

Opinion – Housing Convener writes on the pandemic, housing and inequality

Cllr Kate Campbell is the Housing Convener at The City of Edinburgh Council. Here she writes for The Edinburgh Reporter about the pandemic, housing and inequality.

Let's start this year by being honest. Last year was hard. This year too will present challenges to all of us, some on a scale we couldn't possibly have imagined. The pandemic has taken the lives of loved ones, it's isolated us and it has put incredible pressure on those delivering core and essential services. Especially those on the front line.

It's also drawn out in the starkest possible terms the inequality that was already woven into our society. The differences between those working at home, with job security, and those who face the toughest choices – between putting food on the table, paying the rent, or putting themselves and their families in harm's way.

But housing in our city has been starkly unequal for a long time. Under Right to Buy thousands of council homes were sold in our city, and under that policy they were not replaced. We're having to replace them now.

We have only 14% social housing, the national average for Scotland is 23%. That means that 9% of households who, in another local authority area, would be in social housing, are

more than likely in the private rented sector. And Edinburgh's private rents are the most expensive in Scotland, with the average at a staggering £1,100 compared to a national figure of £844. We are the least affordable city to buy a home in too.



Councillor Kate Campbell Housing and Economy Convener Photo
The Edinburgh Reporter

So the result is that, on average, almost 190 people bid on every social home. This means the average waiting time for someone who is homeless is eighteen months to two years before they place a successful bid. This is directly attributable to the Right to Buy policy and is absolutely awful for people who need a permanent, settled home. We need this to change.

That's why our commitment, made in 2017, to put in place a programme to build 20,000 affordable homes over ten years is so important. The Strategic Housing Investment Plan report at committee this week sets out our progress – and it is positive. Even with the pandemic and the consequences for construction. Even with Brexit and the impact on workforce and

supply chains. We're still making much needed progress.

The headline figure is that we are on track to have approved 10,000 affordable homes by late 2022. So far, 5,031 homes have been approved and 3,568 homes completed. More than 2,300 affordable homes are currently under construction on 35 sites across the city which are operating under strict procedures to keep staff and communities safe during the pandemic. This is phenomenal progress and I want to thank everyone in the Council, housing associations, housebuilders and others who are helping to deliver this.

And not only are we building homes that people can afford. We're building high quality, well designed, energy efficient homes. Council homes are more energy efficient than most others being built in the city which means significantly lower fuel bills, easing the financial pressure on households. They're more accessible and they're more spacious with emphasis put on making sure they are good quality homes in well-designed neighbourhoods. Simple things like making sure there are enough cupboards, or space outside for drying clothes or children to play in.

But there is much, much more to do and there will be challenges ahead.

The two key issues are grant funding from The Scottish Government and making sure there is enough land available to build affordable homes on.

The Scottish Government helps to fund social and mid-market homes by providing grant subsidy. It's impossible to build social housing without grant because the repayments on the money borrowed to build them would make the rents too high if they weren't subsidised.

Because our housebuilding programme has been so strong we've secured an additional £35m in grant funding over the last four years. This is a fantastic achievement, but the money comes

towards the end of the year and it's only available because other local authorities haven't managed to spend it.

We need certainty on what grant funding is coming because building homes is a long process – from identifying sites, carrying out studies, getting architects to design them, consulting with local communities and getting planning permission. All of this before you even start building.

So we need to know what funding we can expect in future years so we can properly plan the programme. And the truth is we need even more funding. The report at committee this week sets out a plan to build 10,000 homes, but we'll need around £390million of grant funding to support the homes that the council and housing associations want to build. So it's up to us as a city, collectively, across all the different political parties, with the third sector and with residents, to make the case for why we so desperately need this investment in social housing in Edinburgh.

But we also need to look at how to deliver affordable homes without subsidy. We need to be innovative and work with partners in the third sector and the private sector. It's crucial too that our planning policies support our ambitions. We've been consulting through the City Plan on increasing the affordable housing allocation of all new build sites from 25% to 35%. This will make a big difference alongside us, as a local authority, buying sites to build homes on ourselves.

There are a number of reasons why housing is so expensive in Edinburgh. The main one is that our city is just such an amazing place to live that our population keeps growing. This creates extra demand. But it's also to do with losing homes to short term lets. We've been at the forefront of using existing powers to limit the number of them across the city. And we're leading the campaign for more regulation so that we can properly control them. We will keep working on this until we have the powers we need. We've been clear that we want to see

most short term lets return to use as residential properties.

We also need to look at proper controls for rents. We've been working on Rent Pressure Zones with other local authorities, but this is a long process and will be some time before we can implement them. With the pressure on housing in Edinburgh it is important we have the conversation about how to make sure rents are fair as well as tenants' rights being protected.

The Scottish Government has rightly put huge focus on homelessness. The Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group have been working on recommendations to prevent homelessness wherever possible and improve people's access to services, and the quality of support available. We've worked with them closely, delivering pilots and bringing forward new services. Despite, or more likely because of, the pressure on housing and homelessness services, we have been at the forefront of innovation in how we improve the support and options available for people experiencing homelessness. I'm confident that our homelessness services are among the best in Scotland, but because demand is so high we're always under pressure. And just like with our housebuilding programme, there is always more we can do.

As we emerge from the pandemic, and as we deal with the true economic cost, we need to make sure that we are doing everything we can to support residents. This is true across so many service areas in the council. But I firmly believe that making sure everyone has a home that is safe, warm and that they can afford, is absolutely critical and must form the bedrock of that support.