

# Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

## Inquiry into the provision of affordable housing in Wales

### Response from Rural Housing Enabler



My contribution to this inquiry is made as an independent Rural Housing Enabler with 4 years experience of working in three different planning authority areas, representing 52 community councils.

*'The effectiveness of public subsidy in delivering affordable housing, in particular Social Housing Grant;'*

Without doubt there would be significantly fewer affordable homes in Wales if it were not for public subsidy, but it would be wrong of me if I did not highlight some of the failings with the current approach. Up until fairly recently there has been an over reliance, particularly on Social Housing Grant (SHG), to deliver affordable housing and as such opportunities to explore other funding options may have been missed. With the limited amount of SHG currently available to deliver housing, there needs to be greater scrutiny on whether a development provides value for money, not just in terms of housing, but its wider economic and regenerative impact and the contribution it makes to sustainable communities. I also feel a closer scrutiny of overall scheme costs could identify where savings could be made. Some organisations are much more cost effective than others and it is important that efficient practices are publicised and shared for all to learn from.

*'Whether alternatives to public subsidy are being fully exploited;'*

I think the fiscal constraints all organisations face means alternative funding methods are being sought out. I believe the affordable housing sector is slightly behind where it should be in exploring alternatives, but I am confident that over the next few years more funding options will become available. It is imperative that when an organisation does access alternatives to public subsidy, then their approach is disseminated for others to learn from.

*'Whether the Welsh Government, local authorities and RSLs are effectively utilising their powers to increase both the supply of, and access to, affordable housing;'*

To such a broad based question it is only really possible to provide a generic answer and that would have to be no. There is a failure by all parties to focus on the outcome, which should be to increase the supply and access to affordable housing. For example, if there is local support for affordable housing development, even if that is as part of an open market development, then is it the duty of the representative bodies to do everything they can to facilitate it. If a 'can do' attitude was adopted, I know that mindset alone would increase delivery significantly and that would therefore provide additional economic benefits and a regenerative effect where the development takes place. The key to this is a move away from the 'risk-adverse culture' which is usually adopted by public bodies in Wales.

*'Whether there is sufficient collaborative working between local authorities, RSLs, financial institutions and homebuilders;'*

As I work with three planning authorities, at least six RSLs and numerous homebuilders, I can confidently say that there is insufficient collaborative working between these parties. There tends to be fairly good collaborative working between the RSL partners, especially in terms of the various consortia. I also feel that there are relatively good working relationships between homebuilders and RSLs. I think the biggest failing is the lack of a collaborative approach between local authorities, where there are significant differences in policies with resultant differences in housing actually being delivered. I feel that if local authorities fail to work more closely together than a regional approach to planning would be the best way forward. If this approach is ever adopted, then there would have to be assurances that individual communities are actively involved in influencing what is planned for, as this is critical to achieving sustainable development.

*'Whether innovative methods of delivering affordable housing such as Community Land Trusts or co-operatives could be promoted more effectively by the Welsh Government.'*

I do not think the responsibility to promote innovative methods of delivering affordable housing should be reliant on the Welsh Government. To date, there have been very few, if any noteworthy examples in Wales of innovative approaches to delivery which merit promotion. Outside of Wales though there are examples where innovation has led to successful outcomes and the Welsh Government should encourage Welsh delivery agents to broaden their horizons to seek out these cases.

I have some experience of Community Land Trusts and would suggest that although the principle is worthy of support, in practice there are so many difficulties that they take an inordinate amount of time and resources before there is any delivery. Some of the ones I am aware of have not provided good value for money.

I am only just beginning to explore housing co-operatives, but am very excited about the opportunity they present. I am currently assisting a rural community where a housing co-operative seems to be the best solution for bringing

empty homes back into habitable use. The more I delve into the subject the more applications I can see it can be applied to, so I really feel this is an area where, more important than just Welsh Government promotion, it will need political support.

I sincerely hope you find my contribution useful. I would be happy to give oral evidence if requested to do so.

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