

Council house defects known about ‘somewhere up the tree’ MSP says

Serious issues with the construction of hundreds of council homes in Edinburgh were known about “somewhere up the tree,” an MSP has said, as questions mount over how substandard building works were approved off on such a huge scale.

An investigation by the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) revealed wide-ranging defects, including lack of adequate fireproofing, were found in 728 homes built by Robertson for the council over the last eight years.

Poor ventilation and leaks causing damp and mould, black specks in tap water, sewage leaking into bathrooms, faulty electrics, and randomly-sounding fire alarms were among the other issues uncovered across 12 developments, predominantly three-storey flats delivered by the housebuilder in the north and west of the city.

Tenants caught up in the scandal said it was clear their properties had been “negligently built” and many were left furious upon learning safety features designed to prevent fires rapidly spreading through blocks had not been fully installed.

With many still waiting on repairs, they have criticised the

council and Robertson's failure to act quickly enough to ensure homes meet all building and safety regulations, and are demanding to know how the failures weren't spotted prior to them moving in.

Upon visiting one of the worst affected blocks at Parkgrove Terrace in Clermiston Edinburgh Western MSP Alex Cole-Hamilton said he was "horrified" to find the "simplest things have been missed".

Speaking to the LDRS after his recent visit he said: "The number one word with the problems around these flats is ventilation.

"There's no exterior vents. So it gives you the illusion of ventilation without it being there.

"Similarly you've got inadequate drainage from the roof. There's a hopper at the top of the convex of the roof which easily overflows and when it overflows it cascades down the walls which in winter months can freeze quite readily and you can already see stone cracks within the brick work, which in itself is a structural concern.

"I was shown in the bin store all the new covering in the roofs to make it fire safe and I thought 'who signed these buildings off'."

The MSP said there were also "concerns about the way the gas mains are routed," adding: "Nobody seems to be talking to these people.

"People somewhere up the tree knew that this was unsafe but didn't inform the residents until they actually went to do the works. They don't trust the council at the moment, they don't trust the management company and nobody is communicating with them effectively.

"So much public money was invested – rightly invested because

we need social housing and council-owned housing – and yet somewhere along the line it was signed off without the due diligence that is required.”

Parkgrove residents have been promised extensive repairs to the roof to stop water leaking into homes and improve drainage, however it's understood the works are yet to begin.

Mr Cole-Hamilton said: “I think that the city are trying to go for the easy fix of putting in a new ceiling of a different material, putting in a couple of fans and hoping it will go away, when actually it's not going to go away.

“A number of these residents are infirm and disabled and so they're in those flats most of the day which means the moisture content will be much higher and the impact on their health will be bad.”

He said the only way for tenants to feel reassured was sending “somebody unconnected” with Robertson to “go in and tell the council what needs to be done to make those buildings dry”.

He added: “Only that would give them confidence that they're not living in a potential death trap.

“I think the city needs to just bite the bullet, go in there, if need be move these residents out, which will be a huge disruption to them, but I think they would prefer to live in accommodation that's not making them sick and replace the windows to start with.”

The LDRS asked the developer to explain how defects were present on such a huge scale at new developments they had led across the city and whether it wished to apologise to the residents impacted. However, it declined.

A spokesperson for Robertson Partnership Homes, said: “Working with our customer City of Edinburgh Council, some defects were identified across developments within the Edinburgh Living and

Council portfolio.

“As a responsible contractor, we are working closely with the Council and its tenants to carry out repairs.”

Edinburgh Council said the buildings were “all built with project managers and clerks of work in place”.

It said: “The projects were all subject to planning and building standards processes. Building warrants and completion certificates were obtained and Building Standards officers also carried out checks.

“A project team was set up last year to oversee the programme of work. There are weekly site meetings to review progress and additional monthly meetings with senior managers from Robertson Construction.

“A clerk of works is in place on all sites and work is being reviewed by specialist surveyors following completion. The vast majority of the work has taken place without the need for tenants to leave their homes. Robertson Construction will carry out decorative works on completion of repairs.”

It said Robertson has “shown willingness to complete all areas that are their responsibility,” however added: “Court papers have been served on various parties connected to the construction to ensure that there is a route to recourse should the current approach begin to fail.”

The council’s housing convener, Councillor Jane Meagher, said: “Ensuring the quality and safety of our tenants’ homes will always be our top priority, so I was disappointed to hear about these issues, particularly in new buildings.

“I fully appreciate the concerns of our tenants and am sorry for the impact that this has had on them. The builders, Roberson Group, are making good progress on carrying out the repairs and other improvements, which will all be

independently inspected once complete.

“We’ve been in regular contact with tenants throughout – both face-to-face and by letter – to update them on the progress and next steps. We provided officers’ direct contact details should they have any questions or concerns and will continue to make ourselves available at tenants’ meetings.

“I’m very grateful for their ongoing patience and understanding and I’ll make sure lessons are learned from this.”

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter