

Scottish Borders Council submission on the Housing Emergency, 24 July 2024

Dear Ariane

Thank you for your letter on 28 June on the housing emergency.

On the 30th of May 2024 Scottish Borders Council considered a report which outlined the significant challenges that the Council and partners are experiencing in ensuring residents in the Scottish Borders have access to a home which meets their needs. At this meeting Council determined to [declare a local Housing Emergency](#).

Our report on [Housing and Homelessness Pressures](#) was produced preceding this decision. It highlighted a wide range of evidence of critical stresses in our housing system, including:

- The supply of homes cannot keep pace with a sustained increase in demand;
- There have been significant increases in property values, at a rate well above national and local wage increases;
- RSL's in the Borders adopt a Choice Based Letting system and the average number of bids per available social rented property has more than doubled over the last 5 years;
- Over the past 24 months our homeless service has been experiencing increasing demand from applicants who are requiring assistance with housing issues including access to temporary accommodation. This is resulting in pressures across the service including the requirement to increase the stock of temporary accommodation to an all-time high of 155 units.
- The number of homeless presentations from the Private Rented Sector has increased by 80% over the past 4 years.
- By the end of 2023/24, the number of private registered landlords and registered properties had fallen by 7% compared to 2020/21.
- Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates are comparatively low and not sufficient to cover the cost of private renting and impacts development opportunities for other affordable tenures such as MMR. The data suggests only half (49.25%) of households in the Scottish Borders can afford a private rent.
- We have an ageing population and increasing dependency (in 2022, the Scottish Borders' proportion of people aged 65 and above was amongst the highest of all local authorities in Scotland at 26.3% compared to a national average of 20.1%),
- Construction prices have increased significantly since 2021 with the average new build cost for an affordable home around, or close to, £300k.

These issues have had a direct and significant impact on property prices, rental levels, and general housing availability and accessibility.

Responding to Declaring a Housing Emergency

As a stock transfer Council we are not in direct control of some issues but do work closely with local RSLs and the Scottish Government to help address the challenges. There is a clear intention locally to address these issues as evidenced through our new Local Housing Strategy (LHS) 2023- 2028, participation in the Edinburgh and South East Scotland City Region Deal work, the Convention of South of Scotland housing summit held in February 2023 and the subsequent activity of the Regional Economic Partnership Housing Subgroup, which brings together a range of housing stakeholders and partners. A regional

Housing Action Plan for the South of Scotland was launched on 23rd July 2024. All this activity ensures focus on the key issues and the outputs will help prioritise and identify further appropriate actions and interventions.

The Leader of the Council will shortly be writing to the Scottish Government setting out some of the key challenges and requesting a review of the decision to reduce the Affordable Housing Supply Programme allocation to the Borders for 2024/25; review of Local Housing Allowance and review of funding and support for homeless services and empty homes activity.

While the LHS will continue to be the appropriate vehicle to monitor activity, a new working group, the Borders Strategic Housing Forum, is being established. The forum will include elected members, officers and external partners to discuss strategic housing issues and agree key priorities and actions on a quarterly basis to help ensure our local response to the Housing Emergency is as robust and collaborative as possible.

Voids/ Unlettable Properties

As a Stock Transfer Local Authority we don't hold the contextual information on void/unlettable properties in the area. When funding was made available for LA's and Housing Associations to bring void properties back in to use for Ukrainian Re-settlement our local RSLs were unable to make use of this funding as there are minimal unlettable properties in the area, and those that are may be part of a current or future regeneration programme, for example or the overall costs prove too prohibitive due to structural issues. We will request an updated summary position on unlettable properties from our RSL partners and report back to you in due course.

In terms of buying back properties, since 2015/16 the four largest local RSLs (Eildon Housing Association, Waverley Housing, Scottish Borders Housing Association and Berwickshire Housing Association) have made 169 Open Market Purchases, 19 in 2023/24. This has helped increase the number of affordable homes in the Scottish Borders.

If we can be of any further assistance, or you wish to discuss any aspects of this in more detail please do let me know and we would be happy to facilitate.

Yours sincerely

DAVID ROBERTSON
CHIEF EXECUTIVE