

West Lothian Council Housing Action Plan will go to Holyrood

West Lothian Council will ask Holyrood to increase funding for council housing and reverse cuts to budgets as two key planks to tackle the housing emergency it faces.

Housing Minister Paul McLennan will also be urged to suspend legislation which has helped fuel West Lothian's housing crisis.

The SNP branded that crisis, especially the millions spent on B&B accommodation, as being self-inflicted. The council was causing "real misery and distress", said housing spokesman Councillor Robert de Bold.

The Housing Services PDSP heard proposals for the Housing Emergency Action Plan. It outlines an eight-point plan to take back to Housing Minister Paul McLennan following a meeting he had with senior councillors and housing officers in Livingston in July.

The Action Plan proposes:-

- an urgent meeting with the Minister for Housing, whereby the Council is represented by the Executive Councillor for Housing Services and appropriate senior officers.

- that the Scottish Government increases the revenue grant funding made available to the council in 2024/25 to £297,000 in support of the council's RRTP, and
- that the Scottish Government immediately reverses its decision to cut the affordable housing programme budget by 26%.

Other demands include the suspension of the removal of local connection for the duration of the national Housing Emergency and urges the Scottish Government to take action to address lengthy delays by energy suppliers in replacing or updating meters- the latter being a major reason for the delays in getting empty homes back to the market for let.

The removal of local connection allows anybody to demand to be housed by the council in West Lothian. Previously to qualify you had to show family connection to be housed.

Answering questions from Councillor Andrew McGuire on Holyrood's own declaration of a housing emergency Marjory Mackie, Housing Strategy and Development Manager told the meeting that West Lothian had been promised an extra £2m funding from the Scottish Government for acquisitions of former council homes to build up housing stock.

The SNP group housing spokesman Councillor Robert De Bold said: "I feel the need for many of these measures has been self-inflicted by the Labour conservative administration. Over a 12-year tenure in office the administration has refused to build sufficient housing stock.

"Each year they shrug their shoulders and claim insufficient funding."

Councillor de Bold referred to the motion he had made at the last Budget meeting earlier this year which would have doubled

the council house construction programme.

“It was fully costed and approved by officers, and you voted it down. We could have had an additional 388 council houses yet here we are spending £2m a year on hotels and B7B to house 170 people per night. It makes zero financial sense.”

Councillor McGuire said: I would urge councillor De Bold to learn more about housing he might discover that far from being the only local authority with housing issues they are widespread which obviously led to the Scottish Government declaring their own housing emergency.

“Council housing plays only a fraction of the role in housing people adequately and we have a very strong record on both council house building as do our partners in the registered social landlord sector.

“I welcome the proactive approach we have already taken about this. I think nationally there has to be a good conversation about how we want housing to look as we go forward. We need to continue to have discussion and dialogue to get to a place which takes pressure of the council financially but ultimately gives constituents and residents in West Lothian proper decent homes and a place they can set down roots.

“I think the current minister has shown a more proactive approach and that’s to be welcomed.”

Councillor George Paul chairing the meeting said: “We didn’t declare a housing emergency lightly. Every other council declared a housing emergency for the same simple reason. That the Scottish Government did not or will not fund more extra housing. There is not much point in blaming the Westminster government. The SNP took on the mantle of housing in Scotland and I don’t think they have done very well. To criticise West Lothian and every other council I think is a piece of nonsense.”

The action Plan will be presented to the council Executive

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter