

'FORMER POLICE HOUSES SIT EMPTY AMID HOMES CRISIS'

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With Langton Green residents feeling swamped under new housing developments, questions have been asked as to how two houses could have remained empty for years.

Two former police houses on Speldhurst Road have been vacant for between four to five years, according to resident Rosemary Castle. Having lived in the village for 40 years she remembered the first local bobby whose beat included Langton Green and Rusthall. She said when he left there were two further policemen and their families but since then it has been unoccupied and left to deteriorate.

After recent battles between developers and residents over new housing schemes including Monteith Close and Cheyne House, Mrs Castle attended parish council meetings last year to ask members about the police houses.

She said: "My concern is that they have been empty all this time and they have become vulnerable. I'm surprised it hasn't attracted graffiti and other anti-social activity. The shed door was wide open for a long time and I used to wonder if someone was sleeping inside. We are supposed to have a real housing problem, and young families can't afford to buy in Langton Green."

At the parish council meeting on Monday last week no update from Kent Police was given about the future of the buildings.

A Kent Police spokeswoman said the forces had not offered housing for their officers since 1994 and that it was unable to legally rent its ex-police houses on a short-term tenancy, only on a long-term basis.

Parish clerk Pauline Lambell said two planning applications had been submitted in 2003 to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council but were refused by planners. The authority has not received further proposals.

A borough council spokeswoman Sarah Olney said the council was in the process of collating data on the number of empty homes in the borough and the estimated number was 437. She said delays in the selling process were the main reason for the empty houses.

Legislation is currently being debated in parliament that would allow councils the power to take an Empty Dwelling Management Order and get homes reoccupied. However this would apply to private homes and not property owned by councils and other public bodies.

MP for Tunbridge Wells Greg Clark said that in an area where there was pressure on housing it was essential to make use of all homes. Properties standing empty for too long could become grot spots, he said.