



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 25 March 2025

Session 6



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LOCAL GOVERNMENT, HOUSING AND PLANNING COMMITTEE
10th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con)

*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

*Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Gary Brady (Dundee City Council)

Louise Butchart (Dundee City Council)

Craig Dugdale (City of Edinburgh Council)

Susie Fitton (Scottish Federation of Housing Associations)

Euan McCallum (Angus Council)

Murray Sharp (Clackmannanshire Council)

Jackie Timmons (City of Edinburgh Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jenny Mouncer

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 25 March 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:31]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Ariane Burgess): Good morning, and welcome to the 10th meeting in 2025 of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. I remind all members and witnesses to ensure that their devices are on silent.

The first item on our agenda is to decide whether to take items 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 in private. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Building Safety and Maintenance

09:32

The Convener: The next item on our agenda is to take evidence as part of our work on building safety and maintenance. We have about 90 minutes for this discussion. We are joined in the room by Murray Sharp, senior manager of housing at Clackmannanshire Council; Jackie Timmons, head of area based regeneration and shared repairs at the City of Edinburgh Council; Craig Dugdale, surveying manager at the City of Edinburgh Council; Louise Butchart, head of housing, construction and communities at Dundee City Council; and Gary Brady, city engineer in design and property services at Dundee City Council. We are joined online by Susie Fitton, policy manager at the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, otherwise known as the SFHA; and Euan McCallum, acting housing assets manager at Angus Council. Welcome, everyone, and thanks so much for coming to help us to understand the issues.

We will go to questions. So that people who are watching are aware, I point out that some people on the panel are here to speak on issues relating to damp and mould, some are here to talk about RAAC—reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—and some are here to speak on both. We will try to direct our questions to specific witnesses but, if you would like to come in, please indicate that to the clerk clearly. For those of you online, please indicate that you want to come in by typing an R in the chat function and we will bring you in.

There is no need for you to turn your microphones on and off—we will do that for you. For those of you online, there might be a bit of a pause before your microphone turns on. Do not worry about that. We know that that happens when folks are joining by Zoom—we are aware that there will be pauses.

I will start with a question on dampness and mould, which will be our initial focus this morning. The first questions are on tenants' experience and landlord practice. I need to remember who to direct my questions to—this is for Louise Butchart and Craig Dugdale and for Susie Fitton or Euan McCallum, if they want to come in. We are interested in how the volume of tenants' complaints about dampness and mould in their homes has changed in the past couple of years. Has it increased or reduced?

Craig Dugdale (City of Edinburgh Council): We have seen an increase, because the media and so on are pushing tenants to report the issue more. We are now able to get in and try to fix it. We have set up a team in Edinburgh to do that.

The figures that we are starting to report now show that, between April 2024 and February this year, we carried out circa 1,600 surveys throughout the city of Edinburgh just for damp, mould and condensation, which is an increase of about 600. That is purely because of the team that has been brought in—we now have the capacity to deal with that.

The Convener: Is it also because people feel more encouraged to report the issue?

Craig Dugdale: Yes. People can now report damp, mould and condensation on the City of Edinburgh Council website. We have pro formas in place so that people can report the issue online. People can talk to housing officers or call the call centre, and there is now a dedicated team to deal with the issue.

The Convener: Louise, how is it going where you are?

Louise Butchart (Dundee City Council): It is similar to what Craig Dugdale set out. In Dundee, we have been doing a bit of work over the past couple of years on tenant engagement around dampness, mould and condensation. We have looked at developing our advice and information and worked with tenants so that they are informed and to ensure that the material that we produce and the advice that we give are helpful. However, we are continuing to work on that. Over the past two years, we have had a dedicated damp, mould and condensation task and finish group. This year, we are refreshing that group. Part of that involves engagement and consultation with our tenants and residents.

On the overall picture in Dundee, over the past year, approximately 3.1 per cent of our repairs overall were for mould, dampness and condensation but, within that, there was a fairly significant spend. We have spent about £1.8 million over the past year across Dundee City Council in tackling the issue, which is approximately 7.24 per cent of our overall expenditure on repairs, re-lets and maintenance of our stock.

We continually look at how we provide support and learn about the solutions. In the stock profile in Dundee, we have approximately 29 non-standard house types that require different solutions. We need to work through our teams but also with experienced specialists in the area to inform targeted solutions.

Part of it is about prevention. To date, we have spent over £59 million on solutions to improve the fabric of our homes. We very much take a fabric-first approach, which is set out in our asset management and energy efficiency and net zero strategies. It is not just about the reactions.

The Convener: That is great. I will pause you there, because we have more questions on that. I will leave some responses for colleagues, who might ask about that.

Murray, do you want to come in on the numbers increasing in relation to dampness and mould?

Murray Sharp (Clackmannanshire Council): Our situation is similar to that of my colleagues. Over the past couple of years, we have seen an increase in the reporting of cases. On average, around 5 per cent of our stock goes through our damp and mould process per year, which is an increase from about 2 per cent pre-pandemic. In some ways, as my colleagues have indicated, that can be a good story because, sometimes, the worst thing that can happen with damp and mould is underreporting or people just leaving it so that it festers and gets worse. Sometimes, tackling the issue early and getting on top of the actions that are required is a good thing.

Similarly to what some of my colleagues have said, we have invested in the past couple of years. We have a landing page on our website that gives information and details of how to contact us. We have also invested in resource—we have trained professionals who go out and inspect the cases. We have also made it easier for customers to come forward—we have a system for booking the surveyor to go out and look at damp cases.

The Convener: Does anybody who is online want to come in on that?

Susie Fitton (Scottish Federation of Housing Associations): To echo what other contributors have said, tenant understanding of the issues around damp and mould has increased, and housing associations and co-operatives have responded to that. They have policies in place that set out clear standards and timescales for investigating and dealing with damp and mould. The timescales will vary, depending on the root causes of the issue, but landlords triage repairs, and damp and mould complaints are prioritised, especially when there is a known health issue.

The tenant will report the issue to the landlord, and the landlord will arrange inspection within a few days. Repairs and remediation will be arranged and carried out within the timescale that is set out in the repairs policy. The average time to complete non-emergency repairs is in the region of nine working days. Where remediation is likely to take longer and where there are health issues that could be affected, our housing associations and co-operatives will try to decant and rehouse tenants where possible.

Our members constantly explore ways to improve performance. Some have set up or are looking at setting up rapid reaction teams to go into homes and deal with spores to minimise

health risks. Some are testing different technologies and solutions. We share the learning from that via our forums, such as the building safety and maintenance forum.

It can sometimes be difficult to identify the root cause, which we will probably talk about in further detail as the session progresses. Some of our members report issues with contractor availability and challenges in ensuring that they prioritise damp and mould issues. There is a range of approaches for prioritising the issue, which is important. Collaboration with tenants is absolutely key to resolving it.

The Convener: I will add in another question. You talked about work such as rapid response teams and the difficulty in detecting mould spores. I am interested to hear a bit more about that. Now is your opportunity to go into that a bit more and talk about the best methods to treat the problems and how you are getting a better understanding of dampness, and therefore mould, in the stock of your housing association members.

Susie Fitton: Undertaking proactive assessment of stock condition is key. That involves taking a data-informed and risk-based approach to prioritising, with a focus on properties that are particularly susceptible to damp and mould. It is also key to train all staff to identify and respond to damp and mould and to see every home visit as an opportunity to identify issues.

As we have talked about, it is important to encourage tenants to report damp and mould when they might otherwise not do so. That involves sharing communications on the risk of living with damp and mould, giving tenants clear and simple methods of reporting relevant issues and ensuring that tenants do not feel blamed for the issues of damp and mould. I have talked about responding promptly. It is also important to undertake an assessment of the property to identify the root cause. Obviously, adequate training and the correct equipment are key.

When treating the problem, the response will vary depending on severity. It can involve minor repairs such as fixing leaks or windows. Installing an extractor fan is a fairly minor way of tackling condensation. Obviously, much more intensive work may be needed, such as mould remediation, improving ventilation, terminal cleaning to neutralise and clean spores and bacteria, indoor air-quality monitoring and introducing smart ventilation.

Follow-up is important—that means checking that steps have been taken to resolve the issue and taking further action until the issue is resolved. Record keeping is also important. That involves recording all the actions that have been taken and ensuring that the data can be linked to other

information about the property and previous repair works. If a case escalates to a complaint or disrepair claim, it is important to take positive steps to resolve the issue and to learn from past cases. That is about improving processes where needed and considering which property types might need further proactive work.

There are a lot of good practice examples across the sector where members are practising that approach, and we are always happy to share information with our members on the issue.

09:45

The Convener: Before I come to Louise Butchart, I will bring in Euan McCallum, because he has not spoken yet. He indicated that he wanted to come in on the previous question, but I missed that.

Euan, you can tell us about the numbers if you want, but also talk a little about the understanding in Angus Council of the damp and mould situation and how you are tackling it.

Euan McCallum (Angus Council): At Angus Council, we have 7,800 or so social rented homes, and the picture is much the same as others have set out. We have noted a marked increase in the number of requests for surveys and reports of damp and mould. We have damp and mould issues reported in circa 5 per cent of our stock—that is based on requests for damp surveys in the past year. As others have said, that is a result of increased knowledge among people of the prevalence of the issue and also of our making tenants aware of it.

On the steps that we are taking, we currently have a reactive repairs officer with the appropriate accredited training who carries out surveys and produces reports on our behalf, and we are building up a team around him. We deliver our repairs slightly differently, and we are going through a review of that at the moment. We do it through outsourced contracts with external contractors. However, for the most basic treatments of damp and mould—fungicidal washes and so on—we use internal teams to deliver that service, which helps to expedite things.

That is a snapshot of where we are at the moment.

The Convener: Louise, do you want to come in on how you are approaching damp and mould and your understanding of what is going on in the stock? I want to get a sense of whether you are identifying damp and mould in particular stock. You said that you have 29 non-standard housing types. Have you identified that damp and mould are showing up in particular types of stock or are they across the board?

Louise Butchart: There are two aspects to that. One is investment in energy efficiency measures, which, as you will be aware, is crucial in combating the conditions, because poorly insulated homes are particularly susceptible. Particularly this year, through our rent-setting process in Dundee, we have record levels of investment in future-proofing our stock and increasing standards, particularly on energy efficiency, to mitigate some of the issues. As you will appreciate, it will take time for that to filter through.

On the reactive response, the situation is much as colleagues have said. On the solutions and the work that we are delivering in Dundee, and in relation to your point about identifying particular stock, we are looking at how to enhance our data analysis. We are looking at a geographic information system to map the reports that come through and the trends in the stock and fabric condition, so that we understand the causes more deeply than we do at the moment.

The Convener: We talked last week about the idea of mapping out where damp and mould is with the GIS mapping work. Is that also part of looking at the location and, therefore, the surrounding effects of being on a flood plain or something like that?

Louise Butchart: Yes, that is correct.

The Convener: It is great that you are doing that. Does anybody else want to come in?

Craig Dugdale: The team in the City of Edinburgh Council consists of four surveyors with certificated surveyor in remedial treatment and certificated surveyor in structural waterproofing—CSRT and CSSW—qualifications. We also have eight dedicated housing officers who work directly for the damp, mould and condensation team, and they go out on survey with the surveyors. The surveyors assess the situation and try to find the source of the problem. While they are doing that, our housing officers liaise with the tenant. It may well be that there is a case of fuel poverty there, and they can then start to deal with that side of it. Our surveyors are first class and will tell you what has caused the damp but, as soon as you start talking about fuel poverty they are kind of lost, and that is where we bring in the expertise of our in-house housing officers, which means that we are providing a full package. It is not just the damp survey we are doing; we are trying to make it better for the tenant.

Murray Sharp: It is almost like we are in tune. On identification, the rise is troubling, although, as I indicated earlier, sometimes that can be good as well.

In Clackmannanshire, 80 per cent of our stock is energy performance certificate C or above. We did

quite well with our energy efficiency works quite early on in the response to the Scottish housing quality standard. Hopefully, that has stood us in good stead with some of our responses going forward and some of the issues related to fuel poverty.

As my colleagues have indicated, our work needs to be data led. When I first started with the council, there was a heavy reliance on reports from contractors. Sometimes those reports would be contradictory, so, like our colleagues here today, we have invested in internal trained resource to make sure that we are taking a wholesale approach to looking at the assets. Sometimes when you ask a contractor to look at a particular issue, they just report on that issue and do not look at the house composition in the round in order to see what might be driving particular issues.

Similarly, as Louise Butchart said, we have noticed concerns with some properties in relation to climate change—which I think some of your witnesses alluded to last week—with increased rainfall and water not draining away as effectively as it could. We have committed to conducting a stock condition survey during the course of the year. We will provide our data to the people who are doing the stock condition analysis in order to home in on that issue, to ensure that we are as proactive as we possibly can be with these properties, rather than relying on the tenants.

The Convener: Thanks very much. That has been a very helpful beginning. I will bring in Willie Coffey, who has a couple of questions.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): In your authority, when your houses are void and are about to be re-let to a new tenant, do you systematically investigate the condition of the property? If it is showing signs of dampness, mould or condensation, do you continue to allocate that house to a tenant or would you prevent that until it is remedied?

Craig Dugdale: We have weekly meetings with our voids team throughout the city. If there are any voids that have signs of damp, mould or condensation in them, the team hands them to the damp team, and we then take ownership of it. We will rectify the issue and, once that is done, hand it back to the voids team, which will then do what needs to be done in order to get it handed back over to housing.

If there is any pause—if, for example, there has been a lengthy time over winter with no heating or ventilation—and a little bit of mould starts to come back, that is picked up prior to the property being handed over, and we will go back in and fix that. However, nine times out of 10, we manage to hand it over to the voids team, and the voids team

will not do anything with a damp property without passing it to us.

Louise Butchart: Our approach in Dundee is similar, but, as part of our letting process, we have a letting standard that involves checking the historical reports, including reports of the various repairs that have been done on a property as well as dampness, mould and condensation reports, which will then be considered as part of the re-let to determine if the issues have been rectified. Further, there is a visual inspection of the condition of the property at the point that it has become void to ensure that it meets our letting standard before we re-let it.

Murray Sharp: In Clackmannanshire, we involve our tenants in the void process as much as possible. Where properties become void, we try to allocate them as quickly as possible. As Mr Stewart knows, we try to encourage the tenants to come along to the void property, to look at the condition and agree on the works that will happen. Tenant choice is part of that, with decorating rooms also part of that work. As part of that check, we look for dampness and mould, and that will be tackled first and foremost.

There are some occasions where, as my colleague indicated, there are challenges, especially in winter, with heating systems being switched on and with gas and power. You have previously heard that there can be a challenge around the onset of winter and so on. Of course, we strive to make sure that we eliminate those issues as far as possible.

The Convener: Euan McCallum, can I bring you in on this?

Euan McCallum: I am happy to comment. Basically, as previously, I echo what others have said. We have a re-let standard that we have just revisited, which includes specific items in relation to damp and mould.

In Angus, we have a process for dealing with complex voids, which sit outwith the normal process, because some of these works are more complicated than others—not all of the issues can be dealt with by just a fungicidal wash. We have taken a view that we will park those and deal with them specifically through our repairs contractors. .

The Convener: On the complex issues, does that mean that you are taking out bits of the wall or something like that to remove the mould that has arrived in the building?

Euan McCallum: There can be quite significant issues. As has been mentioned previously—in last week's meeting, I think—we are seeing an increase in the build-up of moisture in the solums, which are the spaces below the floor, and areas like that can be more complex to deal with. We

have a number of voids that are held currently while we are addressing those more significant issues.

The issues can also involve things such as cracks in external render that have allowed water to build up. I think that that has been mentioned before. Our view is that climate change is directly contributing to the issue as well. We have a bit of a perfect storm—that is not meant to be a pun—because there is an increased amount of rainfall soaking walls, and energy price hikes have meant that it is sometimes more difficult for people to heat their homes, which would normally be a mechanism to dry out the walls in the house.

We are holding some quite complex cases and are taking steps to address the problems rather than just re-letting them and opening up ourselves and the tenants to further issues.

Willie Coffey: When your tenants sign up for a property as part of the missive agreement and so on, is there a clear indication to them about the condition of the house and a clear statement to them that there is no damp and mould in the house that they are about to occupy? Is there a written agreement with the tenant that gives them an assurance about the condition of the house?

Craig Dugdale: I am not sure how that position is portrayed to the tenant when they sign up to the tenancy.

Louise Butchart: In Dundee, as I touched on earlier, there is a letting standard. Part of the viewing process involves going through the property and highlighting the works that have been carried out and the level of standard at which we are letting the property. In our tenant information pack, there is further information provided supporting the tenant once they are living in the property. That reflects what we have done and the condition to which we have brought the property at the point of re-let.

Willie Coffey: Does it make clear that there is no damp and mould, for example?

Louise Butchart: It is important to have feedback from tenants as to whether it is clear. Officers should ensure that they are clear at the viewing and the signing point about the condition of the property, and that we are letting it with the understanding that there is not a live issue with dampness, mould and condensation. It might be for us to understand directly from our tenants whether they feel that that is coming through clearly.

Willie Coffey: Are there other views on that? Is the condition quite clear and obvious to tenants?

Craig Dugdale: I know that the damp, mould and condensation guides that we have had printed go into the new tenancy packs. There is advice

given right at the very start, but I am not sure whether tenants are told about the house not having damp, mould and condensation at any time.

10:00

Murray Sharp: It is an interesting point. I have explained that, in Clackmannanshire, our approach is to involve the tenant in the early process around the void period and discuss the works that we will be carrying out. We do not provide a statement to identify that the property is free of damp and mould. However, essentially, all social landlords are working to make sure that properties are provided to tenants in a safe and secure manner and that they are all fit for purpose. That includes issues around heating systems, electrics and a range of standards. It might be quite an interesting point to reflect on, but where would you stop with some of the identification of what work should be done?

Willie Coffey: Susie Fitton described processes around when a tenant may report an issue about damp and mould. Do other colleagues follow a similar process? I have been a councillor for many years as well as a member of this place, and I have had numerous contacts from constituents who are a bit confused about where they stand with respect to those issues. I have heard that, when they report an issue and the teams turn up to do their best to repair it, there is not any formal notice to the tenant that the issue is fixed or sorted. Sometimes, the team comes along and does the fungicidal wash that we have known and loved for many years, and that is it—there is no communication beyond that to say, “We think that it is fixed now and you can be confident and assured about it.” I would like to know what happens in your areas in that regard.

Craig Dugdale: We have a dampness case tracker. The date that the tenant contacted us about an issue is put into that, then the date that the survey was carried out is put in, and it goes on and on and on until we are complete, and the date of completion is marked there, too. The tracker has a date-sensitive cell that turns red eight weeks after the completion, and our housing officers then call or visit the tenant and go over the job to ensure that what has been done has worked. If it has not worked, we will go back in without the tenant having to go through the whole process of raising new surveys and calls and so on—we just take ownership of it straight away. The period is set for eight weeks just to allow new plaster to dry out and so on. That is the communication part that we have brought in to try to encourage the tenants to be honest with us. We started that approach about eight months ago, and we are starting to get some positive feedback from that.

Willie Coffey: Is the sign-off a verbal thing, or do the tenants get a record or note from the authorities?

Craig Dugdale: The tenant gets a copy of the survey report at the very start. We give them a copy of the surveyor’s report, with the schedule, the details, the plan and everything that we are going to do. Then, eight weeks after we have signed off the job at completion, we make contact. That could be an actual visit, if they are prepared for that to happen, but, initially, there would be a phone call to ask if everything is fine, and whether it would be okay if we came to check.

Willie Coffey: So, there is a completion record.

Craig Dugdale: Yes, and then we sign it off as a completed job.

Susie Fitton: I want to feed back on the elements of an effective approach and the points that were made about effective communication. Certainly, our input from members has shown that communication with tenants and having a supportive approach is absolutely critical. We have already touched on some of the underlying contributors to the problem of damp and mould, including the cost of living crisis, as 61 per cent of tenants in social housing are living in fuel poverty. We know that supportive communication with tenants and supporting tenants to report issues of damp and mould where they may be worried about doing so is absolutely crucial.

To echo what has been said by other contributors, although damp and mould can be due to structural issues, it can also be a direct result of households being unable to afford to heat their homes adequately. Some of our members are reporting cases of tenants switching off extractor fans due to concerns about running costs. Therefore, ensuring that homes are energy efficient and that occupants have the resources to heat their homes is essential.

The wider work that housing associations and co-operatives do to provide support with energy costs, affordable heat, welfare rights advice and income maximisation work are all elements that might not be specific to a repairs approach but help to address the underlying causes.

Murray Sharp: On the point about the clarification of the end stages, the regulator will start collecting data and may look at that going forward. The antisocial behaviour indicator has a clear timeframe for indicating to the tenant that the case is complete and so on. However, in terms of the movement in the public sector, Clacks is about to embark on implementing a new information technology system, which I see as being critically important in terms of providing access to the tenant and customer, so that they have a clear view of the repairs history for their property and

can see what actions have been taken, can understand what is happening and see whether the case has been closed. I think that the most efficient and effective way of addressing the issue is to provide access to the tenant and customer.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): The committee has heard representatives of tenants groups talk about a lack of trust and faith in landlords when it comes to identifying issues with damp and mould, and there are issues of trust with the contractors who remedy that damp and mould. Are you aware of that level of mistrust? How prevalent do you feel it is? Is it an issue when it comes to interacting with tenants? I will start with Murray Sharp.

Murray Sharp: I would not say that that is always our experience, but it is part of our understanding. I suggest that that is why we in the local government sector have all indicated this morning that we have perhaps moved on, in terms of recruiting and training our own staff and doing the surveying work in-house. As I referenced earlier, when I started with the council a number of years ago, we relied on contractors. Sometimes, we and the tenants would receive contradictory reports on the work required. It has come down to us having our own fully trained surveyors taking the whole house asset approach to the work that is required. That gives us a full understanding of what is required so there is no discrepancy when the contractor turns up to do work that is based on the survey and on what we have identified through that process.

Trust can only be gained and achieved via actions. That is perhaps why we have all reflected on previous practices that might not have worked as well as we hoped they would and why we have switched to the new approach. Certainly, at Clacks, we have an internal resource.

Craig Dugdale: As Murray Sharp said, we found that there were issues with contractors around mistrust and so on because they were in and out in five minutes—they got in, did the survey as quickly as they could and got back out again. Our surveyors and housing officers are usually in the property for an hour and a half to two hours, talking to and liaising with the tenant, looking at the property, and letting the tenant know exactly what is wrong, what has caused it and what we can do to resolve it.

We also have in-house dedicated preservation craft operatives, so we do not subcontract out that element. Our surveyors find the issues and make recommendations, and our internal preservation team does the treatments. We are starting to gain trust—we have had emails from tenants recently just saying, “Thank you. This has been a great experience and not something that we have ever experienced from the council.” I think that having

the in-house teams definitely works because it is more personal.

Louise Butchart: There is a bit of work for us in Dundee to get that direct feedback. We have been doing some work with the Dundee fairness leadership panel, which engages directly with customers and with the third sector, which receives some of these reports. We are looking at how we can better engage through regular engagement sessions to get feedback directly and at enhancing our understanding of tenant satisfaction. At present, we measure that through our repair service, and we are sitting just shy of a 90 per cent satisfaction rate. However, I think that we need to drill down further into the particular issue of dampness, mould and condensation as part of that process, to hear directly whether there is mistrust or dissatisfaction with the service that we have delivered.

Mark Griffin: Susie Fitton, is this an issue that you are aware of among your members? From what has been said, there seems to be a trend of a move to in-house provision of surveying and remedying. Is that picture replicated across your member associations?

Susie Fitton: To reflect on what you said about trust and to echo what people have said, I think that our members across Scotland are very keen to remedy mistrust that is caused by a perception of tenants being blamed for damp and mould. In-house provision, where possible for housing associations, is a key part of that.

Housing associations and co-operatives are part of the communities that they serve. They represent the communities that they provide affordable housing to. Our members are charities. They are not-for-profit organisations that are dedicated to providing safe, warm and affordable homes. The commitment is there to support tenants to resolve these issues and to collaborate with them to do that.

Mark Griffin: The Scottish Government has lodged stage 2 amendments to the Housing (Scotland) Bill to make it easier for social housing tenants with damp and mould to get their home fixed within a set timescale. What is the SFHA's position on that proposed change to the bill? Do you have a view on whether legislation is necessary?

Susie Fitton: At the SFHA, we completely understand the desire to act to improve outcomes on this issue, and of course, with our members, we look forward to working with the Scottish Government on any policy development process that would need to follow the introduction of enabling powers.

We have some notes of caution for the committee. When we have discussed those

proposals with members, there was a feeling that there are significant differences between the social housing sector in Scotland and that in England. We have the social housing charter, the need for compliance with the Scottish housing quality standard, the policies and procedures that landlords already have in place to address instances of damp and mould, and the new regulated charter indicators on damp and mould. Those indicators will provide data on performance in relation to damp and mould in the sector, ahead of any enabling powers coming in when the amendments take effect. There was a feeling that it would potentially be useful to allow the collection of that data to bed in and the picture to be fully understood.

As we have already discussed, social landlords in Scotland have policies with clear standards and timescales for investigating and dealing with damp and mould, and for prioritising that work. The timescales are often shorter than those that are being considered in the discussions around implementing Awaab's law. Some of our members felt that there should be a greater focus on support for the social sector to make the best use of existing stock and appropriate use of technology in diagnosing and resolving issues with damp and mould. That is not addressed with a focus on timescales.

10:15

As we have already alluded to, diagnosing and tackling damp and mould can be complicated. We want to ensure that focusing on timescales is not counterproductive, in terms of a contractor striving to meet targets at the expense of proper diagnosis of the issue. That is our position, but I am sure that it will evolve as the legislative process evolves.

The hazards that are included within the scope of any statutory provisions have yet to be identified, but they include many others besides damp and mould. There is lots of work to do on clarifying how the provisions will be monitored.

I will finish by saying that if the intention is to introduce statutory timescales, they should not be and cannot be the only thing that we do about damp and mould. The supply and allocation challenges during a housing emergency must be addressed—we have a chronic shortage of social homes in Scotland. The cost of living crisis, the energy crisis and how tenants are heating their homes are crucial issues. The impact of fuel poverty, which I have already talked about, the costs of retrofitting, the challenges with making repairs in mixed-tenure blocks and competing priorities experienced by housing associations and co-operatives all impact on efforts to tackle the problem. Therefore, they must also be considered alongside any decisions on statutory timescales.

The Convener: Before we go on, I warn people that we are about to close the windows, which makes a noise. I did not want it to be done in the middle of responses, because it is a bit loud. *[Interruption.]* There we go.

The next question, which I will ask, is about other ideas for improvement. Murray Sharp has already mentioned the actions that the Scottish Government and the Scottish Housing Regulator are taking, such as the issuing of guidance and the collection of monitoring indicators. Is there any other action that the Government could take to drive forward improvements in the prevention and treatment of damp and mould in homes?

Murray Sharp: Susie Fitton laid out the position quite well. She reflected on several areas of good practice. There is a movement towards trying to understand the home, its condition and what is happening within it, and there is a movement towards introducing sensors. Some of our colleagues have gone quite far. Stirling Council has installed 1,100 sensors in its homes, and we are about to embark on a pilot to look at the environmental conditions in a number of our houses. We want to identify and, we hope, get an early indication of—without the tenant even notifying us—issues within the property that we can react to. That will enable us to contact or visit a tenant, before they have even noticed that there is an issue or a challenge, to say that we have identified a potential issue that needs to be investigated further. We would then be able to take the same approach to similar property types across our stock.

We are looking to invest in sensor technology so that we can be a lot more proactive and a lot more informed about what is happening in our homes.

The Convener: I will ask a few more questions before opening up the discussion. The committee has been working on building safety and maintenance for quite a while. We started our journey by looking at cladding, then RAAC showed up, followed by damp and mould. A couple of ideas have come up in our discussions. One is the idea that local authorities should have a database that tells us what houses are made of so that we can understand what materials have been used and potential problems with them. Before we even get to that point, maybe we need to have a better understanding of what we allow houses to be made of—I have added that in.

The other idea is about the regular maintenance of buildings. That could involve buildings having what could be described in shorthand as an MOT, in the same way that cars have to have an MOT. From the proactive approach that Murray Sharp has just described, it sounds as though Clackmannanshire Council is already beginning to consider that.

Murray Sharp: It is interesting that you mentioned the idea of an MOT. During the Parliament's consideration of what became the Housing (Scotland) Act 2006, the Chartered Institute of Housing Scotland suggested a system whereby housing—communal stock, in particular—could have a proactive MOT every five or 10 years. Obviously, you could choose how in-depth those MOTs would be.

We should certainly take a data-led approach. We need to use the data as well as possible, reflect it in the stock condition survey and map it across our assets. With the artificial intelligence technology that we now have, the sector has the chance to take that forward, given the stage in technological advances that we have reached.

With regard to the idea of building up a database, that would need to be something that was done in the future. It sounds like a good idea. Such a database would be great if any issues were to come up with particular materials or frameworks that had been used to build homes or properties. In Clacks, we have been hindered in taking a backward view of some of our stock. Some landlords have struggled to identify RAAC because they did not have the relevant historical records. It is a great idea to build up such a database.

Louise Butchart: I have a couple of points to make about that. When it comes to social landlords, our asset management database should capture some aspects of the information that you are talking about, such as stock condition and quality. In Dundee, we will commission a 100 per cent building condition survey in the coming year, which will enable us to continue to build on our existing database and to enhance it by including information on what buildings are made of and the measures that we have installed. That will inform the future direction of our capital plan.

With regard to the idea of regular maintenance, the maintenance that is required feeds from the building condition survey, as well as the reactive service that you deliver. For me, what is most important is that we understand our data, and we are investing in that. We need to understand what the challenges are with regard to property and asset, what the uncontrollables are and how the aspect of fuel poverty fits into that. We also need to think about whether we are directing our advice services and supports where they need to be, what solutions are working and effective, and what needs to move. That is an evolving aspect.

Craig Dugdale: We currently have a pilot whereby 500 properties have sensors that send in data every 15 minutes, record relative humidity and temperature, and calculate the dew point. We get an alert if dampness has been detected or is predicted. If dampness has been detected, our

housing officers will arrange for a survey to be carried out as soon as possible. If dampness is predicted, our housing officers or our surveyors will call the tenant to find out whether something in the environment has changed. The reason might be simple—for example, the tenant might have moved a relative in over Christmas, which has increased the relative humidity.

We are doing a volumetric exercise at the moment, whereby we are extending that pilot to a further 2,000 properties throughout the city. That data gathering process is very proactive. It puts us on the front foot, because it enables us to backtrack and see what the relative humidity was doing. When we go in to do a survey, we will take a hygrometer reading. A hygrometer reading gives us a snapshot in time. It will tell us what the relative humidity and the temperature are at that precise moment, but it will not tell us what they were that morning at 8 o'clock. The sensors give us that information throughout the day, 24 hours a day. That is an example of how we are being proactive.

The Convener: That seems like a great idea. When you gather that data, is it pulled together? Murray Sharp mentioned the use of AI. Are you using AI for analysis?

Craig Dugdale: No, we have not—

The Convener: You have not gone there yet.

Craig Dugdale: No.

The Convener: Okay. Euan, do you have any other ideas for improvement?

Euan McCallum: The picture in Angus is similar to the one that others have described. We might be slightly behind the curve in some areas, but we are certainly looking to commence the piloting of environmental monitoring sensors. We plan to do that. Initially, we are looking to have 200 sensors, which will be sophisticated enough to give data on temperature, moisture, carbon dioxide and air quality in general. Our intention is to spread the sensors around the different house types that we have so that we get a spread of data.

A question was also asked about tracking the different types of properties that we have. Our incumbent housing system already includes some basic information on that, but we are currently implementing a new housing asset management system that will allow us to include a lot more data of that kind, and to record information on issues of damp and mould, which will allow us to target our future investment.

The Convener: I am aware of the time. We are almost an hour into the discussion, and we have not gone deeply into our questions. However, we have touched on the issue of damp and mould, which relates to what is coming next. Two more

colleagues have questions, after which we will move on to the subject of RAAC.

I must ask everyone to be a bit more concise. We have got to the point at which, unless you hold a view that is the complete opposite of what has been said, I will ask you to hold off answering.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): We have already touched on the cost of living and how that is impacting on individuals and how they manage their properties. That is having an impact on dampness and mould, because they are not using the heating in their homes effectively or efficiently, because they are afraid of the cost of doing so. Susie Fitton mentioned that. It would be good to get a flavour of whether other councils are finding that that is happening—that individuals are struggling and, because they are struggling, they are not keeping their heating on at certain times or they are switching things off, and that is having an impact on the process of looking after the property. I will come to Murray Sharp first.

Murray Sharp: I cannot comment on that specifically in relation to damp, but, over the past few years, we have had a number of tenant engagement sessions on our budget and our rent proposals, and we have had money or energy efficiency teams at those sessions to provide support. We hear from tenants all the time that they are struggling because of price increases, especially in gas and electricity.

It is a prevalent issue. I cannot relate it specifically to damp, but it is an on-going issue that presents a challenge for tenants. As Susie Fitton mentioned, we are dealing with a group of tenants who are among the poorest people in society, who face significant increases in their energy costs.

Alexander Stewart: Is the situation the same in Dundee and Edinburgh?

Craig Dugdale: We do not have exact figures, but we are doing a lot more Changeworks referrals, purely because of the effect that fuel poverty is having on damp and condensation.

Alexander Stewart: Susie Fitton mentioned the provision of support, including on income maximisation. How do you ensure that tenants get information about that and that they act on it? Does that help to prevent issues from happening, and does it assist tenants?

Susie Fitton: Housing associations and co-operatives have a range of ways of supporting tenants to ensure that they receive the benefits and social security to which they are entitled. Some offer in-house welfare rights provision and some signpost to third sector and other providers. That is crucial for supporting tenants so that they

can afford to heat and ventilate their homes appropriately.

We hear more and more about tenants being too frightened to put on their heating. We also know that the Scottish house condition survey shows that social tenants were more likely to say that the reason why their home was hard to heat was that they could not afford to heat it.

10:30

We need joined-up policy making to tackle the issue. Efforts to tackle poverty more generally will improve the tenant experience of their home. That can be anything from welfare reform and cash-first approaches to supporting tenants to heat their homes properly, right through to energy market reform, which is necessary to combat the energy price rises and the disparity between tenants who use different heating systems. I note that the fuel insecurity fund, although extremely valuable, has come to an end. Instead of unpredictable rounds of funding, we need a multiyear approach.

The SFHA has been calling for some form of cost of living fund. We have certainly been adding our voice to the call for a social tariff, which would mean that more vulnerable people, including a lot of social tenants, would have more guarantees about the energy bills that they will face. Fundamental to the approach to tackling damp and mould is tackling the underlying causes and the things that impact it.

Louise Butchart: Susie Fitton has covered well the holistic approach and the areas that we need to consider. I echo the points on data and on understanding the root cause, which could be mixed, as Susie Fitton has just highlighted.

For me, this is about ensuring that we have in place energy advice and support. I will give an example from my council. In the previous year, we renegotiated more than £150,000 of fuel debt on behalf of our tenants and cleared a further £150,000 in fuel debt for tenants. This is about looking at the supports and measures that we have in place while we are progressing with this work.

Alexander Stewart: The Scottish Government has said that it will not progress with its proposed heat in buildings bill until it is satisfied that the interventions in it will decrease fuel poverty. If the bill does not go forward and the issue is not progressed to the same level, that is a problem. What impact, if any, do you think that that might have on preventing damp and mould in homes? What should be included in the bill to alleviate the problem? The delay to the bill might mean that some of the solutions that are in it happen later on. Who wants to jump in?

Murray Sharp: That is some question.

Alexander Stewart: Sorry about that.

Murray Sharp: Do you have anything on sport?
[Laughter.]

The issue perhaps speaks to your previous question. I have to declare an interest. I recently moved from a home that had a heat pump. Some of the best tariffs in the marketplace are not available wholesale. For example, British Gas has specific tariffs for those with Vaillant heat pumps—it is 14p or 15p a kilowatt hour for electricity, for example. Those tariffs are not available wholesale; they are available only to exclusive parts of the market. Those who have well-installed heat pumps and use them in the correct way will potentially be paying substantially less than their neighbour on mains gas.

One challenge resulting from tweaks to some of the legislation is that, sometimes, it leads to uncertainty about the investment and uncertainty in the discussions with tenants. There is already a lot of mistrust when it comes to some of the new technologies. Sometimes, the Government moving dates makes the investment decision for us as landlords difficult and the discussions with tenants are even more challenging. We need to be aware of that situation. The issue is being framed in fuel poverty terms, but it perhaps does not take cognisance of the fuel picture in the marketplace.

Louise Butchart: We have given a commitment in Dundee, through our fabric-first approach and investment, to increase energy efficiency in homes while decarbonising heat. We have clearly set out in our strategy that our options appraisal and processes to inform those measures will not put households in a worse position than they are in at the moment and increase fuel poverty. That is the driver for us continuing with that approach.

Jackie Timmons (City of Edinburgh Council): I manage the mixed-tenure improvement service in Edinburgh. The social housing sector will continue to take the fabric-first approach, as Louise Butchart was saying. We will do as much as we can across the city. The delay to the proposed heat in buildings bill will affect mixed-tenure properties because, without the legislation, private landlords and owner-occupiers will not have the drive to do anything and come along with us. It was shown in the working groups that we were involved in that aligning the standards is really important to give us all a platform on which to move along on the same journey. However, it looks like the social housing sector will be in front of the private sector if the delay happens.

Alexander Stewart: What will be the knock-on effect on mixed-tenure properties in Edinburgh?

Jackie Timmons: At the moment, some of the areas that we are in are 50:50 private and council, so we are completely relying on owners agreeing to the works, and they are expensive.

Alexander Stewart: Absolutely.

Jackie Timmons: Those areas are deprived. We will start with the most deprived areas in Edinburgh. The condition of those properties is poor. We try to make a move in areas where the council owns more homes, which give us a greater ability to push things forward. The area that we are in at the moment is 50:50. That is not helpful; it will put a lot of blockers in our way. We are doing this for our tenants, but some of them will lose out because we cannot improve some of those properties.

Alexander Stewart: They will not have the opportunity, because of the delay in things happening. That will have a knock-on effect on what can be achieved. For you, that will create a bigger backlog and a system failure, which will be primarily in the process.

Jackie Timmons: Yes.

Susie Fitton: It is right to say that the proposed heat in buildings bill needs to tackle both fuel poverty and the climate emergency. The SFHA has always been clear on that.

Further delay is not the answer. Our members across Scotland are heavily involved and committed to the clean heat transition, and there are numerous examples of SFHA members upgrading the energy efficiency of homes and installing clean heating systems such as air source heat pumps, ground source heat pumps and clean heat networks. We are very clear that the transition must be fair and just. That means that the cost burden must not sit with those least able to pay via their rent—that is, social tenants. Social landlords need affordable funding mechanisms so that the cost of meeting heat in buildings does not result in unaffordable rent increases.

There is a concern about the practicalities of transitioning to clean heat in mixed-tenure blocks, as has been alluded to. There is also a need to ensure sufficient skills in the supply chain so that we have confidence in the quality of installations and assurance that contractors will be available for on-going maintenance. There are lots of issues. We have outlined some of our key policy asks on transition and decarbonisation. We are finalising a policy position paper on the transition to net zero, and I will send the paper to the committee when it is published.

The Convener: I will bring in Fulton MacGregor, who will ask about retrofitting insulation to existing homes. We have already started to cover that.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): My apologies for being late—I had some train trouble today. As the convener alluded to, when you are late, you run the risk of covering things that have been answered or were included in the opening statements. I apologise if that is the case, and feel free to let me know if the issue has been covered.

The committee has heard that damp and mould problems can be created or exacerbated by poor-quality installation or insulation to existing homes. What are your organisations doing to ensure that renovations and retrofits will not create damp and mould problems for tenants in future? Given the size of the panel, I perhaps do not need everybody to answer, convener.

Jackie Timmons: In our work, we look at the whole building—we take a whole-house approach. For insulation, we look at the dew point, then ensure that the insulation is the right type and designed to the right thickness. We also take into account ventilation of the properties. That is really important. That is part of the process that we go through when we design the insulation measures. We are extending roof lines, making sure that insulation will not get wet and using deeper gutters because of climate change issues.

I hope that that answers your question.

Fulton MacGregor: Do you feel that that approach will safeguard tenants into the future? If so, how long into the future?

Jackie Timmons: In one of the big improvements schemes that we have just finished at Wester Hailes, scientific evidence came back from the suppliers showing that the dew point would have been inside the wall in winter time, which leads to a high risk of damp. Installing insulation completely removes that risk of damp from the property.

You have condensation risk inside the property—Craig Dugdale probably knows more about the technical side of this—and ventilation is key to that. We ensure that the trickle vents are working, and that the ventilation is adequate and of the right type. The insulation comes with 25-year warranties from the manufacturers, as long as it is maintained, so it should last longer than that.

Murray Sharp: It is a challenge. I mentioned that I had moved house during the summer. One thing that we looked at was energy efficiency. Sometimes, it is difficult to check on the insulation in a property because doing so would involve using borescopes and whatever. We discovered that the cavity wall had slumped and that it had not been put in properly. The cost falls on the owner to remove poor insulation.

Last week's witness at the committee issued a call to arms for the sector to ensure that there is a balance between getting the fabric-first approach that Louise Butchart spoke about and not taking that too far. There are houses that have perhaps gone beyond the point at which those measures would be suitable.

Going forwards, we need to consider what we are focusing on. The discussion about the heat in buildings strategy has to be about how far you can take the reduction in the heat demand of the building versus the cost of insulating the system and getting that up to speed. There is a balance to be struck.

Last week's comments to the committee were a call to arms for the sector to reflect on how far we can take some of our existing stock beyond, for example, EPC C.

The Convener: Before we move on to discuss reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—I have to say it in full, otherwise I do not remember which way round the As go—I come back to Murray Sharp. You mentioned that you had looked at the evidence that the committee heard last week. One interesting point from that was the call from Gloria Lo to look at solar thermal as a more cost-effective way of potentially getting heating into people's houses. We heard that Government grants are focused—certainly in the private sector—primarily on air source heat pumps, and Gloria said that we may need to look at thermal solar as a low-cost way of heating, so those grants need to be opened up. Have you looked at solar thermal for social housing? Did you become interested in that after hearing what Gloria Lo had to say?

Murray Sharp: She referred to the 13°C element and the need to introduce a minimum level of protection for properties, which was an interesting take, as we have not looked at that dynamic in particular. We have focused some of our pilots on air source heat pumps. We are interested in looking at options for our flatted dwellings; Jackie Timmons referred to the challenge that mixed tenure will present across Scotland in that regard, especially where the council might not necessarily have majority ownership or anything approaching that. At present, the options for flatted dwellings are very limited, aside from the installation of common-ground source boreholes, with the cost shared across the flatted dwellings.

Technology has to be embraced and welcomed, and its use has to be reviewed case by case. As Gloria Lo expressed well, some of the technology is not particularly affected by the weather in Scotland, because on some of the coldest days in January and February we still manage to get the sun's rays to heat up water, with a boost, so there may be a movement towards that. The technology

is very similar to how heat pumps and boreholes work, whereby an ambient temperature is produced and then boosted with refrigerant and so on. Solar thermal is something for us to take on board and look at.

10:45

The Convener: We move to RAAC, and I will ask the first question. I cue up Jackie Timmons for that, as Gary Brady has been sitting here not saying anything, and I do not want to put him on the spot right off the bat.

Jackie, could you briefly describe the scale of the task that your local authority has faced in dealing with RAAC issues over the past couple of years?

Jackie Timmons: The City of Edinburgh Council is at quite an early stage with that. We have 72 properties with RAAC roof panels in a specific area of Edinburgh. Of those properties, the council owns 44 and the remainder are private. We have done all the surveys—every single RAAC panel on a council property has been surveyed—and we have a risk assessment from our structural engineers; they use the Institution of Structural Engineers guidance on how to risk assess those panels. We have no critical risks, and no evacuation of residents or propping is required, but we have red, amber and green risks, and we are looking at how to deal with those.

We have taken forward works in a void property with advice from structural engineers on what design to use—we have completed that, and we will use it as a base. We have four archetypes, and we need to look at each one separately to work out what the measure approach should be. That is the technical side of thing—there are other challenges on the mixed-tenure side, but we can talk about that aspect separately.

The Convener: Great. We come to Gary Brady.

Gary Brady (Dundee City Council): Dundee City Council is in a similar situation. A couple of years ago, we did not know where RAAC was, and we did not have an inventory of property types, so we had to do a lot of investigation of stock that was built between the 1950s and the 1980s. We ring fenced about 2,500 houses and had to do an investigative analysis to determine what the actual construction was. We have rationalised that to 81 blocks of flats and 293 cottages that have RAAC. Of those, 79 blocks of flats have council tenants or are in mixed tenure and 172 cottages are council tenanted. They were predominantly built in Dundee in a three-year period between 1967 and 1970; there is a real locus in that regard. Having done those investigations, we are confident that those are the only properties where RAAC exists.

Similarly to the City of Edinburgh Council, we have undertaken inspections of the RAAC estate and, barring one or two properties that had very specific issues, none of our properties is in a critical condition. We are able to maintain, through a risk-based approach, the properties that are occupied. Similarly, we are looking at trial repairs this summer on the various archetypes that we have, which cover roughly five or six different property types. It is heartening to hear today that the City of Edinburgh Council is independently looking at a remedial scheme similar to that in Dundee—that is a case of either two minds thinking alike, or the alternative.

The Convener: Thank you for that picture. Does anybody else want to come in on the RAAC picture in their authority?

Murray Sharp: As colleagues have alluded to, when there was media attention and word went out about the unfortunate incident at a school where there was a ceiling collapse, our focus at that stage was primarily on our public buildings, and obviously on the schools.

Early on, while we were still completing that work, we were notified by an owner-occupier who had had a surveyor out to his property that the surveyor had identified what he felt was RAAC. We were called out to do further work, which led to our focusing on that housing estate. In three blocks, the independent structural engineers and the council's building control felt that the situation was critical, and those three blocks have been decanted in Tillicoultry. We have a further seven or eight blocks, all in Tillicoultry, that have RAAC.

We have done checks across the entirety of the rest of our housing stock—as most of our colleagues here today have done—to reach a level of confidence that RAAC is not elsewhere in the stock. We know, for example, that it is located all within Tillicoultry—in some cases, that goes beyond the scope of flatted developments and includes pram stores, bin stores and so on.

We are engaging with the home owners who have been decanted from the blocks. As colleagues have indicated, our most recent discussions with the home owners related to proposals for remedial roof replacement. In that respect, the sector, and the industry itself, have started to gain confidence with regard to some of the works that might be required. There has been a lot of learning and understanding from proposals that have been taken forward in England in particular, where works have been done on some of the public building estate to replace roofs. We are taking forward some of that learning in Scotland, based on the discussions and interactions that we have had with some of our decanted owners.

With some of the other blocks, we are operating a manage-and-monitor approach, which—as colleagues have referred to—is a risk-based system. We are looking at the deflection scores and ensuring that properties are correctly rated as red, amber or green under the system that Jackie Timmons mentioned earlier.

The Convener: Euan McCallum, do you want to give us the picture in Angus?

Euan McCallum: We have surveyed our estates, and 25 Angus Council homes, all in the one street in Monifieth, were found to have RAAC roof panels. Those are part of a development of 75 homes that were built in 1966. The properties are terraced one-bedroom and two-bedroom properties, with a mix of one and two storeys. Right to buy has meant that we do not have outright ownership of any single whole terrace, which can further complicate things.

As has been the case in other councils, we have had independent structural engineers carry out inspections. The condition of the RAAC in our homes is generally good. One home had more significant issues and required a decant—however, subsequent inspections have found that there has been no change at all in that regard, so it may just have been a construction issue at the time that it was built. Again in common with other councils, we have implemented a regime of inspections either every six months or annually.

The Convener: I bring in Meghan Gallacher, who has a number of questions.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Good morning. The witnesses have given a brief overview of what the RAAC situation looks like in their area, but, as we know, RAAC remediation comes at a cost. Have you done an overall costing for how much it will cost your area, how it will be paid for and what role the Scottish Government should play in supporting social landlords and councils that are dealing with RAAC issues? It is a really big question—I do not know who wants to take it. Perhaps Jackie Timmons will start.

Jackie Timmons: I will try to remember all the questions in there.

As part of the capital budget for 2025-26, we have allocated an amount to resolve the RAAC issues in our council homes; that is more than £2 million at the moment.

How the Government can help with the situation is probably more to do with how we deal with the private owner situation. Our powers are limited in certain circumstances around access to homes to do the work and around decanting private home owners in order to do the work where we share ownership in a mixed-tenure block. We want to take the lead in this work. We are being really

open and transparent with owners and tenants, providing copies of all the reports so that everybody can see what we have done so far and telling them that, although we do not have all the answers yet, we are working to find out the answers. We are being open with them.

I attended a meeting last night for owners with properties with RAAC. There are individual circumstances relating to each owner, which we will have to deal with. They have a number of issues—I do not know whether you want me to speak to those right now. They relate to the valuation, insurance and mortgageability of properties. All that is uncertain. It seems that there is not a consistent approach across lenders, insurance bodies or valuation surveyors. I would like to know what the outcome will be in a valuation surveyor's position after RAAC is repaired or remediated and there is no longer a risk. Will the property value reflect its previous market value or not? It is a moving picture. We need guidance from professional bodies as to how we deal with that, and we need a consistent approach from valuers across Scotland. That would be helpful.

Meghan Gallacher: That is a really important point, particularly, as you say, to ensure that the valuation matches the remedial work that has been done, as well as to ensure that it does not fall behind just because of what has happened across the board in some areas up and down the country. Gary Brady, do you have a costing associated with the remediation work that you have undertaken?

Gary Brady: We have not had costings yet. Part of the reason for the pilot repairs is to undertake those works, then look at the scalability of the works to ensure that we can get sensible prices. One issue is that there is no database of costs for remediating RAAC. They are all specific to property type, so they are very sensitive to the market. I guess that, after the pilot repairs, we will be in a position to more accurately reflect what the costs are and to then look at our capital plan to roll out the works to council and mixed-tenure stock. I completely agree with the sentiments expressed earlier on owner-occupiers and how remediation transfers to their mortgageability and insurability.

Murray Sharp: We are going through our business planning period and looking at our capital programme. As part of the finalisation of that programme, as I said earlier, our stock condition survey will look at the blocks that we manage to build up the cost base. In the blocks that we have to decant, we have discussed with the owners their likely contribution. That ranges from £20,000 per owner for roof replacement alone to about £30,000 for a more wholesale solution for roof render, energy efficiency works and so on. That is

a significant challenge for a number of owner-occupiers when it comes to the value of those works versus what might be the assumed value once the works are completed, whether they still have mortgages or equity in the house or whatever. There are major challenges with affordability for some of the repairs.

As Jackie Timmons indicated earlier, we have had a wider group discussion to introduce the fact that we are considering this as an option. A lot of the discussions will need to be quite intense and go into personal details, so they will have to be individualised. It is quite resource intensive for us as landlords to lead on those conversations.

Susie Fitton: On the extent of the issue for housing associations and co-operatives, the regulator has identified that seven registered social landlords have identified the presence of RAAC in some of their homes, and two more RSLs are still investigating whether RAAC is present. The regulator provided guidance on how to assess and manage the risk of RAAC, which sets out the stages of action for establishing the presence of RAAC. Affected members are undertaking comprehensive programmes of surveys and inspections to identify properties in their stock that might contain RAAC, including houses that they own and any private houses for which members act as property factors. Visual assessments and more in-depth surveys have been done. Where privately-owned properties are located in blocks where RAAC has been identified in communal areas, members are working with property owners to try to ensure that necessary monitoring and remedial works are carried out.

11:00

On the financial implications, as witnesses have already explained, identifying and replacing RAAC panels in housing stock can be very expensive, and members might struggle with the high cost of remedial works or full-scale replacements of affected building elements. The need to divert funds to address RAAC-related issues can potentially limit investment in other essential housing improvements or new housing developments.

Insurance and liabilities have been mentioned. The SFHA has recently undertaken research to outline the challenges that housing associations already face in obtaining appropriate property cover, and insurance coverage for RAAC-related risks may be problematic, with increased premiums or insurers refusing coverage, which is a significant issue.

It is certainly fair to say that the financial challenges of dealing with this situation might well impact on a range of landlords' business plans,

affecting their ability to build new homes or upgrade existing ones and, in particular, people's ability to meet net zero requirements. It is obviously potentially disruptive to tenants, with the extent of that disruption being dependent on the response.

Meghan Gallacher: That is really helpful—thank you.

Euan McCallum: In Angus, we have recently completed an options appraisal based on guidance by our independent structural expert. That is now complete and due to go to our housing committee at the end of April. There are five options in the appraisal, with a sliding scale depending on the extent of the work. For our 25 homes that are impacted, we are looking at costs ranging from about £200,000 up to £1.2 million. Under the preferred option, we are looking at removing the RAAC and replacing it with a timber deck roof, newly insulated to current standards, and a single-ply membrane. That has been costed at closer to £1 million—about £900,000. That is certainly the preferred option.

Flowing from that, given that we have junctions with neighbouring properties that are owner occupied or privately let, there is a need to engage with the owners. That is our aspiration. Our ask as part of the options appraisal is that we get permission to really get into the trenches with the owners and see whether we can adopt collaborative solutions with them. It sounds similar to what Clackmannanshire Council is talking about and, by extension, the City of Edinburgh Council, too. That is where we are at the moment.

Meghan Gallacher: Thank you.

Convener, my questions about the support that local authorities and housing associations provide to tenants have been heavily touched on, and the issues for private home owners who live in properties with RAAC elements have also been touched on. I do not want to stray into questions that other members want to ask, so I will leave it there.

The Convener: Mark Griffin has a number of questions.

Mark Griffin: I want to go back to Euan McCallum. I am interested in how landlords and local authorities are dealing with terraced blocks where RAAC is present. Some RAAC panels will straddle multiple properties, so it is effectively impossible to remediate a council property without doing a neighbouring owner-occupied or privately let property. Does the current legal framework prevent you from doing what you need to do? I do not want to say that it is almost easier to do the work in flats, but at least there is a legal framework for tenements and flatbed developments, where there are legal obligations on shared roof spaces.

Is there a legal impediment to remediating an entire terraced row that needs to be done because of the crossover of RAAC panels between properties?

Euan McCallum: I am not absolutely certain about whether there is a legal impediment, but I do not think that there is.

To touch on the technical point that you made, we have done investigations and know that our panels are unique to each of the properties, so they do not straddle the terraced properties. In theory, you would think that that makes things easier, because we could deal with the properties in their own right. However, if you are contemplating, as we are, an option to remove the RAAC panels, that is not straightforward. If you are taking off roof panels, you obviously have to take off the roof finishes as well. We have felt roofs on properties that we think are about 30 years old, so they are already past their serviceable life. The roof finishes are in need of upgrade as well.

We have a preferred option. We need that to be signed off and ratified by committee and after that the plan is to engage with the owners. Our numbers are slightly different from those in other authorities. We have 33 owners who are interspersed in terraces, and our plan is to speak to all of them individually about their circumstances and how we might open up options to find mutually beneficial solutions to the problem.

Mark Griffin: Do any other landlords have experience of panels that go across terraced rows?

Jackie Timmons: We have experience of being an owner in a row of terraced houses. We have recently discovered through the title deeds that the council shares ownership across the whole terrace, although we own only one house in the terrace. As you said, the legal authority to carry out the work under the Tenements (Scotland) Act 2004 does not work for terraced houses. We could use statutory notices under the City of Edinburgh District Council Order Confirmation Act 1991, which we already do for private tenements and other properties. However, that will not work to get the owners to agree to give us access or to move out so that we can do the works. There is definitely a gap in our powers when it comes to remediating terraced houses.

Gary Brady: It depends on the solution for remediating the RAAC. If the RAAC is remediated from below and a new structural deck is placed entirely underneath it, there is no interaction across the terrace. In Dundee, similarly to Angus, the RAAC does not straddle properties in terraces. As Dundee is a series of hills joined by hills, many of the blocks of terraced properties are stepped,

so there is no continuity across the roofs. The landscape is slightly different. Whether there is a party wall issue depends on the solution for RAAC remediation.

Mark Griffin: Survey and remediation guidance is in place for non-domestic properties. Would you welcome that for domestic properties? If so, what would you like to see in that guidance from Government?

Jackie Timmons: It might be helpful to have an archetype-based solution so that we can all share best practice. We have guidance on surveys from the Institution of Structural Engineers, but there is a gap in relation to what solutions are available. Every structural engineer should consider every solution that is available, and we can then apply those to the archetypes that we have in common. That would be really helpful.

Gary Brady: It is fair to say that the guidance is on non-domestic properties—nice big open rooms such as the one that we are in now—rather than houses, which have partitions and a different scale of RAAC. I agree that some of the potential solutions for RAAC that are identified are probably relevant for the non-domestic sector. I would like archetypes to be brought in, not only to help engineers look at the solutions but to look at what would be acceptable for mortgageability and insurability. It would be good to have an agreed framework that everybody buys into as an acceptable way of dealing with RAAC.

Mark Griffin: When RAAC has been a critical issue that has led to decants, what has been the wider knock-on effect on council temporary accommodation provision and homelessness services?

Murray Sharp: That was a very difficult challenge, especially on the evening when building standards indicated that they would serve notices. First and foremost for us, it was about making sure that people were protected and that we had early engagement with residents to try to find them alternative accommodation. There is no doubt that the issue has had an impact on our temporary accommodation this year. Our numbers on temporary accommodation are the highest that they have been for several years.

We also have works progressing on our travelling persons site, as a result of which people have been decanted into our accommodation, which has had an impact. There are no two ways about it: RAAC has had an impact on our ability to offer temporary accommodation within our stock. That has meant that we have had to have placements either outwith the area or in accommodation that is not owned by the council. That puts a big financial burden on the council,

because it does not fully qualify for housing benefit cost assistance.

Jackie Timmons: We have not yet had to decant, but we see that it will have to be done when we carry out the works. That will affect the scheduling of the works because, as you know, in Edinburgh we have a real shortage of housing. If we agree with the local office that we will have four or five properties available, we will need to schedule the works in such a way that we use those properties efficiently and so that people are moved out and back into their properties as we go. That will affect the timeline and how quickly we deliver the repairs.

Mark Griffin: Thank you.

The Convener: That brings us to the end of our session. It has been very helpful to have you in, so thanks so much for joining us.

As that was the last public item on our agenda, I now close the public part of the meeting.

11:12

Meeting continued in private until 12:46.

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