



REQUEST 18836

Under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 I request the following recorded information:

1. A list of domestic properties within the Wigan Council area that have been recorded by the council as **empty** (unoccupied and substantially unfurnished) for a continuous period of 6 months or more, for the period **1 January 2024 to 31 December 2024**. Please include: address (uprn if available), date first recorded as empty, current status (e.g., owner contact attempted, enforcement action, subject to sale), and whether the property appears on any council priority/empty-homes register.
2. Copies of any policies, guidance or internal criteria used to decide whether an empty-homes record is published publicly or withheld.
3. Copies of any relevant public-interest or s31 (prejudice to law enforcement) assessments, redaction logs, or reasons the council relied on when deciding to withhold or redact empty-homes addresses in the last 24 months.

Preferred format: CSV or Excel for dataset items; PDF for policy/assessments.

Public-interest point and narrow scope:

I request this data because there is a strong public interest in the efficient use of housing stock and transparency about how local authorities are addressing empty properties in the face of housing shortages. The information requested is narrowly defined (one-year period) and will be used for research/monitoring of empty property re-use and council enforcement. If any specific addresses are withheld on the grounds that disclosure would **prejudice the prevention or detection of crime (s31)**, please provide a redacted version and supply the **specific and contemporaneous evidence** on which the council relies to demonstrate the likelihood of prejudice for each withheld item (or explain why a meaningful public-interest balancing exercise supports non-disclosure).

If you consider any part of this request vexatious or ask me to narrow the scope, please contact me and explain which part and why, and which narrower options you would accept.

If you refuse part or all of this request under s31 or any other exemption, please provide:

- The specific exemption relied upon and the full reasoning (not just the exemption name).
- The factual basis/evidence that disclosure would be likely to prejudice prevention or detection of crime (not speculation), and whether the prejudice is immediate or relates to ongoing investigations.
- The council's public-interest balancing exercise and the factors considered for and against disclosure.

If you withhold the addresses themselves but can provide aggregated data (e.g., number of long-term empty properties by ward or postcode sector), please provide that as an interim release.

RESPONSE

1. Please see attached Excel file. The numbers provided have been sourced using Council Tax records and include properties which have benefited from Major Repairs Discount (alongside standard 6 month unoccupied and unfurnished indicators). Major repairs indicators are not time specific to 6 months and cannot be separated out as the indicator ranges from day 1 to 12 months in line with the discount period.

The full details in your request have not been provided as we consider it exempt under Section 31 of The Freedom of Information Act 2000.

2. Information not available. Any request for empty-homes records is treated on a case-by-case basis and release of information is considered under the provisions of The Freedom of Information Act 2000.
3. The Council maintains that the information requested is exempt from disclosure under Section 31 of the Freedom of Information Act 2000, on the grounds that disclosure would be likely to prejudice the prevention and detection of crime. This exemption applies because releasing the addresses of empty domestic properties would significantly increase the risk of criminal and anti-social activities.

Providing a list of empty domestic properties would create a ready-made resource for individuals intent on committing crimes. The Council considers that disclosure could have the following effects:

- Empty homes are prime targets for burglary, theft of fixtures, and vandalism. Disclosure would make it easier for offenders to identify vulnerable properties.
- Empty domestic properties are often targeted for squatting, which can lead to criminal damage, arson, and anti-social behaviour.
- Empty homes can be used for drug cultivation (e.g., cannabis farms), illegal raves, or other criminal enterprises, often involving forced entry and further offences.
- Release of addresses could enable fraudsters to impersonate property owners or tenants, bypassing Council security checks and potentially claiming benefits or refunds unlawfully.
- Publicising empty homes could encourage trespass and criminal damage associated with urban exploration.
- Some properties are long-term empty by nature and properties that were empty in 2024, may still be empty now increasing the likelihood of crimes being committed.

These risks are real and significant, not speculative. Greater Manchester has experienced issues with illegal raves, squatting, and property-related crime, and disclosure would exacerbate these problems.

Section 31 is a qualified exemption, so the Council has considered whether the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

Factors in Favour of Disclosure

- Promotes openness and transparency in Council decision-making.
- Enables public scrutiny of how the Council manages housing stock and addresses long-term vacancies.
- Supports research into housing policy and empty property reuse.

Factors in Favour of Maintaining the Exemption

- Disclosure would make it substantially easier for criminals to target empty homes, increasing burglary, arson, and anti-social behaviour.
- Fraud is a current and serious problem; disclosure would facilitate impersonation of property owners and compromise Council security systems.
- Crime prevention and protection of public resources are strong public interest factors.
- Victims of crime and neighbouring residents would suffer distress and harm.
- Tackling the consequences of increased crime would involve significant public expense.

On balance, the Council concludes that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

While full addresses cannot be provided, the Council can consider releasing aggregated data, such as:

- Number of long-term empty domestic properties by ward or postcode sector.
- Trends in empty property numbers over time.

This approach supports transparency without compromising crime prevention.