

# **West Lothian Council declares a housing emergency**

**West Lothian Council has declared a housing emergency as the numbers of people presenting as homeless surges.**

Councillors heard the housing department has around 1,400 homeless cases, an average of 350 new applications each month and the waiting list sits just under 12,000.

And the council has a burgeoning emergency hotel bill with 177 claimants a night housed in B&B at £84 a night.

Housing officers warned that new housing laws would do nothing to address existing problems – and some measures could add to housing lists.

Declaring an emergency was, said a senior councillor, an “admission of scale of the problem” the council is facing.

The declaration was approved by the council’s Executive this week, and sees West Lothian follow an increasing number of councils making the declaration, including Argyll and Bute, City of Edinburgh, Glasgow, Fife and West Dunbartonshire.

The Scottish Government also declared a housing emergency earlier this month.

Housing officers advised councillors that the implementation of the proposals in the Housing (Scotland) Bill introduced to the Scottish Parliament in March 2024 are expected to add more pressures on housing and homelessness in West Lothian.

As of April, the service holds a total of 11,269 applications for council housing, with an average of over 350 new applications each month, with a current live caseload of 1,392 homeless cases.

Introducing an outline of the proposed housing bill a report to the Executive said: "Several of these proposals will have little to no impact on current operational activity. However, there are key areas of change which will have a significant impact on the council's ability to meet statutory duty."

Among the new proposals is a demand for local authorities to assess rents and determine whether rent controls be introduced. The fear is that rent controls will drive more private landlords out of the sector and put more pressure on councils to house people.

West Lothian has already seen a big drop in the numbers of privately rented property since the pandemic. Private landlords are selling up as mortgage increases and other costs strip away profit potential.

The Executive passed a motion requesting an urgent meeting with the housing minister, Paul McLennan.

It will also request that the Scottish Government both increases the revenue grant funding made available to the council in 2024/25 to £297,000 in support of the council's Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan (RRTP), and reverses its decision to cut the affordable housing programme budget by 26%.

An amendment from the SNP critical of Westminster's cut in block grant to Holyrood was voted down.

Executive councillor for housing George Paul said: "The imbalance between supply and demand for permanent social rented accommodation continues to be a key challenge in West Lothian.

“Our housing staff carry out an amazing job of preventing homelessness and supporting those who seek housing, with the limitations they face.

“There remains a high number of people applying to the council for permanent housing through the council’s allocations policy, as well as accommodation required for homeless applicants to enable the council to discharge its statutory homeless duty.

“By declaring a housing emergency, we aim to acknowledge the scale of the issue in West Lothian and appeal for the additional support we need to try and tackle the issues.”

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter