

Accelerated repairs programme to bring empty homes back

An emergency £2m grant to help tackle homelessness is to be used by West Lothian Council to accelerate home repairs and build new houses.

A five-year national programme to tackle homelessness is reaching an end – with homeless figures rising across Scotland.

In West Lothian those figures have been fuelled not only by the cost-of-living crisis and changing housing market, but by successive changes in housing law.

Now the council is preparing to “reset” its plans to tackle homelessness with fresh ideas.

Sarah Kelly, Housing Needs Manager, told a meeting of the council’s Executive: “The supply pressures that faced West Lothian have not reduced over the duration of the Rapid Rehousing Transition Programme (RRTP) and demand still far outstrips supply by over 300%.”

In November additional grant funding of £2.2 million was confirmed for this financial year by the Scottish Government via the Affordable Housing Supply Programme (AHSP) to address temporary accommodation pressures, with a focus on acquisitions and bringing void properties back into use.

The funding must be spent this financial year, with properties being available for let by 31 March.

The bulk of this money, £812,000, will be spent on six new build homes at Deans South in Livingston. This funding will be drawn down by Wheatley Homes as part of the Deans South project and the council will receive nominations for these.

Of the extra funding, £400,000 will be used to accelerate bringing long term and high-cost mainstream empty homes, known as "voids", back into use. This will bring an additional 50 void homes back into use.

A further £360,000 will cover the purchase planned for this year of nine buy back properties, while £430,000 will allow the council to buy back 10 more by the end of March.

Councillor Willie Boyle asked: "What's the current position we are in with voids at the moment?"

Ms Kelly said the figures had improved and promised to circulate a report to members which was presented to councillors on the the Housing Services PDSP in December.

Chairing the meeting, council leader Lawrence Fitzpatrick said he had seen the report and the improvements in the turnaround time because of the prioritisation programme.

He added: "The foot's on the accelerator,"

In December the Local Democracy Reporting Service highlighted the shocking state some council homes had been left in by ex-tenants with filthy bathrooms and squalid kitchens with rubbish piled high.

Specialist contractors have to be brought into a large number of vacated homes to clear them of rubbish before major improvement works can be carried out costing up to £10,000 a property.

Grant Taylor, Building Services Manager told the December meeting that, by the end of November, Building Services had completed refurbishment of 1,143 mainstream and temporary

tenancy homes in the 24/25 financial year- an average of 33 a week.

Of those 990 have now been let. Building Services received 936 new voids during the same period to 30 November.

The RRTP was launched by the Scottish Government in 2018. A report to the Executive highlighted: "The proposed update notes that there remains a significant imbalance between the demand and supply of affordable social homes in West Lothian with severe pressures in homeless services. RRTP has also been impacted by unprecedented external challenges such as Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis.

These external pressures included many made homeless by private rental increases. In other cases, private landlords sold up, making many families homeless.

The Scottish Government has also introduced changes to housing rules, including, in 2022, allowing households from outside the county to apply for housing in West Lothian, removing the familial connection restriction which had existed.

West Lothian's central location meant it was hit particularly hard by this change.

The report did detail the successes of the West Lothian RRTP :

- A reduction in homeless applications by 7.1%, decreasing from 1,252 in 2022/23 to 1,169 in 2023/24;
- The length of stay in temporary accommodation reducing by 11 days, reducing from 152 days in 2022/23 to 141 days in 2023/24 through the introduction of Rapid Access accommodation;

- An increase in lets to homeless households by 2.2% from the previous year;
- 121 more properties re-let from the previous year through the introduction of an extensive void improvement programme.

After the meeting, the Head of Housing Customer and Building Services, Julie Whitelaw said: “There are significant challenges still ahead for the council. Demand for homeless services in West Lothian is predicted to remain high. RRTPs play a key role in continuing to address these pressures and require to be updated.

“There is an opportunity to reset RRTP by developing a refreshed Homeless Strategy with engagement from key partners which takes a sharper focus on the actions that are needed towards meeting the ambitions of Ending Homelessness together in partnership.”

By Stuart Sommerville, Local Democracy Reporter