



REQUEST 18037

I am writing to request information regarding empty residential properties within the Wigan Council area.

Specifically, I would like to request the following:

1. A list of all residential properties that have been unoccupied for six months or longer as of the date of this request.
2. For each property, please include (where available):
 - Full address (including house number and postcode)
 - Date the property was first recorded as empty
 - Ownership type (private, council-owned, or housing association)
 - Whether the property is subject to an Empty Dwelling Management Order or similar intervention

I appreciate that councils often cite exemptions under Section 31(1)(a) (prevention of crime) and Section 40(2) (data protection) to withhold specific address data. However, I would urge the council to consider the clear public interest in tackling long-term vacancy and housing shortages, particularly where the properties are publicly owned or have been empty for a significant period.

If full addresses cannot be disclosed, I respectfully request a redacted dataset that includes:

- Postcode sector (e.g., M29 7**)
- Street name
- Duration the property has been empty
- Ownership classification

RESPONSE:

The Council maintains that this information is exempt from disclosure under Section 31 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

The information you have requested is exempt from disclosure under section 31(1)(a) of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 on the grounds that disclosure of this information would prejudice the prevention and detection of crime. Disclosure of this information would involve releasing the addresses of empty properties which could make the properties more vulnerable to criminal and anti-social activities.

In particular, the Council believes that disclosure of the information could have the following effects:

- Disclosure would provide a ready-made list of empty properties which could be used by criminals who could target empty properties to commit property crimes and fraud.
- Release of information which is not easily available at present would better enable a fraudster to persuade the council that they were the ratepayer. It would entail significant time and expense for the Council to alter its security system to protect against any potential fraud.
- Disclosure of the information would make it easier for criminals to target empty properties in which waste could be dumped.
- Release of information could be used to locate potential venues for illegal raves, construction of cannabis farms or other associated crimes such as criminal damage in accessing the property, further drug offences and public order offences.
- A list of empty properties could be used by urban explorers to locate new properties to explore and could lead to an increase in crimes associated with urban exploring such as criminal damage to gain entry.
- Disclosure of a list of empty properties may lead to an increase in crimes such as criminal damage, arson and anti-social behaviour, which are often associated with squatting.
- There is a real and significant risk that fraud would be made easier by the release of this information and that the provision of a readymade list of empty properties makes it easier for criminals to identify targets for the crimes listed above. Therefore, disclosure would be likely to prejudice the prevention of crime.

This is a qualified exemption and requires a public interest test to consider whether the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in the disclosure of the information.

Public interest arguments in favour of disclosing the information:

- Openness and transparency in relation to procedures and decision making of public authorities and collection of taxes and management of finances.

Public interest arguments in favour of maintaining the exemption:

- The release of this information would make it much easier for a fraudster to pose as an account holder and bypass the Council's security systems.
- Disclosure would also facilitate a fraudster posing as the Council to obtain confidential information from a ratepayer.
- Fraud is a real and current problem and the consequences to the Council of a loss of a significant sum of public money are serious.
- Urban exploring and illegal raves are a current problem in Greater Manchester and disclosure could contribute to this problem.
- Disclosure may lead to an increase in other property crimes such as criminal damage, arson and anti-social behaviour. Tackling issues like these would involve significant public

expense and it is in the public interest to protect property and to ensure that public resources are used efficiently.

- There is also a compelling public interest in avoiding personal distress to the direct victims of the crime and to those in the wider neighbourhood who may be affected.

On balance, the Council believes that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosing the information.

Any investors or developers who are interested in purchasing local empty homes are directed to the Council's Landlord Hub. As a Council we engage with empty homeowners, and where they are motivated to sell, we encourage use of our Landlord Hub platform, through which the property can be offered to any local landlords, developers or investors who are registered with the Hub.

When we engage with an owner who would like to sell, an email is sent out to the Landlord Hub mailing list with the details of the property and any viewing/open day information. We also supply details of who an offer of purchase can be made to.

Further information on the Landlord Hub, plus how to register, can be found here:
<https://www.wigan.gov.uk/Business/Property-and-Land/Private-Landlords/Landlord-Hub.aspx>.