

Tenants in 'potential death trap' council homes left reeling

Edinburgh residents living in "potential death trap" council homes riddled with mould and built without vital fire safety features are demanding answers over how the "shambolic" building works were approved.

A raft of construction issues were found in over 700 brand new homes built for the council by Robertson, which have left tenants dealing with leaking ceilings, poor ventilation and fire alarms that go off randomly in the night.

Other problems uncovered across 12 new developments include rotting walls, black specks in tap water, sewage leaking into bathrooms, faulty electrics and cracks in external brickwork – which has sparked wider concerns over the structural safety of the housing delivered by the Stirling-based developer.

After being informed their properties were substandard, residents – some of whom have had to temporarily move out, while many are still waiting on repairs – said they are being kept in the dark over the extent of remedial works still needed in order for them to feel safe in their own homes.







They have accused the council and its housebuilder of “compromising our safety” by “cutting corners”. And there are also fears the shoddy works could render home insurance policies void.

Edinburgh Western MSP Alex Cole Hamilton said upon visiting one of the faulty blocks recently it was obvious the “simplest things” were missing, adding independent safety checks were urgently needed to reassure occupants they weren’t “living in a potential death trap”.

He said: “Somewhere along the line this was signed off without the due diligence that is required.”

Wide-ranging defects were discovered in 728 homes Roberston was contracted to build in the north and west of the city over the last eight years, the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) revealed last month. Most are in three-storey flatted blocks managed directly by the council’s housing service, with

around a third mid-market properties which form part of the council-owned Edinburgh Living portfolio.

One of the most serious defects identified was the absence of firestopping measures within some floors, walls and ceilings in at least two blocks. This is essential for preventing fire quickly spreading through a building.

As a result crews have had to tear down sections of drywall to ensure gaps where pipes and cables pass through are properly sealed.

While it's claimed the majority of fire safety issues have now been addressed, residents were left furious after finding out they had been living in homes without full fire protection for years without knowing.

Meanwhile, a perfect storm of water ingress and poorly installed ventilation has caused damp and mould to build up in many homes, prompting further health concerns.

At Parkgrove in Clermiston, top floor resident Lorna has been waiting three years on the roof being fixed to stop water leaking in.

"When I moved in it was just a little patch [of mould]," she said. "It was treated and painted over but within a couple of weeks it was all starting to come back and it was black. Water often leaks through the ceiling onto my dining room table.

"I really hope that somebody is going to answer for it because it's terrible. I need to get out of here – it's not good for my health. This has been going on since I moved in here. Three years and nothing."

Mum of two Suzie Phee, who lives in the same building, said: "I've got dampness and mould. In my wardrobe, the whole wall is wet. I've had to throw out clothes and shoes."

Leaking water triggered the block's fire alarm system in the

middle of the night throughout the first half of this year, causing further disruption to tenants, Suzie said.

“The alarms were horrendous, they would just go off randomly. The first bad one was January, it went off for two hours and we were standing outside in the freezing cold,” she said. “From then it just kept going off three or four times a night every night. Then in April it went off for six hours, from three in the morning til nine in the morning and nobody could switch it off.”

She added: “If there was a fire there was nothing in the walls to stop it spreading. Is our home insurance null and void? I’m still paying my home insurance but if there was a fire they could then say you’ve not got fire protections.

“You expect to be living somewhere that’s fireproof, waterproof – safe.”

Another resident, who asked to remain anonymous, said: “It’s actually quite terrifying, especially when you see Grenfell. Somebody’s signed them off in the council, and somebody signed them off from Roberston.”

Ground floor tenant Russell had to move out of his flat for two weeks in July – but it was years prior when he first realised there were problems with his property.

“The day I moved in the water was going down the drain but the drain pipe wasn’t connected. It was just running out of the pipe onto the floor,” he said. “Since then there have been faults with all the damp and lack of ventilation.

“Everyone’s getting p***ed off now. “We’re having meetings after meetings and seeing things getting nowhere. ”

Russell, who lives with disabilities, said he believes the flats were “negligently built”.

“These houses have just been built in the last five years,

it's shocking. They've cut corners, and we've got to try and live our lives. I'm not well myself and it's making it worse. I'm not reassured about the work they've come in and done.

"I'm petrified living in the house."

Bess, who moved into the Parkgrove flats five years ago soon after they were completed and handed over to the council, described the construction job as a "shambles".

She said: "On the construction they've not followed the rules. Maybe they were put up too quickly, maybe cutting corners and trying to save money. Everybody's entitled to make money, but not at the expense of other people."

Those who spoke to the LDRS were left baffled over how the building flaws were not spotted during the snagging process – and dumbfounded that the council signed them off as being safe. They said huge questions hung over the developer and local authority around the oversight of the project and how safety checks were carried out.

At a meeting of Parkgrove residents last week, council officers said work to ensure firestopping was fully installed were complete and extensive repairs to the roof would commence at the end of this month. They said structural surveys were ongoing to investigate cracks spotted in the building, while the authority also awaited the results of water samples in response to concerns over the presence of black particles.

At West Pilton Grove, retired engineer Derek Mills, another resident waiting on ventilation improvements, is dealing with rotting wood and sewage leaks in his bathroom.

"There's s**t coming up through the drain," said Mr Mills, who uses a wheelchair. "So I've got to get a cleaner in to clean all that up. They expect me to live in that?"

“One of the things I want the council to do is take immediate action.

“You move in, you think it looks brand new, you make the assumption that all the procedures have been followed; that someone has inspected it, someone approved it for accommodation, someone did all the fire checks.

“And I find out they haven’t been done. There was no oversight – the council is incompetent.”

He added: “These contracts should be water tight for the public purse – it’s public money.

“The only thing that you’ve got is to make sure the procedures are 100 percent water tight and they’re not. They’re leaking like a sieve.”

Next door, 66 year-old Neil Cunliffe is preparing to be moved out of his flat while works to ensure it meets fire safety regulations are undertaken.

“They came to do the gas pipes because they weren’t what was necessary – I’ve got three holes in my roof from 12 weeks ago, they’re still there,” he said.

“They’ve now done the pipes apparently, but when they were doing the pipes they found out that the beams are not fire regulated. That’s what I’ve been told.”

A short walk away at Crewe Road Gardens, David Forbes is dealing with a persistent draft in his one-bed flat and said he has resorted to sleeping in his living room due to the ground floor bin store directly underneath his bedroom constantly slamming shut. This, he said, has “caused a bit of tension” in the block. “I can’t keep arguing with neighbours all the time,” he added.

Even everyday tasks like cooking, which is second nature for the 52-year-old chef, have become a challenge as turning on

the hob can cause electrical sockets to trip.

“It’s very hard to cook a Sunday roast – the extraction in the kitchen is non-existent,” he said.

“You realise that your house has been made possibly with cheaper materials. There’s draft coming through, you can feel the chill. And for a new build you don’t really expect that.”

Mr Forbes said electricians sent by Robertson were left “scratching their heads,” adding: “They can see that things aren’t as they should be.

“From the architecture side to the planning, to the execution and the building of the building it’s just been one nonsense after another.

“I wouldn’t like [Robertson] involved because it’s like marking your own homework. An independent evaluation is the only thing that needs done. And it can’t be in conjunction with Robertson or the council because the two of them are in bed with each other. They are just as complicit in my eyes.”

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