

Call to help RAAC homeowners in West Lothian

A national campaigner for homeowners hit by crumbling concrete has urged West Lothian council to use its own money to help the more than 300 private homeowners affected in the county.

Wilson Chowdhry of the UK RAAC Campaign Group told a meeting of the West Lothian Council's Executive this week they should "step up" to help homeowners facing losing hefty bills for structural surveys and repairs.

RAAC roofs have been identified in council and privately owned homes in Bathgate, Linlithgow Broxburn and Craigshill in Livingston.

The council has already raised the issues facing homeowners in its initial meetings with the Housing Minister Paul McLennan and his officials and plans to reiterate the need for national policies and help for homeowners .

The Executive passed a motion from Labour urging greater cooperation and as well as assistance from the insurance and mortgage industries and also in structural surveys.

It voted down an amendment from Conservative Angela Doran-Timson calling the council to urge Holyrood to give financial help to homeowners.

Earlier Mr Chowdhry urged the council to use the Scheme of

Assistance to help homeowners.

He told the meeting: "The homeowners needed to know every possible solution is being considered. Homeowners deserve clear answers, real support and immediate action."

The Scheme of Assistance is a system of financial and non-financial help that local authorities can provide for private housing, which is in disrepair or below the tolerable standard, or needs to be adapted because a person is disabled. It does not extend to roof replacement or repair.

Mr Chowdhry was joined by some of the homeowners from Chestnut Grove who are currently in dispute with Almond Housing.

A lengthy debate saw all sides of the chamber agree that more support should be given to the homeowners and there was general agreement that the Scottish Government should formulate a national response to the RAAC issue, not only for homeowners but across the school and health service estate.

Officials have described the talks with Holyrood as constructive and ongoing and there are plans to meet with the Housing Minister again next month. Officials were encouraged that Mr McLennan had come to Livingston to meet senior councillors and housing staff.

Consensus at the meeting diverged on whether the Scottish Government should be specifically asked to offer financial help to homeowners.

Councillor Doran-Timson had suggested adding this to a motion proposed by Labour group and council leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick. He rejected the suggestion, highlighting the motion already said the motion urged the Scottish government: "to explore *any support* which may be available to homeowners."

Councillor Willie Boyle referred to Deans South where

homeowners had to campaign for almost 20 years for help after tenants were moved out.

He agreed with Lib Dem Councillor Sally Pattle's assertion that West Lothian Council had been at the forefront of tackling RAAC issues, but added: "It's also been through the situation with Deans South. I would hate to think that we are going to put more people through the long drawn-out, absolutely cringeworthy situation that we put people in in Deans South, where homeowners were left isolated as homes around them were demolished. That was not a good reflection on West Lothian Council. Please don't let this happen again. Let's try and include everyone."

He added: "There is a national problem here that Westminster needs to step up and recognise."

Councillor Damian Doran-Timson branded councillor Fitzpatrick's refusal to accept the Conservative amendment as "churlish and ignorant towards homeowners".

He added: "I don't see the point of not taking the amendment on board apart from the fact that it wasn't a Labour idea, which we've known for the last seven years is that it doesn't go through if it doesn't have that stamp on it."

Labour's councillor Tom Conn said: The issue of housing is devolved to the Scottish Government. If the Scottish Government wants to wash its hands of it then it should pass it back to Westminster. There's been no offer under any circumstance whatsoever. If the Scottish government isn't getting any money it needs to go to the UK government."

Councillor Fitzpatrick defended his motion and said "there are no games being played here. If you read my motion the third paragraph makes it clear we request the government to explore any support.

"We have already had a very constructive meeting with the

Scottish minister. The concerns of homeowners were put to the minister. He has agreed to go away and consider all these concerns. The amendment would seek to move the goalposts in a meeting with the minister.”

The Labour motion was backed eight votes to five.

Speaking after the meeting a council spokesperson said: “West Lothian Council has pro-actively raised the issues of homeowners with the Scottish Government and this will continue.

“At this point, the Scottish Government has not confirmed any additional funding for council, RSLs or private homeowners.”

“The council is taking all necessary steps to address the issues caused by RAAC within council homes and we continue to liaise with council tenants.”

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter