 if this average was also reflected in the boroughs that did not provide data.**

The average size of each space was 424 square metres. We calculated this after excluding a large farm that Enfield council told us about, which included the land associated with the buildings.

The total floorspace across the 138 dead spaces which came with this information was 187,347 square metres.

KEY FINDINGS

Councils own at least 442 dead spaces across London – with a huge variety of facilities currently out of use.

Most closures are due to business struggles and service closures rather than disrepair.

Average number per borough is 24.

Average floorspace is 424 square metres.

Average length of time a property has been out of normal use is 4 years.

WHAT KINDS OF DEAD SPACES DOES LONDON HAVE?

Councils reported a huge variety of different types of dead spaces, as shown in the diagram below.

The largest number were in commercial categories including shops, office space and industrial units. However, a very significant number of community spaces, including meeting rooms, community centres, halls and play spaces were also reported.

Empty buildings where public services used to be provided were also common, with a number of public toilets, libraries, nurseries, schools, care homes, youth centres, day centres and sports facilities included in the data received.

Unique spaces we were told about included a market, historic house, water tower, boat house, cadet HQ, coroners' court and a civil defence bunker.

Our data request did not include council home voids between tenancies or homes that are vacant due to planned estate demolition, redevelopment or repair, but we did receive information about a number of residential units that are owned by councils outside the Housing Revenue Account.

Typically, these were homes that are auxiliary to other public services, such as school keepers' houses and caretaker lodges.

In total, the data received from councils included 43 self-contained residential units of this kind, as well as a hotel and three care homes which could be brought back into use to provide accommodation.

LONDON'S COUNCIL-OWNED DEAD SPACES:



WHY ARE SPACES NOT IN NORMAL USE?

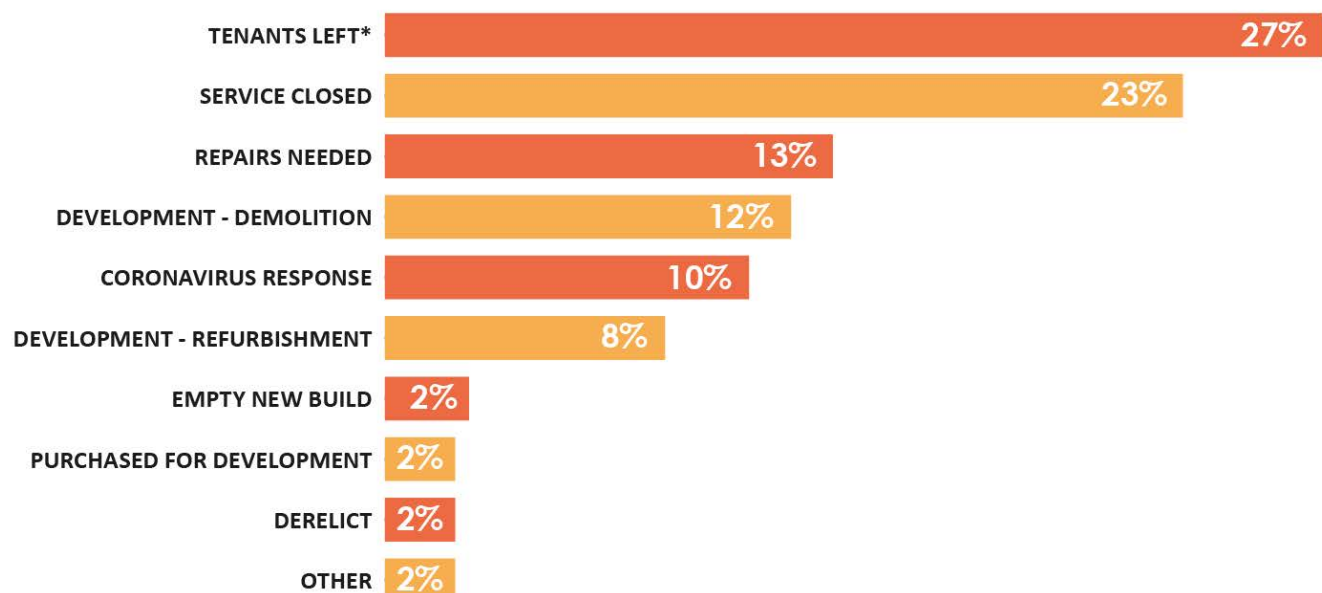
We would expect a certain number of buildings and facilities owned by councils to be out of normal use in any snapshot of data, as council services or commercial tenants change their needs and buildings need to be repaired, refurbished or adapted.

However, in the responses received to our question about this issue, it was notable that tenancies not being renewed and services being closed were the two most common reasons given, a long way ahead of reasons related to disrepair, redevelopment or refurbishment.

This is likely to reflect the impact of more than a decade of squeezes on council budgets and the more recent crisis of the pandemic on public services and local businesses.

Ten per cent of spaces were out of normal use in order to be employed for coronavirus response activities, and this is also reflected in the meanwhile use data outlined below. These were all given as temporary uses, and it is hoped normal use of these spaces will be able to resume in the near future.

REASONS GIVEN FOR DEAD SPACES BEING EMPTY (FOR 252 SPACES WITH DATA)



*Reasons for tenants leaving include unknown, end of contract, bankruptcy and repossession. Others include retirement, fire, and preparing for sale

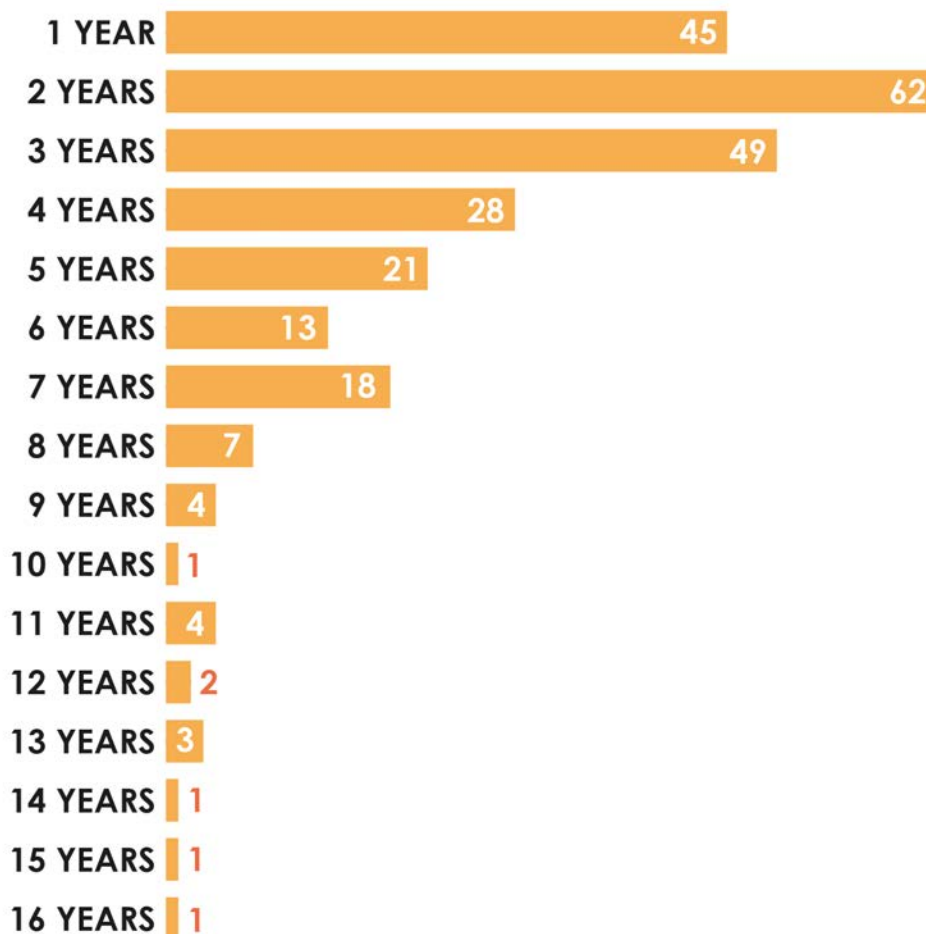
HOW LONG ARE SPACES BEING LEFT OUT OF USE?

We asked councils for the start date of each closure or change of use and received data on 260 dead spaces (59 per cent of the total).

The average length of closure was four years, with the highest proportion (107 spaces, or 41 per cent of the total) closed within the past two years.

However, a significant proportion have been out of normal use for longer periods, and 76 spaces (29 per cent) have been shuttered for five years or more.

LENGTH OF TIME COUNCIL-OWNED SPACES HAVE BEEN EMPTY (FOR 260 SPACES WITH DATES)



ARE SPACES BEING GIVEN TO MEANWHILE USES?

We asked councils whether each closure or change of use was permanent or temporary, and whether spaces were being used temporarily for a different purpose, including community meanwhile use and occupation by property guardians.

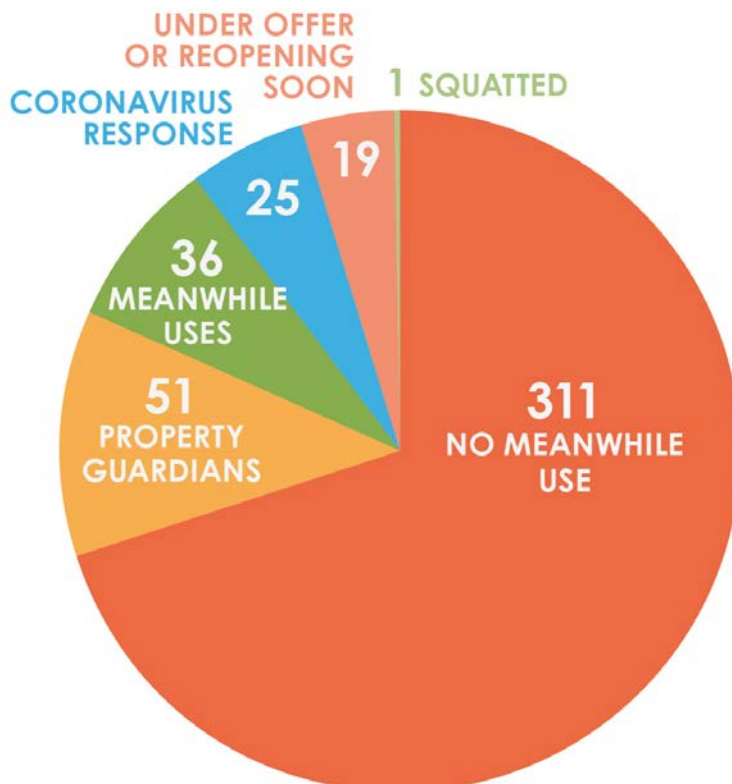
Of all the closures with this data (for 259 spaces), councils told us 58 per cent of spaces were only temporarily closed.

They told us 26 per cent of closures were permanent, with either no decision made on the future of the space, or planned demolition or redevelopment, and a further 17 per cent were 'under review' with no clear plans for future reopening.

The data received on meanwhile uses is shown below.

Over two-thirds of the total spaces (311) have no meanwhile use or plan to reopen soon, with a further 51 being occupied by property guardians and 25 being used for coronavirus response activities (see also above where this temporary need was given as a reason for spaces being taken out of their normal uses).

Only 36, or one in 12, of the spaces was being put to any other public service or community-based meanwhile use.



DEAD SPACES OWNED BY OTHER ORGANISATIONS

Our research looked only at council-owned dead spaces but, across London, many empty buildings are owned by other organisations, including other parts of the public sector and private businesses and landlords.

What data is available to show how many of these are currently out of normal use in London?

OTHER PUBLIC BUILDINGS

In addition to councils, other public bodies and arms-length organisations own and manage non-residential spaces across London, which may also be left empty, leaving dead spaces in our communities.

These organisations include:

- Other GLA Group organisations including **Transport for London**, the **London Fire Brigade** and the **Metropolitan Police Service**.
- **Network Rail**, with a large number of railway arches and former railway and station buildings owned and managed by the Arch Company.²
- **The NHS**, including hospital buildings and local healthcare spaces.
- **Other Government departments**, such as the Ministry of Justice.

We do not have clear data on the total number of spaces owned by these organisations that are out of use, but police stations, fire stations, doctor's surgeries are significant spaces that local residents notice when they are left empty, and there are a number of campaigns and initiatives across London to bring these back into use for the community.

DATA ON RETAIL UNITS

Through the pandemic, there has been a great deal of concern about the pressures on businesses, particularly high street shops. The Local Data Company conducts on-the-ground data collection at retail locations, providing a good estimate of changes in vacancy rates.

According to its post-lockdown analysis of the retail and leisure market across the country, London saw the fourth highest regional rise in retail vacancies in the UK. Between 2019 and 2021, London saw a 2.4 percentage point rise in empty shop and leisure units from 8.3 to 10.7 per cent.³

In March 2022, the GLA High Streets for All recovery team reported some recovery on high streets since last year.⁴ But, with an estimated total of 70,000 retail and leisure units across London, potentially 7,490 privately owned dead spaces could be sitting empty currently.

A significant number of empty council-owned spaces in our 2021 data are also retail units. These could be put to community uses that would benefit local areas. However, the potential for private landlords to contribute to these opportunities is clearly much larger.

"Spend and footfall data demonstrated that outside the Central Activities Zone, a majority of London's high streets now fell into the 'resilient' category, whereas shortly after the first lockdown in 2020, most were 'struggling'. Those continuing to struggle tended to be more central and reliant on tourism or office space, while those serving local community needs fared better."

**London Recovery Board
progress update, March 2022⁴**



WHAT CAN BE DONE TO BREATHE LIFE INTO OUR DEAD SPACES?

The large number of dead spaces within communities offers huge potential both for rebuilding a more resilient local economy after the pandemic, and for rebuilding community life and activity after more than a decade of cuts to local services.

With my team, I have spoken with several organisations who are working to bring dead spaces back to life, both in London and across the country more widely, and the Mayor of London's recovery missions also look at these issues.

But there is a huge focus on high streets and the needs of small businesses, as shown by some of the examples in this section. The wealth of different dead spaces exposed in my research with councils shows that this focus only addresses a small part of this potential.

Some of the measures being used to help fill empty shops and high streets with life again as part of pandemic recovery programmes could have a part to play more widely in helping to breathe life into the council-owned dead spaces revealed by my research.

COMMUNITY GROUPS

Across London, hundreds of community groups and organisations supporting small and non-profit businesses are crying out for easier ways to take over empty buildings.

Many of the ideas being proposed for meanwhile uses and community benefit businesses and projects are suitable for spaces on high streets and in the many other empty public properties exposed by our research.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

While a range of work is being done as part of pandemic recovery, the focus on businesses and high streets risks missing the chance to think holistically about the wider range of dead spaces that councils and residents have told me about.

Work should be done by the Mayor of London to map and evaluate the wider range of empty spaces in our city, working with local communities through Community Improvement Districts and, ideally, a broader People's Land Commission.

Recovery funding should include specific help for councils and community groups to make more use of empty buildings of all kinds and include capital and revenue contributions. This could come from Government (through initiatives like Power to Change) or the Mayor of London through his recovery missions.

Legislation also needs to be improved to:

- make it easier for local authorities to use compulsory purchase powers,
- introduce a true community right to buy at reasonable cost, as exists in Scotland,
- enable more use of orders to bring privately owned space back into use,
- bring in 'meanwhile use' as a planning use class to take the bureaucracy out of temporary changes of use for community benefit.

Often these ideas focus on activities that have multiple benefits. Sharing and repairing items, for example, can help address the cost of living while also reducing the environmental impact of our lives.



A local Library of Things helps residents to save money and reduce waste by affordably renting out useful items like drills, sound systems and sewing machines from local spaces.⁵ It can also offer skill-sharing sessions and repair parties. The appetite for these services is growing. In London, there are already Libraries of Things in Crystal Palace, Morden, Hackney Wick, Kentish Town Finsbury Park, Dalston, Bromley and Woolwich.

While repair shops for digital devices are common, affordable repairs for small, essential electrical goods, such as vacuums, toasters and kettles, are much harder to find.

The Restart Project supports community groups to set up regular events where residents teach each other how to fix their equipment.⁶ Currently in London, there are three regular 'Restart Parties' taking place in North Kensington, Kilburn and Balham, and the Repair Café network provides a similar set-up in Southwark, Nunhead, Sutton, Twickenham and Putney.

The potential for these initiatives to expand is huge if more councils would embrace these kinds of community meanwhile uses. What links the two projects above, apart from the focus on repairs, is that all the activities are based in community centres or church halls. My data shows 18 community centres in London are currently closed and could be used to help.

Another example in London, supported by GLA funding, is the Creative Land Trust, which is turning a long-disused listed building in Stratford into a creative industries hub.⁷

Meanwhile Space CIC is a non-profit helping to bring vacant high street spaces in London back into use with start-up enterprises and community projects.⁸ By 2017, it had supported over 600 people into business space and created 229 jobs in predominantly deprived town centre neighbourhoods.



Earlier this year, I also met with Power to Change, which was set up 2015 with a £150 million endowment from the Lottery to support community businesses across England. It provides practical support and capital funding for communities to take over and refit empty community assets.

In London, Power to Change has supported several initiatives including the Socco Cheta Hub in South Norwood, which is also funded by the Mayor of London and others.⁹ This will create a community café using surplus food, skill sharing, arts and crafts, repair workshops and a community cinema.

Power to Change told us its three policy asks to Government:

- Establish a High Street Buyout Fund to enable communities to bring important empty high street buildings from private into local ownership;
- Create a Community Right to Buy to give communities priority over buying properties they have registered an interest in via Assets of Community Value;
- Expand Community Improvement Districts, bringing communities, businesses and local authorities together.



A Police Station Put to Good Use

Notting Hill Police Station was put up for sale by the Mayor's Office of Policing and Crime (MOPAC) in July 2021. The site is an asset of community value and three local groups all expressed interest in buying it. This triggered a moratorium on its sale, meaning the building could not be sold to anyone other than these three groups for six months. In January 2022, Kensington and Chelsea Council offered to buy the property, to keep it in public ownership and provide community facilities. These include a new GP surgery, space for local police, specialist facility for adults with learning disabilities, community space to rent and affordable housing for key workers.¹⁰ The end date for purchase bids was 13 May 2022.¹¹

COMMERCIAL LANDLORDS

As part of our research, we spoke with the team managing leisure and retail assets at Legal & General Investment Management (LGIM).

In 2020, LGIM changed its commercial leasing framework to move away from traditional long-term leases and began offering shorter, more flexible tenancies. These can include turnover-linked rents to help new and low-profit organisations make use of empty spaces.¹²

It has also offered independent shops and start-ups temporary businesses space for zero rent or business rates in a street outside the Dolphin

shopping centre in Poole. This parade 'Kingsland' had a 90 per cent vacancy rate, blighting the whole area. However, with new tenants given breathing space to see if ideas will work, and curation to ensure a diverse range of offers, the space is recovering quickly.

Since May 2021, in Mayfair and Belgravia, large property owner Grosvenor has supported tenants via a new Tenant Investment Fund offering loans or investment in return for equity.¹³ This has proved successful in reducing business failure and vacancy rates in the area.¹⁴

In east London, the Arch Company has introduced an affordability mechanism as part of its tenants' charter, drawn up in consultation with trade association Guardians of the Arches.

This includes stepped rent increases, relocation options and rent concessions through private arrangements where financial information and accounts are shared with the landlord to work out an affordable rent.

THE MAYOR OF LONDON AND COUNCILS

A range of projects are being supported by the Mayor of London, who responded to the pandemic by setting up the London Recovery Board in June 2020, jointly with London Councils.

This takes a mission-based approach to its London Recovery Programme and has a heavy focus on retail units and town centre spaces.^{15,16}

The High Streets for All (HSFA) mission created a £4 million HSFA Challenge fund to support high streets to recover from the pandemic. Every London borough received £20,000 in July 2021 to develop a local partnership around a high street, representative of a range of voices and interests.





15 councils then received a share of £2 million to develop a strategy or exemplar project. A further £1 million of this funding is set to be allocated in 2022-23.¹⁷

The HSFA Challenge programme runs until March 2023, and will not be evaluated by the London Recovery Board until March 2024, so we cannot yet assess its impact.¹⁸ One example of the kind of project the HSFA Challenge is funding is in Barking, where a vacant council office building is being transformed into a hybrid workspace delivering business space, jobs, community uses and event space.

The HSFA mission is also supporting fledgling Community Improvement Districts in various parts of London, including the first two in England in Kilburn and Wood Green.¹⁹

Other actions from the Mayor include the Make London programme. By June 2021, 39 local crowdfunding campaigns by grassroots organisations had been supported with nearly £500,000 from City Hall, matched by more than £830,000 from over 5,000 backers.^{20,21} Crowdfunding for these projects was managed through Spacehive, giving Londoners, businesses, community groups, charities and councils an opportunity to support them financially through donations.²²

In addition, the Building Strong Communities mission has as its overall goal that: “By 2025, all Londoners will have access to a community hub ensuring they can volunteer, get support and build strong community networks.”

GOVERNMENT

During the pandemic, the UK Government put in place a number of schemes aimed at keeping smaller businesses going and preventing defaults on rents and business rates that would lead to empty, dead spaces.

There are concerns that now these schemes have ended or are winding down, we may see a new wave of vacant shops and offices due to business failures, and that there are gaps in legislation that would help communities take over longer-term empty spaces to bring them back into use.

The Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee made recommendations in December 2021 that are relevant to this work.²³ These asked for new models to be created in legislation for local partnerships, including Community Improvement Districts and Place Improvement Districts, and for greater support to be provided through the Community Ownership Fund, which currently only allows for a maximum of half of the capital funding needed for a project to be given to community groups. The committee also asks for more transparency in property ownership, such as through a national register of commercial landlords.

As part of the Government’s wider ‘levelling up’ agenda it launched the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) in April 2022, replacing the UK Community Renewal Fund from 2021, which was intended to bridge the gap between the end of EU funding and the UKSPF.

The UKSPF offers £1.5 billion a year in funding to local areas across the UK, based on three priorities: communities and place, local businesses, and people and skills.²⁴ London councils are to receive £185.4 million over the three years of the fund.²⁵

I hope that much of this new funding will be made available beyond town centres, enabling dead spaces in all kinds of communities across London to have life breathed into them again.

However, even with more funding, there remain gaps in the policy and planning framework, which should be addressed.

The Localism Act 2011 was meant to support communities to have a say in local services and spatial planning, through neighbourhood plans and the ability to nominate assets of community value for protection and potential purchase by the community.

But, as Centre for London outlined in a 2021 report: “there have been few community purchases of buildings under the Assets of Community Value regime, as cash-strapped organisations are expected to pay market prices for property... Similarly, limited revenue funding for Neighbourhood Planning has held back what is a time-consuming process requiring technical expertise.”²⁶

In contrast, Scotland has much stronger rights for community groups to buy land or property that is neglected at a fairer price.²⁷ As part of legislation following the 2022 Queen’s Speech, the Mayor should lobby for new legislation to include a devolved or national ‘community right to buy’ that reflects and learns from the Scottish experience.

The draft Levelling Up and Regeneration Bill²⁸ from Government includes provisions for local authorities to take over the letting of units on designated high streets. This appears to be a step forward. However, this will not help with community assets away from town centres and risks a further concentration only on retail and leisure, not the holistic support needed to bring community uses back to the wide variety of dead spaces uncovered by this research.

The draft Bill also proposes some changes to compulsory purchase processes, which the Mayor has lobbied for previously, but it is unclear at the time of writing whether this relates only to purchase for development or if it will include more powers for the Mayor or councils to take empty and neglected buildings under their wing without demolition or redevelopment.

COULD A PEOPLE'S LAND COMMISSION HELP REVIVE OUR DEAD SPACES?

I have been interested in helping to solve the problem of empty public buildings since I joined the Assembly in 2016.²⁹ In 2021, I put forward a holistic policy proposal aimed squarely at solving the problem of dead spaces in our communities and achieving a strong, locally led recovery from the pandemic.

At its heart was a People's Land Commission, which I described at the time as a project to: "empower boroughs, councillors, local people and businesses to map their areas and put forward ideas to use land for new homes, green spaces, community infrastructure and businesses from the ground up."^{30,31}

In June 2021, I took this idea to Mayor's Question Time, where I had an interesting discussion with the Mayor and won a meeting with his team to propose these ideas in more detail.³² This was followed by several meetings with officials in different departments.

While there has been enthusiasm for taking forward aspects of the idea, particularly the technical aspects including mapping, I am concerned that the Mayor is looking at these issues in too 'siloed' a way. For example, GLA planning teams with links to boroughs are not sufficiently connecting with grant funding and recovery teams to reach out to local communities where dead spaces exist to explore opportunities.

Without a more joined-up approach, we risk a postcode and privilege-based lottery of support. Communities could be left out if they are not already forming plans, trying to access funding and setting up non-profit groups.



"The huge responses from people on the ground, from all walks of life, to the climate and ecological emergency and the coronavirus crisis, has shown the potential for local action and local ideas.

"There are groups meeting every week in all parts of London looking at these issues in detail with ideas that we in City Hall must help to make happen...

"To bring all these new ideas to life, I'll support local areas with funding to purchase land – through grants, revolving funds or borrowing that is financed from rents and income resulting from new businesses and homes."

Sian Berry AM, February 2021³¹

The number and variety of council-owned spaces exposed by my research that are unknown to the GLA and not being considered as part of recovery plans, along with the continued lack of powers for community planning, means they risk staying that way, without a new, more holistic initiative.

I therefore reiterate my call for a People's Land Commission to become a cross-directorate initiative led by the Mayor, rather than have parts of it left to individual teams and projects.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

I would like to hear more from Londoners about how the Mayor and the GLA can help them breathe new life into the dead spaces in their local areas.

Please get in touch with me if you have any comments or suggestions.

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This report sets out my views as an individual Assembly Member and not the agreed view of the entire Assembly.

References

¹ Only Bromley council did not respond to our FOI requests submitted from September 2021. Five boroughs refused to provide information citing a Section 31 exemption (Prejudicial to law enforcement: Hackney, Hammersmith & Fulham, Haringey, Hounslow and Merton. Three boroughs refused citing a Section 12 exemption related to cost limits: Hillingdon, Islington and Tower Hamlets. Newham council refused our request citing both Section 12 and Section 31 exemptions.

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