

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

Presentation by Cymuned to the Local Government and Housing Committee

7 November 2001

Policy Solutions to the Housing Crisis

in Welsh-speaking Communities

Background

1. During the second half of the twentieth century Welsh-speaking Wales saw a massive deterioration in the linguistic vitality of its traditional strongholds. This occurred for a number of economic and social reasons. However, one of the main reasons for this was the indigenous population's inability to gain access to the housing market in rural Welsh communities.
2. The solutions to the Welsh language crisis are bound to be complex – they lie in the fields of education and the economy as well as housing and planning. In other Assembly committees, economic solutions should be sought that develop work opportunities, and retain young people in their own communities. In terms of education, our failure to offer adequate support to newcomers to Welsh-speaking communities to learn the Welsh language should be seriously addressed.
3. In our evidence to this Committee, however, we shall restrict our comments to the issues of housing and planning.
4. Since the Fifties social phenomena such as counter-urbanisation have resulted in significant population movement to Welsh-speaking communities, which are often located in some of the most beautiful areas in Britain. This demographic trend has been accentuated by improvements to the transport networks that link England and Wales,

such as the opening of the A55 in north Wales.

5. Other economic factors have also contributed. The Welsh-speaking communities, most of which are in Objective One areas, are amongst the poorest in Europe. This has led to house buyers in other parts of Britain having more capital to buy property in rural Wales than the indigenous population. In many communities, local people cannot gain access to the housing market, and this in turn has led to the outward migration of the local population; to nearby towns or further afield.
6. There has been a tendency for this social problem to have far-reaching consequences at times of growth in the UK housing market, since house prices, and therefore the capital of those house owners, increases more quickly in prosperous regions of England than in rural areas of Wales.
7. At present, with the value of the housing market having risen considerably during the past five years, we are living through a period when local people in many parts of rural Wales cannot afford to buy homes in their own communities.
8. It is worth noting that this is also a problem for English-speaking rural communities in Wales, such as Powys, Monmouthshire and South Pembrokeshire; as well as rural areas in England, such as Cumbria, Devon, Cornwall, Yorkshire, Norfolk and so on.
9. **Cymuned** believes that intervention is required in the housing market in rural Wales in the interests of social justice and equal opportunity. We believe that local people must have the same opportunity as non-local people to own homes. At present, housing policy in Wales does not facilitate this.
10. **Cymuned** also believes that the crisis in the housing market undermines the future of the Welsh language as a community language. We agree with socio-linguists such as Joshua Fishman, the world's foremost authority on revitalising minority languages, that a language must exist within a community context if it is to survive at all. At present the housing market adversely discriminates against that part of the population that is most likely to speak Welsh.
11. In practical terms, therefore, the housing market, as it presently operates, threatens the whole future of the Welsh-speaking community in Wales, contrary to the wishes of that community. Since the Welsh-speaking community is a minority community under pressure, we believe that promoting its interests in a manner which reverses the current trend of linguistic decline is compatible with the aim of creating a multi-lingual and multi-cultural Wales. We also believe it is compatible with the Assembly's commitment to social inclusion, equal opportunities and the vision of a civil society where the weak as well as the strong are treated fairly.

0. **Policy Recommendations**

1. Although the solutions to the housing crisis are complex, complexity should not deter the government of any country from attempting to identify those solutions. The National Assembly has the power to take action, and to provide guidance to Local Government.
2. The Assembly should continue to acknowledge that decisions related to housing and planning have a linguistic dimension. The Government has already accepted this principle and the Welsh language has been an official planning consideration since 1985. It should also be remembered that other precedents exist in Britain and Europe for intervention in the housing market.

1.3 It is inevitable that planning decisions will have a greater effect on the future of the Welsh language in areas where Welsh is still the everyday language of conversation of a substantial proportion of the population. These areas might include whole counties or parts of counties. Henceforth these areas shall be referred to as the 'Welsh-speaking areas'.

4. The following policy guidelines should not be considered as negative policies that exclude and prohibit people from investing in property but rather as measures that support local communities, communities that are often weak economically, and under pressure linguistically.

1. **Research**

1. In order to draw up growth projections and house building strategies, the principle of 'predict and provide' should be abandoned. 'Predict and provide' seeks to 'foresee' the demand for new housing for years to come. Due to the nature of the free market, although the new houses that are built will be purchased, this will frequently be done by an incoming population. As a result, population movement subsequently justifies the 'prediction'. This massive population rise is not based on local needs and is destructive to the Welsh language as a community language.

Rather than 'predict and provide', any development should be based on detailed research of the needs of local communities.

2. A research sub-division should be established in each County Council that is within, or partly within, the Welsh-speaking areas. This sub-division should be responsible for undertaking surveys, collecting evidence and accumulating statistics on the linguistic and social nature

of those individual communities within the Welsh-speaking areas. These should include research into language trends, housing needs, population shift, work patterns and travel patterns.

3. This information should be constantly updated and maintained so it can be used by officers, councillors and members of the public who wish to know about the linguistic nature of their communities at any given time.
4. Having abandoned the 'predict and provide' principle, research should form the basis of any forecasts regarding new housing developments of any kind in these areas, forecasts that could be provided for relatively short cycles, e.g. every two or three years rather than every decade.
5. This sub-division should also be responsible for undertaking language impact surveys when required.
6. Another of the sub-division's responsibilities would be feeding necessary information to the National Housing Authority that is referred to in Section 6.

2. **Planning**

1. The National Assembly should give practical and moral support and guidance to local authorities to implement planning regulations that give full consideration to the effects of any development on the Welsh language. Many of these regulations already exist and local authorities should be given guidance how best to use them.
2. **Cymuned** is particularly concerned about the quality of some Unitary Development Schemes, many of which are being developed at present.

We believe that Ceredigion's Draft Unitary Development Scheme is particularly inappropriate. It claims that up to 6,500 new dwellings are

needed in the county by 2016. In reaching this figure, Ceredigion has replaced the Assembly's estimate of population in the county in 2016, namely 73,500, with a 'predict and provide' model from Norfolk that estimates a population increase to 82,435.

Planning decisions should not be based on a single planning model from outside Wales, where no linguistic considerations exist at all.

Each Unitary Development Plan should present recommendations from at least three different expert independent sources (such as the London Research Centre) for the number of houses that should be developed in the County during the Plan's lifespan. A detailed summary should be presented of the statistical base that has led to the recommended figure in each case, and the Authority's detailed reasons for selecting that particular figure from amongst the other recommendations should be clearly stated.

3. The effects of planning decisions on the Welsh language should be considered against a broader political background of sustainable development and environmental planning.

3.4 The indigenous language of any area is part of the fine environmental web that makes every area unique. Sustainable development should strive to maintain the area's linguistic environment as well as its natural environment. Often the same considerations will be relevant in both cases – over-development of housing is harmful to the environment and to scenery as well as to the Welsh language, the very qualities that visitors and newcomers often find attractive in the first place.

3.5 Technical Advice Note 20 should be strengthened to include the above points and to give County Councils clear guidance that they have the right and responsibility to protect the interests of the Welsh language.

6. There should be no presumption in favour of development. Instead there should be policy adoption of 'language belts' similar to 'green belts', where development is prohibited unless there is irrefutable proof of the need to do so.
7. We are not of the opinion that there is a need to enlarge the current housing stock in Welsh-speaking communities. The problem is not a lack of housing but rather the inability of the local population to gain access to the housing that is already available.
8. Any new development should include irrefutable proof of local need.

9. A survey should be undertaken of the linguistic effect of any development that consists of more than one house in Welsh-speaking areas, and more than ten houses within ten miles of the border of any of these areas.
10. Planning permission that has been granted in the past (over 5 ago or more) should be re-assessed in order to consider whether it poses a threat to either the environment or the Welsh language. The Assembly should request that Westminster introduce primary legislation so that local councils may be compensated for any compensation paid out to holders of repealed planning permissions.
11. The Assembly should encourage planning authorities to exercise their right under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 to impose a time limit on any planning permission granted.
12. Any new development should include a Section 106 Agreement.
13. New planning permission should include a condition that the application must be re-submitted if the work has not been completed, and the dwelling not ready for habitation, within 18 months. The application should then be re-submitted every six months thereafter along with the appropriate submission costs.

3. Housing

1. Under normal circumstances house prices reflect the state of the local economy. Low house prices are to be expected in areas where there is a weak economy, low wages and high unemployment.
2. The opposite is true in rural Wales. Houses prices are decided by other economies, and not the local economy. Although the local economy is weak, house prices are high and far beyond the means of local residents. This is a serious problem that demands policy solutions.
3. Although there is a very real demand for better-paid

employment in Welsh-speaking areas, the local economy will

never be in a position to compete directly with that of the large cities and more prosperous regions of England. The only solution for Welsh-speaking communities is to control the housing market, and/or offer financial support to local buyers.

4. Property should be designated for the use of local people. Local

people should be defined as individuals who have lived in an area for ten years, or who have attended a local school. An area should be defined as being within a ten mile radius of the dwelling concerned.

5. Local authorities should use Section 106 Agreements to ensure this.

6. When property is available in Welsh-speaking communities, but

no local buyer available, people from outside the area should be

considered and prioritised by developing a points system that would acknowledge family ties, proximity to the ten mile border and employment needs.

7. Many estate agents in Welsh-speaking areas understand that

economies outside the locality decide prices and therefore advertise directly in those areas rather than attempt to sell locally.

8. A 'For Sale' sign should be placed on any house that comes on

the market for at least a month before it is advertised in newspapers. This would ensure that local people would know that the house is for sale before commercial advertising takes place.

9. Houses should not be advertised by an agent whose registered

office is further than 30 miles away from the dwelling concerned until a year has passed since the property was first advertised.

4.10 Every estate agent should have a statutory responsibility to offer a 'welcome pack' to every potential buyer explaining the linguistic and cultural background of Welsh-speaking communities and noting the desire of these communities that newcomers learn Welsh.

11. Suitable housing should be available to rent in order to meet

local demand. This should be a statutory responsibility on local authorities. This provision should be made from the current housing stock.

12. The demand for housing should not be met at the price of destroying rural communities. Apart from developments that meet the proven needs of agricultural or forestry workers, or their families (such as parents retiring from farming and leaving the farmhouse), no housing development should be permitted in open countryside outside areas specified for dwelling.

13. In villages and rural areas, buildings should not be transformed for any purpose other than for the creation or maintenance of employment, agricultural diversification, or to meet a proven local demand for affordable housing.

14. Any housing development should include a local employment element, possibly 1 employment element per 3 dwellings in large villages or 1 employment element per 5 dwellings in towns.

15. Housing associations have an important role to play in meeting

local needs, but a fresh view needs to be taken regarding house

building schemes. At present housing associations are required to provide new stock that offers best value to the Assembly.

Consequently, large numbers of houses are built on the same

site. This does reduce single unit costs to the value determined by the Assembly. But it also results in new tenants being shifted from rural areas to live on the outskirts of towns.

16. The Assembly's house buying rules should be amended to allow housing associations and councils to buy more private houses and ex-council houses in rural areas and let them (adapted if necessary) to the residents. With council houses, Right to Buy legislation should be amended and the 'right to buy' should be changed to the 'right to acquire'.
17. The present situation where slum landlords import people from deprived backgrounds in England to live in some of the most disadvantaged communities in Wales should be resolved. These people are often housed in very poor quality accommodation. They then have a right to be rehoused by the local council, rising very quickly to the top of the housing waiting list.
18. Assembly secondary legislation in housing should be studied to see whether slum landlords will exploit it. In February, the Assembly passed the Homeless People Order extending the categories of individuals regarded as requiring priority for accommodation. The Order is not operational in England. We would like to see research undertaken to establish whether these disadvantaged individuals will be encouraged to move to Wales as local authorities in Wales now have an obligation to accommodate them, which is not the case in England.
19. The immoral trade in people by slum landlords should be

prevented by releasing funds to raise housing standards so that

unscrupulous landlords cannot place newcomers to Wales in

unsuitable dwellings. The points system used by local councils

in deciding whom to rehouse should also be reviewed so that

local people with needs cannot be prevented from gaining access

to appropriate housing as a consequence of this trade.

20. We support the Assembly's Home Buy Scheme. We believe that this scheme is an important contribution to social justice since it enables local people to buy houses and live in their own communities. But we do not believe that the resources

released to date meet the demand. At least £20 million per annum is required to ensure that a meaningful number of people are enabled to live in their own community.

We implore the Assembly to make more funding available for this scheme with immediate effect.

4. Holiday Homes

1. Too many holiday homes in any area is totally destructive to the social and linguistic networks of those areas.
2. Since the owners of these homes possess far greater economic power than the residents of Welsh-speaking areas their strength enables them to price local buyers, who are relatively weak economically, out of the market. The effect of this is seen in house prices that extend far beyond the holiday home market.
3. These homes, which are empty for a large part of the year, literally create a gap in local society, which in turn makes that community less attractive to live in.
4. Often, holiday homes are transformed into main dwellings and this too leads to a deterioration in the Welsh language in these areas.
5. The need and the ability to buy holiday homes derive from economic factors that exist outside Welsh-speaking areas.
6. Owners buy property in addition to their main dwelling, either as an investment, a retreat/holiday home, and/or to create an income by letting out the property. In this sense buying a holiday home is a business arrangement, and the Assembly should recommend to the Treasury that VAT should be charged on the purchase. We also support calls to raise council tax on holiday homes to 200%.
7. Planning permission ought to be necessary to change a permanent dwelling into a holiday home. Permanent dwellings and holiday homes should not be included in the same Use Classes for Planning Regulations (Use Classes Order 1995). Holiday homes can be placed in a different Use Class to permanent dwellings. It is within the National Assembly's powers

to amend the Use Classes Order. That would mean that planning permission would be needed to change a permanent dwelling into a holiday home.

8. Holiday homes should not account for more than 5% of any

community's housing stock.

5. A Housing Authority for Wales

1. An authority should be established that is able to predict

housing needs and the types of housing provision that is required in future years.

2. The aim of such an authority would be to establish a national planning structure.

3. Such an authority would operate on the principle of meeting

demand for housing rather than rewarding individuals who profit from over-development.

Notes