

Budget for homelessness more than doubles in Edinburgh

Following the declaration of a housing emergency in the capital, The City of Edinburgh Council has reported a huge increase in the funds allocated to deal with homelessness which rose from £28 million to £64.5 million in the last year.

Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Convener, Cllr Jane Meagher, said: "Every single person deserves a safe and affordable place to call home which is why our number one priority remains helping everyone find a suitable place to stay. We have already declared a housing emergency, which is drawing widescale attention to this issue, but the reality is that the demand for temporary accommodation in Edinburgh far outstrips supply.

"We are making the grant funding we do have available stretch further, improving older council homes and building and buying as many new affordable homes as we can afford. When the council sets its housing revenue account budget on Thursday, I hope the housing emergency remains at the forefront of every councillor's mind as we consider other means of increasing housing supply.

"We're truly at a point where urgent, united action must be taken to do right by the most vulnerable in our city but we

can't do this on our own. I will continue to fight for fairer funding from the Government.

"Our stark and rising spend on temporary accommodation is a symptom of the housing and homelessness crisis Edinburgh is now facing. Our city and services have been affected by the cost of living crisis and the terrible war in Ukraine, with refugees fleeing from Ukraine and other parts of the world to Edinburgh. Plus, Edinburgh is a growing city which has long been experiencing housing pressures like nowhere else in Scotland, with the lowest proportion of social housing in the country and biggest, most expensive, private rented sector.

"With only 14% social housing in Edinburgh, compared to a national (Scottish) average of 23%, Edinburgh squeezes around 10% more households into the private rented sector.

"We all know that renting a house in the city is very expensive with an average two-bed flat now costing £1,362 a month, up 78% in a decade. Similarly, the cost to the council of sourcing temporary accommodation from the private sector has risen, and in order to support growing numbers of people presenting as homeless we of course need greater resources and staffing, which adds to our costs."

ACTION PLAN

The council has drafted an action plan to respond to the housing emergency which draws together the key actions it will take. Council officers have held 14 engagement workshops with partners such as Cyrenians, Living Rent and Edinburgh Tenants Federation, to establish what the council's priorities should be.

The £63 million funding pays the costs involved in putting a roof, however temporary, over someone's head. It includes all related expenses such as the cost of the council staff dealing with the public as well as all other practical costs involved

in offering housing. The council has a statutory duty to house people as one of the hundreds of services it provides.

At present there are around 5,000 households in Edinburgh – equivalent to around 7,000 people – who live in temporary accommodation of all kinds from B&Bs and hotels to temporary homes each night. Of these, around 1,300 people live in temporary housing which is deemed unsuitable. There is little option for the council but to use all available hotels, bed and breakfasts and guest houses as there are simply not enough council homes available to house everyone, although officers suggest in the action plan that one way would be for the council to return more empty homes more quickly to the available stock.

In addition there are a further 2,000 households who are assessed as homeless but who are not actually “accessing accommodation” as yet.

Finance

Cllr Meagher continued: “What we’re trying to do in Council is as much as we possibly can, within the constraints of the financial limitations we have to resolve the housing emergency.”

In the next five years the council through its affordable housing partnership plans to build 9,500 new affordable homes. Cllr Meagher outlined that the recent cut of £196 million to the Affordable Housing Supply Programme for 2024-25 by The Scottish Government creates another problem for the council.

It represents a cut of around a quarter of funding made available in the previous year, and it is the second year in a row there has been a reduction in funding. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation responded to the government that it was “baffling that the affordable housing supply programme should be the victim of such a brutal cut” and called for The Scottish

Government to reverse the cut and put the “programme back on a sustainable path”.

Until the council sets its budget on Thursday the Housing Convener and council officers say they have no set funding calculations but the draft plan does state that the council wants to “maximise funding of new homes while ensuring best value”. After Thursday’s meeting the draft financial calculations will be finalised and then reported to councillors next week.

The Housing Convener is suggesting a seven per cent rise in rents for council tenants in the capital which she says is “broadly in line with adjacent and other authorities”, but it is much more than the three per cent agreed last year.

The action plan suggests ways of increasing funding and revenue by, for example, investigating the use of housing cooperatives, increasing the number of empty homes brought up to lettable standard and possibly also establishing innovative rent models. Rents have always been set on the number of bedrooms which a home has, but the council is open to this being changed and rents assessed on the basis of the location of a property for instance.

There are 75 actions which the council will focus on when helping homeless people in future, ranging from the way that customers are dealt with either face to face or on the phone and email, to ensuring that anyone at the margins such as refugees and care experienced people receive the service and support needed.

Some of the priorities include simplifying the process of accessing council homes, potentially redesigning the allocation system, but the council confirms it is firmly committed to continuing the Housing First model. This government backed scheme is an attempt to change the system by providing “ordinary settled homes for people with multiple

needs” which goes further than just bricks and mortar. People who have become homeless because of factors such as addiction or domestic abuse need more help and advice than simply a home. Housing First is a personalised form of support provided to a homeless person and an attempt to avoid repeat homelessness or rough sleeping in certain cases.

Practical suggestions

The council owns around 20,500 homes although only 20,250 are immediately available for let. The council uses the letting system Edindex which prioritises who is highest on the waiting list and ultimately who is offered a permanent home, and some of those who attended the workshops raised the perceived unfairness of the allocation system which the council may review.

In drafting the plan the council has also mapped out the way the homelessness system works in the city in an effort to avoid duplication of work by the council and its partners in another bid to streamline the process.

Using data is one way that the council feels it could actively prevent homelessness from happening in the first place, and also speed up the process of placing a tenant in a new home. By using all the facts at hand the council also wants to investigate how it could free up larger properties by identifying anyone who is living in a house which may have become too big for their needs.

Void Homes

Edinburgh Council says it has around 1,280 empty or void homes at present – houses which need to be refurbished before a tenant can move in. This is an obvious source of properties which could be used to address the homelessness issue.

The Scottish Empty Homes Partnership says there are around 47,000 empty homes in Scotland with about 28,000 empty for more than a year. These are not solely council homes, but it is indicative of the assets spread about the country which could be used in a more practical way.

The Partnership runs the Empty Homes Advice Service providing advice in its Neighbour Toolkit to anyone – from those who own the properties, who live next door or who want to invest in the properties. The body also works collaboratively with local authorities who have the powers and tools to contact the owners and encourage them to take action.

If there is an empty home near you then the [Scottish Empty Homes Partnership want to hear from you](#).

The City of Edinburgh Council's Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Committee meets on 27 February at 10am. [The papers are here as well as instructions on watching the meeting either live or as a recording afterwards](#).



City Chambers High Street Edinburgh