

SH 44

Ymgynghoriad ar ail gartrefi

Consultation on second homes

Ymateb gan: Unigolyn di-enw

Response from: Anonymous individual

**Response to local Government and Housing Committee re the Inquiry into Second Homes, the terms of reference which were to examine the recommendations made by Dr Simon Brooks, the Welsh Government response and to consider policy objectives and evaluate the evidence base for policy changes and to identify gaps in knowledge and data.**

### **Interest declared**

The family have owned a mountain property for 60 years. When purchased its roof needed replacing, it had one cold water tap, no access apart from a footpath climbing over 300 feet of steep mountainside up which all items had to be carried, no services (apart from electric light) no cooking facilities beyond a black lead grate and no indoor privy.

Over the years well over £120,000 pounds has been spent in bringing the property up to standard by employing local labour and purchasing local supplies as well as our own back breaking sweat. We have built firm friendships in the community and regularly support local shopkeepers and transport services. As an act of community support, we have for 60 years allowed the local farmer to graze our small field for a peppercorn rent. Our contribution to the environment as stewards of the land has involved agreement with the NRA for replanting an area with natural species. This is being done at our own expense and is our contribution to the environment.

The property is used throughout the year, which includes all seasons and all weathers. Local services/businesses are supported throughout the year.

### **Recommendations made by Dr Brooks**

Dr Brooks in his report made a number of valuable contributions to the need to provide affordable housing for local people, whilst maintaining the viability of rural communities, their language, culture and heritage.

Amongst them were recommendations to consider the following; -

- Developing regional and local variations in public policy
- Controlling the number of second homes
- Closing the loophole which allows second home owners to register their properties as short term holiday lets, thus putting them into the business rate category, thereby avoiding paying community charges and community charge premiums
- Introducing legislation which allows long term empty housing units to be brought back into the housing stock

- Ensuring that properties built for those in the community carry clauses which mean that on resale, or at the end of a tenancy, they remain within the local housing stock for local people
- Encouraging County Councils with serious housing shortages to increase community charge premiums on second homes to 100%
- Varying the land transaction tax to reflect local circumstances
- For Welsh Government to consider whether planning guidance should be amended or strengthened to support local housing schemes
- Establishing a Commission to make recommendations regarding the future of the Welsh Language as a community language

These recommendations if implemented will way support rural communities.

Neither Dr Brooks or subsequently Welsh Government have been able to come up with a suitable definition of a second home. With regard to the second bullet point-controlling the number of second homes we note that Welsh Government is looking at defining new housing use classes (UCOs) and creating a class C5 for second homes. Perhaps there needs to be a class for those second home properties lived in for most of the year (non- letting). Again, defining a family as 6 people is fraught with contention.

It is noted that Welsh Government has stated in their consultation document on planning legislation that, "While changing the UCO will not impact on existing second homes and short term lets, changes to the UCO might enable the planning system to respond to issues in the future." We do not agree that existing second homes be included in any future changes, which are disadvantageous to the owners.

### **Other aspects which would support local people in acquiring their own home**

- Welsh Government should further develop shared ownership schemes for local people
- Welsh Government should provide grants to help local people buy or renovate property
- Welsh Government should develop schemes to buy and renovate empty houses for local people
- Welsh Government should require local planning authorities to release suitable land for affordable housing for local people
- Welsh Government alongside the planning authorities, including National Parks, should relax planning restrictions to support the children of local families living in the upland areas of Wales who want their own home. This is best illustrated by a couple of examples- The National Park refused planning permission for a Welsh speaking farmer's son, who with his family was living in a caravan on the farmstead, to convert a derelict upland property which his

father owned into a home. The local council supported the family in re-applying for planning permission and it was eventually granted after much local pressure. The son who works in North Wales continues to live in his new home with his wife and two children. Their example of the re-populating of Upland Wales (where there was once upland townships of dispersed farms and cottages) by Welsh speaking local people is one that could be replicated many times over with gentler and proactive planning law.

Eg- a farmer with two Welsh first language sons working on the family's upland farm wanted to convert a barn into a dwelling for his second son. Planning law was not supportive.

### **Is Gwynedd County Council using the second home additional premiums to the community charge to provide affordable homes for local people?**

There are many sources of income and all must be tapped to produce maximum delivery of homes. Gwynedd County Council levies a 100% additional premium to the community charge for second home owners. Whilst this causes some discomfort to second home owners its purpose is clearly stated as being used to build affordable homes for rent for local people. Gwynedd CC Housing Plan (January 2021) clearly states that it will use the 22.9 million of funding from the second homes premiums between 2021 and 2026 for this purpose. This is good news.

However, when on a freedom of information request, I asked Gwynedd CC for the amount it had collected in and would collect in the period 2018 to 2026 I was told I was not entitled to this figure. I was given the formula and referred to Welsh Stats to work it out. On doing this I calculated that £54 million would be raised between 2018 and 2026 (50% additional 2018-2020; 100% 2021-2026). If the figures are different publish them!

On writing to the Minister for Climate Change requesting that information be placed in the public domain for the following-

- the figures for the additional premium money collected by counties annually
- the figure for the amount spent; annually
- the number of homes it provided
- and where the homes had been built,

the reply from the civil servant stated that Welsh Government regarded it as a matter for the County Council!

In Education, the Health service, Social Care Welsh Government monitors the impact of its spending through various measures. Why is Housing different? If I were a family needing affordable housing in Gwynedd, I would want to see that all funding was being used to produce a home for me. Don't Second Home owners need to see that their contribution is being used to benefit local families? Would this not strengthen the bond between the two groups?

We live in a democracy and public funding is open to scrutiny. Welsh Government must place a duty on County Councils to give the above information annually. They need to be held to account so that funds are not used to subsidise other things.

### **Balance, Social Justice and Avoidance of unintended consequences.**

There is general acceptance that the second home debate is both complex and emotive and there is a real need for understanding from all parties to gather reliable data and analyse it before acting in undue haste. Statements like second homes are the problem, or second homes are killing the language does little to move to a positive conclusion.

There is a real danger that social cohesion in the towns and villages, particularly in the far west of Wales will be severely damaged by hotheads on all sides of the debate, by politicians seeking to gain votes from the electorate or in the Senedd; by reporters cashing in on negative stories etc. In these circumstances there can be no winners, everyone is a loser.

Ministers and others need to publicly acknowledge, and keep acknowledging the contribution made by second home owners and holiday flat owners. The hospitality sector alone in Gwynedd accounts for 27.35% of employment (Ms Liz Saville-Roberts speaking in the Commons), whilst the Western Mail stated that tourism's contribution was worth £1.35 billion to the County's economy, employing 18,200 people with 7.81 million visiting annually. Plainly local and holiday maker need each other.

Why is it that second home owners' representation is not sought? It is far better to make them part of the solution, rather than repeatedly seeing them as part of the problem. Consultation is key and it is only recently that three consultations are being undertaken by Welsh Government/Senedd. How do second home owners know that there are consultations? Have they been notified by their taxing authority?

Whilst Dr Simon Brooks' report has many excellent features and much valuable comment his own personal background was not declared and the fact that it was funded by Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, rather than directly by Welsh Government places it in a more difficult position in securing its impartiality. The management of the process of commissioning the report should have been stronger.

The tone by a few individuals in the questions and answer sessions of the plenaries in the Senedd have not always shown adequate respect between MSs.. This does nothing to move the debate forward and secure action on the affordable homes front.

### **Responses to various arms of Welsh Government/Senedd**

In the space of three months there have been requests to comment on second homes from three different arms of Welsh Government/Senedd. Many will not have responded to what is a national debate for they will not have picked it up.

Three consultations in as many months raises the question, "Are individual Ministers and Civil servants in their many departments aware of the holistic nature of the debate?"

(Local Government and Housing Committee -Response to Second Homes; Consultation on Welsh Language Communities Housing Plan put out by Minister Jeremy Miles; consultation on Planning legislation and policy for second homes and short-term holiday lets put out by the Minister for Climate Change).

### **Other points**

- Councils should not be allowed to charge more than 100% additional premiums as this would endanger social cohesion, which is already being tested by some hotheads eg sign in house window in central Dolgellau August 2021, 'Visitors Go Home'
- Welsh Government should look at re-populating the upland communities in Wales. Some of these lie in National Parks, some are on National Trust land, others in private ownership. There should be grants for local people and National Bodies to repair.re-build and add them to the housing stock for in the first instance for rent to locals and failing that for letting as an income stream for locals/national bodies, including National Parks themselves. How many romantic ruins do we need?
- Private development schemes by companies, also need to make a larger contribution to affordable homes for local people. They should be required to build in a higher percentage of affordable homes for local people- 40%
- Much of the data so far published by various bodies lacks detail and can be interpreted in a variety of ways. However, we accept the need for affordable homes for local people

All the above comments are made in good faith with the underpinning belief that we can do more together than apart in providing affordable homes for local people for rent/sale; maintaining and re-vitalising our village communities; and protecting and maintaining the Welsh language.