

Council to buy army homes at Dreghorn

More than a dozen homes lying empty at Dreghorn Barracks will be bought up by the council in a bid to secure more affordable accommodation for the city.

The go-ahead has been given to purchase 23 properties on the army site after the Ministry of Defence deemed them surplus to its requirements.

The mix of two, three and four-bedroom houses – which are in extremely high demand from families across the capital – will be acquired at a cost of £5.7 million using mostly council funds and some grant funding from the Scottish Government.

Whilst the move was welcomed by the finance committee on Thursday some members questioned if the money could be better used to build new council homes instead.

Local councillor Scott Arthur said more affordable housing is needed “as quickly as possible,” adding that freeing-up the empty homes would be “transformational and life-changing” for people in his ward.

Figures published last year showed that in the south-west of the city, the average waiting time for a two-bed social rented home was 770 days with priority but NINE years without. Furthermore, the city experienced a 23 per cent rise in the number of households assessed as homeless last year compared to 2020/21.

It is hoped that over time a total of 78 properties at the south Edinburgh estate will eventually come under council ownership.

Paul Lawrence, the local authority's Executive Director of Place, said the initial acquisitions are "the first part of wider and deeper relationship" with the Ministry of Defence (MoD) which will make more available "on a phased basis".

The vacant homes are "in reasonable condition with minor works required prior to habitation" according to a council report.

Mr Lawrence said: "There's nothing in the current condition of the houses that can't be readily fixed at a relatively low cost."

Graeme McGartland, senior estates surveyor at Edinburgh Council, said all but four meet the energy efficiency standard for social housing, known as EESSH. However, he added the cost of upgrading them to EESSH2 – the standard social rented houses will have to meet by 2032 – would be around £10,000 per property.

Cllr Graeme Bruce said Edinburgh is "desperately in need of housing" and asked when families would be able to move in. However, officers did not offer a timeline, saying it would depend on how quickly the homes are brought up to scratch.

Meanwhile the SNP group originally tabled an amendment calling for the purchases to be halted so the council could "investigate whether there are alternative ways to spend the same money in the same locality on providing even better social housing".

However it was withdrawn after it emerged £1.7 million from the Scottish Government's affordable housing fund would need to be spent before the end of this financial year on 5 April.

The purchase was unanimously approved by the committee.

Cllr Arthur said: “I get that the money used to purchase these homes could have been used to build new homes elsewhere in the city, but the reality is in my ward, particularly in Oxbgangs and Firrhill there’s a lot of people that are living in overcrowded accommodation or temporary accommodation – and they need a home as quickly as possible.

“Buying these properties from the MoD at market value and getting them up and running to a good standard as quickly as possible and getting families in them will be transformational and life changing for people.”

by Donald Turvill

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