

West Lothian council agrees changes to its buy back policy

A number of council homes in West Lothian are set to be sold after the council agreed changes to its buy back policy.

Councillors on the Housing services committee agreed proposals which could see homes which are the sole council property remaining in a block being sold on the open market.

Money made from selling council homes would go into a pot to fund the buying of other homes.

The proposals were backed today (Tuesday) by a meeting of the council's Executive.

The SNP said it was an idea that could have been implemented a long time ago but would now see houses being sold weeks after the council had admitted to a housing crisis.

A report to committee said: "In situations where the council is in minority ownership or where reaching an agreement with private owners regarding necessary repairs proves impossible and the property becomes void the service would propose to designate the property as surplus to requirement and offer the property for sale on the open market once it naturally becomes vacant."

The report added: "The Right to Buy scheme has resulted in some tenements where the council owns only a small portion of

the properties. This scenario can create difficulties when addressing essential repairs to common areas due to the involvement of private owners. “

The report detailed criteria both for the sale of council homes and the buy back.

For the sale these include:

- The council is in minority ownership within the tenement block;
- Reaching an agreement with private owners regarding necessary repairs has proven unsuccessful;
- The property has naturally become void;
- Funds received from any disposal would be re-invested into new supply.

For the buyback these include:

- The property for sale is in one of the highest demand areas in West Lothian;
- The purchase of the property would result in the council being the sole owner in a block;
- The purchase of the property would result in a long-term empty home brought back into use.

Councillor Pauline Stafford asked: “ Will this have any impact on the long-term capital programme if we have to wait for a long time for these properties to become naturally vacant?”

Marjorie Mackie, the Housing Strategy and Development Manager said: “No. We do have an active open market acquisition scheme in place where we are purchasing properties. It’s part and parcel of asset management whereby there’s one flat in a larger block, There wouldn’t be any delay.”

“I’m taking it that we wouldn’t be down any properties?” asked

Councillor Kirsteen Sullivan.

When this was confirmed she said: "I think we have all probably had representations from council tenants where work has been unable to be done because private owners haven't agreed."

Councillor Stafford said: "There's logic behind this but I think it would have been an action better to have been taken quite a few years ago. Here we are talking about getting rids of council properties that are desperately needed. I don't think this is the right time for this policy change."

Chairing the Executive meeting Councillor Lawrence Fitzpatrick said it was always difficulties in tenements divided between council tenancies and private owners.

"It's a much higher management cost there's much greater complexity in maintenance and much higher costs it makes sense to divest ourselves of such property and use this money for acquisitions elsewhere."

A report to the Housing Services PDSP said: "In 1997 the council agreed a policy of buying back former council houses. When the policy was first introduced, the purchase price was the original selling price and included reasonable legal costs of the transaction.

"On 15 June 2009, the policy was changed and it was agreed that the council would carry out a formal valuation of each property being considered for buy back. It was agreed that the offer price would be the lesser of the actual selling price or 80% of the current market value. "Only three properties had been bought back using this policy since 2009. The policy was reviewed in 2016 and again in 2021, as a means to increase purchases and as a result increase West Lothian Council's lettable stock.

"On 19 January 2021 the reviewed policy was agreed by Council

Executive. The current policy has seen continued success with 97 properties purchased between 2021/22 and 2023/24.

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter