

Coronavirus – impact on housing in Midlothian

by Marie Sharp Local Democracy Reporter

Delays to rebuilding the economy were branded “unacceptable” by councillors after it was revealed that planning applications face a four-month wait for rulings.

As Midlothian Council held its first full meeting this week, members were told that the impact of Covid-19 and other issues meant it was unlikely to meet its national target to deliver 1,000 new homes by May 2022.

Kevin Anderson, executive director, told the meeting that it was now projected only 865 homes would be built and efforts were being made to buy an additional 135 homes to meet the shortfall.

However, his report on council housing due to be constructed or currently under construction revealed hundreds more units were planned for the county, with 125 currently under way on sites, a further 462 planned to get under way this year and 608 sites identified for years ahead.

It revealed that numerous sites had been hit by lockdown and were slowly restarting, with social distancing measures causing a slow return for developers in many cases.

It said: “In general, the sites under construction or about to commence have all been affected directly by the shutdown.

“Social distancing measures have not had as significant an

impact on programmes as first thought (one contractor advising a five-week slippage on an 18-month programme).

“Further easing of the restrictions which could reduce impact on the overall programme also need to be considered; however, there remains a risk of further spikes and potential shutdowns.”

Councillor Stephen Curran paid tribute to the council’s progress in building new homes, saying: “This council has led the way when it comes to housebuilding in Scotland and it is good to see we are continuing on that path.”

However, concerns were raised over part of the report which warned of long delays facing developers in the planning process.

The report said: “The planning department have, however, advised that applications may take longer to process with an approx. timescale of four months for new applications.”

Councillor Russell Imrie said: “I don’t find that acceptable at all, not only should we be fast tracking applications until we are back to what we were before but we should be really, if we are going to do anything about our economic recovery, with plans which are fit for purpose and within the local plan, we should be accelerating that programme.”

He called on councillors to agree to tell officials to address the problem.

He added: “Getting people back to work has got to be our main focus.”

Provost Peter Smaill said the performance and policy scrutiny committee often looked at the speed of planning applications, adding: “Put it this way, we are not the fastest county in Scotland.”

Councillor Derek Milligan called for a motion to address the

delay and formally moved that the four months was not acceptable and asked for planning officers to accelerate the speed of applications being dealt with.

He said: "I thought through our leadership meetings we had been really clear to officers about the need to accelerate things as much as possible.

"I would formally move that four months isn't acceptable; indeed, we are looking for it to accelerate and would ask planning officers to ensure appropriate steps are taken so applications are dealt with at speed and appropriately."

Mr Imrie said it was a crucial factor in "building back our economy".

The motion was carried unanimously.

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