

Over £1 million spent on smashing up empty council homes to stop squatters

EXCLUSIVE

By Emma Ailes

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SOUTHWARK COUNCIL has paid £383,000 to board up 63 homes on the Silwood Estate in Rotherhithe that have stood empty for more than five years, an investigation has revealed.

Information obtained under the Freedom of Information Act also revealed that in the past financial year, £249,000 was spent securing 130 empty dwellings on the Aylesbury Estate.

On the Heygate Estate at Elephant & Castle, nearly half a million pounds has been spent in the last year on security and squatter proofing of around 1,100 empty flats.

The figures were obtained by The Empty Homes Agency, a campaign group that has uncovered around 12,000 empty social homes across London that are 'hidden' from official government lists because they are awaiting regeneration.

Official statistics for Southwark state that of 54,000 'viable homes', only 373 stand empty. However, taking into account homes earmarked for demolition, the figure stands at 1,406 empty properties.

"In many cases, the cost of doing nothing is high," David Ireland, Chief Executive of The Empty Homes Agency, told the 'News'.



Boarded up flats on the Heygate Estate at the Elephant & Castle

"Councils do what is called 'treating' - which essentially means warding against squatters by sending someone in with a sledgehammer to smash the place up and make it uninhabitable.

"It might make sense from the point of view that squatters don't move in, but the damage is irreversible. They create tens of thousands of pounds worth of damage where they could find much lower cost, positive alternatives."

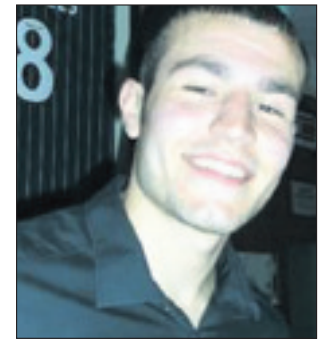
One idea that David is asking councils

to consider is a scheme that has already seen great success in Holland, where the local authority gave empty properties to young professionals on condition they paid for the renovation.

Councillor Fiona Colley, cabinet member for regeneration, defended the council's squatter proofing measures. She said: "Southwark Council has one of the largest regeneration projects in Europe currently underway which will transform parts of the borough to provide

better quality homes for people to live in which will be warm, dry and safe. As such, a number of sites are sealed up while the properties are awaiting demolition.

"Vacant sites can be dangerous, and empty buildings are vulnerable to squatting issues. We have quite rightly been criticised in the past for leaving such sites insufficiently protected. The security measures are for the public's safety and protection."



Mounting concern for AWOL soldier

SOUTHWARK: A serving soldier's family are "very concerned" after he went AWOL from his regiment and disappeared in Scotland.

Mehmet Ali Osman, 25, was last seen by his family in Southwark on Tuesday, May 31.

He left the address to travel to Catterick army base in Yorkshire but never arrived. Police believe that Mehmet may have instead travelled to an address in Lochgelly in Fife, and stayed there until Wednesday, June 1.

Mehmet, who states that he went to Geoffry Chaucer Secondary School on his Facebook page, is described as 5' 10" to 5' 11" in height and of proportionate, muscular build.

His family and police are now concerned for his welfare.

Officers from Southwark Missing Persons Unit are investigating and request that anyone with any information contact them on 020 7232 6246.



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