

West Lothian Council plans to work with home owners to get vacant property back into use

A new scheme to bring more than 300 West Lothian private homes which have lain empty for over a year back into use has been drawn up by the council.

As the homelessness crisis continues to grow the council is looking at all options to get housing back into use.

The reasons for empty homes range from simple repair issues to complex legal problems, and the council now plans to work with owners to resolve these so the homes can again be put to use.

The new scheme would see a dedicated staff member, paid for by the Council Tax on the 89 second homes in the county as well as funding from the housing charity Shelter, work in partnership with homeowners to urge empty homes to be sold on or otherwise made available for use.

This could also see the council buying empty homes as part of its buyback scheme which buys ex -council houses to refurbish and add to the council's stock of social housing.

Marjory Mackie, Housing Strategy and development manager, told a meeting of the Housing Services PDSP that 309 empty private homes had been identified.

She said: "The Empty Homes Framework sets out a collaborative approach to engage with homeowners, council staff and external

partners to make best use of available housing in West Lothian.”

Ms Mackie told the meeting that the new framework “supports the Scottish Government’s vision that no homes are left empty for significant periods of time without good reason.”

The majority of empty homes are in council tax bands at the lower end of valuations A to C – that is houses valued up to £45,000 under the terms of the last valuation done in the 1990’s.

There are a variety of reasons for empty homes including the need for major repairs or refurbishment. Affordability issues with repair costs also play a role, as do inheritance issues.

It’s acknowledged as well that there is a lack of awareness about options for homeowners who want to bring homes back into use.

The council aims to encourage empty home owners to bring their properties back into use in a number of ways, mainly by signposting owners to where they can get legal and financial help to access repairs to help move the home back into use.

The target is to have 10 empty homes to be brought back into use in 2024/25, with annual targets to be developed thereafter.

Councillor Alison Adamson questioned how and where communities could get involved, as suggested in the report.

Ms Mackie said there were some instances where owners could not be traced or, in very few cases, where no owners could be identified because of succession issues.

The council will also work with the Fire Service and police on empty homes where there are issues of vandalism. It would be in these cases that communities would be encouraged to come up with alternative uses.

The council has set up a page on its website for homeowners to seek advice.

Chairing the meeting, Councillor George Paul commented on the fact that council tax receipts and charity funds had to cover the costs of introducing the scheme.

He said: "The Scottish Government makes statements that no homes should be left empty. You'd expect some funding to come from that source to help run the scheme."

By Stuart Sommerville Local Democracy Reporter