

Plan to move hundreds out of unlicensed temporary accommodation sparks crisis

Hundreds of homeless people in Edinburgh are set to be moved out of 'unlawful' temporary accommodation as the council prepares to cut ties with providers operating unlicensed shared housing.

Council housing allocations have been halted so that homeless families living in houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) which do not meet licensing requirements can be temporarily moved into any available properties. Non-urgent repairs are also being paused to prioritise work to get more void homes back into use.

The decision marks a huge blow to efforts to tackle the city's housing crisis, which Shelter Scotland warned was "at risk of getting worse not better".

And it raises serious questions over whether the local authority will be able meet its legal responsibilities to provide every homeless person with a place to stay – or if the sudden upending could leave vulnerable people sleeping on the streets.

Edinburgh Council's housing chief said the council's use of unlicensed HMOs "can't continue" and added: "We urgently need

to move people out of these properties and find alternative temporary accommodation.

“We’re planning to use existing council stock, speed up the turnaround of void homes to a minimum standard, continue to encourage unlicensed providers to apply for their licence, source other suitable temporary accommodation in the city, and engage with registered social landlords to encourage them to maintain the increased rate of allocations to homeless households.”

The council is currently using around 700 rooms across 30 unlicensed HMOs to house homeless families, it emerged in September, as monitoring officer Nick Smith warned councillors in a report the practice “amounts to illegality and maladministration” and had to end.

Shared temporary accommodation not subject to full checks to ensure residents’ safety and suitable living conditions was first procured during the pandemic as part of urgent action taken to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

The authority’s reliance on illegal shared housing in order to meet rising rates of homelessness has continued long past the end of the pandemic however.

The number of households in temporary accommodation across the capital has risen to over 5,000 from 3,570 at the start of the first lockdown in 2020.

Officials have asked landlords in breach of the rules to register for HMO licences and “many did so or have undertaken to do so,” Mr Smith’s report said, “but others have refused or taken no action”.

It’s understood the council plans to stop paying providers who don’t comply from the start of December – which would leave less than a month to find alternative accommodation for those living in unlicensed HMOs.

In response bosses have paused adverts for council homes to temporarily prioritise properties for people staying in unlicensed HMO accommodation. Allocations will continue for households living with a disability, while housing association and housing co-op homes will still be advertised.

A notice on EdIndex, the website which manages Edinburgh's social housing applications, said due to "unprecedented pressures" the service took the "difficult decision to temporarily pause the advertising of council housing".

The council will review the temporary pause on council home adverts at the end of this month and the pause on non-urgent repairs for tenants will remain in place until January 7 at the earliest, it is understood.

Commenting, Shelter Scotland assistant director Gordon MacRae said: "One year on from declaring a housing emergency, the situation in Edinburgh is at risk of getting worse not better.

"It would be highly misleading to suggest that this crisis has only occurred in the last few months. We have known about Edinburgh's broken and biased system for many years.

"Suspending council housing allocations or legal duties might make the numbers appear better but they will not address the needs of those suffering without a safe secure home.

"Decades of underinvestment in social housing and poor decisions at every level of government has brought us to this point. Investment and leadership, not cuts and excuses is what we need."

Councillor Jane Meagher, the city council's housing convener, said: "With greater numbers of people facing homelessness, some of the most expensive private rents in the UK and insufficient funding from the Scottish Government to build more homes, the pressures on temporary accommodation are unprecedented.

“The unfortunate reality is that in responding to these pressures we have had to house people in unlicensed HMOs and realise that this can’t continue. We’re in a critical position that means we need to escalate our efforts to address this.

“We urgently need to move people out of these properties and find alternative temporary accommodation.

“We’re planning to use existing council stock, speed up the turnaround of void homes to a minimum standard, continue to encourage unlicensed providers to apply for their licence, source other suitable temporary accommodation in the city, and engage with registered social landlords to encourage them to maintain the increased rate of allocations to homeless households.

“This has not been an easy decision to make, and I appreciate how difficult these changes are. I’d urge any tenant who is worried to contact their housing officer for advice and support.”

NOTE TO EDITORS: Please see below an additional quote for the story Plan to move hundreds out of unlicensed HMOs sparks crisis’ published 6/11/24.

Eilidh Keay, Edinburgh city chair of the tenants’ union Living Rent, said: “It is crucial that those in temporary accommodation are moved from unlicensed HMO’s. But it is a shocking indictment of the failings of the City of Edinburgh Council that they were ever moved there in the first place.

“That the council is now unable to take on more applications due to “unprecedented pressures” should and could have been avoided. The shortage of council housing in Edinburgh is having a catastrophic impact on residents. Tenants were already waiting unforgivable lengths of time for a permanent, affordable home in Edinburgh prior to the declaration of the city’s housing emergency.

“The Visitor Levy, set to make over £50m pounds in its first year, presents a clear opportunity to invest in the council housing the city needs. However, to deliver the volume of council housing needed, Edinburgh requires more funding beyond the levy to ensure that everyone has access to a safe, secure and affordable home.

“More radical action must be taken by the Council if it is serious about ending the housing emergency. This means increasing the availability of council owned homes, not only through building, but by buybacks and bringing empty properties back into use.

“It must also champion the rights for private tenants. In the city where rents have skyrocketed by over 80% in the last ten years, private tenants in Edinburgh rent controls to bring rents down, and ensure that no one is made homeless due to eye watering rents.”

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter