

Government declares a housing emergency

The Scottish Government has declared a housing emergency across the country, voting in favour by 95 votes with 29 against in a vote on Wednesday.

The debate was the second called for by Scottish Labour in six months – and it was six months ago that The City of Edinburgh Council declared a housing emergency in the capital.

Shelter, the housing charity, say that there are 15,625 households in Scotland living in temporary accommodation, and there are 9,860 children included in that number. But the organisation also says that 1.5 million people live in overcrowded, dangerous, unstable or unaffordable housing. Their proposed solution to tackling homelessness is to provide social housing, and they say they want to hold the government to account after declaring the emergency, demanding that they build more social homes now. The charity has also demanded that the government reinstates the £200 million cut to the affordable housing budget introduced during the last budget.

The Housing Minister, Paul McLennan, said that the government will invest £600 million in affordable housing and more than £90 million will be made available for Discretionary Housing Payments which help those who experience homelessness. He also confirmed that the government will deliver 110,000 high quality energy efficient affordable homes, and promised action on empty homes when he meets local authorities in two weeks' time.

The debate on Wednesday was tabled by Mark Griffin Labour MSP for Central Scotland said that he moved for the parliament to declare a housing emergency supported by housing charity Shelter. Mr Griffin said: "Every 16 minutes, one household becomes homeless. Around 10,000 children are now in temporary accommodation. Three more councils have declared housing emergencies and more are likely to follow."

Lothian MSP, Miles Briggs, who is Shadow Housing Secretary, said : "The housing situation in Edinburgh has been at crisis point for a number of years now and SNP minister have finally had to accept the reality that there is a housing emergency in Edinburgh and other parts of Scotland.

"The number of children in temporary accommodation and the level of homelessness in the capital, is worse than anywhere else in Scotland.

"I have repeatedly called for a national housing emergency to be declared, but these calls fell on deaf ears until now. SNP ministers have also ignored the calls from charities, as well as five local councils declaring emergencies in their own areas.

"This situation is entirely of the SNP's making. Shirley-Anne Somerville has typically tried to blame Westminster but the SNP have received a record block grant and it is them who shamefully slashed £200 million from the affordable housing budget.

"Finally declaring a housing emergency must be more than lip service from SNP ministers. We must see ministers now reverse their deeply damaging cuts and take the urgent action required – including bringing thousands of empty properties back into use – to tackle Scotland's housing crisis."

Arianne Burgess MSP, Greens, said during the debate: "Circumstances have changed, with 10 local authorities covering nearly half the population either at or close to

crisis point. Close to 10,000 children are stuck in the misery of temporary accommodation, with no safe home to grow up in. Declaring a housing emergency must lead to collective action and shared responsibility to tackle the crisis using all the means that are at our disposal.” She also added later in her speech: “Tens of thousands of empty homes could be brought back into use. Part of the solution involves using all our taxation and enforcement tools to incentivise the reuse of such homes, as well as increasing funding for empty homes officers.”

Jeremy Balfour, Conservative Lothian MSP, and former Edinburgh councillor, said: “There is no getting around the fact that Scotland is in the grip of a housing crisis. There has been a 10 per cent increase in homelessness applications during the past year, and the number of people who have been assessed as homeless has risen by 4 per cent.” He added: “The Scottish Government has neglected its duty to increase our housing stock over the past few years, which has led to a lack of affordable homes for people who need them.”

Sarah Boyack, Lothian MSP, said: “We have 46,000 empty homes in Scotland—that was mentioned by Ariane Burgess. We need action. We do not need a small-scale approach. We need to work with our local authorities and support them so that they have the staff to pursue compulsory sale orders and to promote urban regeneration. In that way, we can bring empty homes back into use.

“We need new houses being built. We need practical solutions. We need new homes across Scotland. Our constituents deserve nothing less. Emergencies demand responses. We are in an emergency and it is time to respond. It is time to build the new homes, bring back homes into use and tackle poor-quality housing. People deserve that, and they need those homes now.”

Councillor Jane Meagher, Housing, Homelessness and Fair Work Convener at the City of Edinburgh Council, said: “It has been

six and a half months since we declared Edinburgh's housing emergency and in that time our funding from the Scottish Government has been slashed and homelessness has risen.

"It is astounding that it has taken Parliament so long to recognise this as a national emergency, but I welcome the move. To declare a housing emergency on a Scotland-wide scale points to changed priorities for government.

"I do hope this also signals a rethink on funding for affordable housebuilding and a better housing system that works for everyone. We would be delighted to work with the government in doing the right thing and listening to the ever-growing voice that is saying: housing must be its priority.

"As the only council in Scotland to develop an action plan in response to our local housing emergency we look forward to supporting the government on its response."

Edinburgh West MP, Christine Jardine said: "I am pleased to see that the Scottish Government has finally recognised the scale of the crisis facing my constituents and thousands of families across Scotland.

"With rents increases in Edinburgh some of the UK's highest, and mortgages soaring in recent years, this is a welcome step.

"But years of SNP cuts to council budgets, the standard of social housing and the sheer extent of mould, damp and maintenance issues in properties is a disgrace.

"I hope this will be followed by firm action from Ministers to tackle in full the problems my constituents are forced to live with every day."

The Scottish and Northern Ireland Plumbing Employers' Federation (SNIPEF) urgently calls on government and industry leaders to launch a comprehensive national retrofit plan. This strategy would harness the tens of thousands of vacant, sub-

standard properties across Scotland, transforming them into energy-efficient homes and significantly alleviating the housing shortage and its environmental impact.

Fiona Hodgson, Chief Executive of SNIPEF, said, “Revitalising these empty properties through a national retrofit strategy is not just about providing more homes; it’s a critical step towards addressing our dual crises of housing and climate change.

“By retrofitting these homes, we improve the energy efficiency of our national housing stock, reducing overall carbon emissions and moving Scotland closer to its net-zero targets.”

SNIPEF calls for a more efficient use of government resources and stresses the importance of leveraging the knowledge and expertise within the construction sector to tackle this crisis effectively.

“We call upon stakeholders from all sectors to unite in support of this initiative, which offers a sustainable and inclusive approach to housing and environmental policy.”