

## Written submission from the Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations

### Introduction

The Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations (GWSF) is the leading membership and campaigning body for local community-controlled housing associations and co-operatives (CCHAs) in the west of Scotland. The Forum represents 63 members who together own around 75,000 homes. As well as providing decent, affordable housing for nearly 75,000 households in west central Scotland CCHAs also deliver factoring services to around 13,000 owners in mixed tenure housing blocks. For almost forty years CCHAs have been at the vanguard of strategies which have helped to improve the environmental, social and economic well-being of their communities.

The Forum's key objectives are: to promote the values and achievements of the community-controlled housing movement; and to make the case for housing and regeneration policies that support our members' work in their communities.

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee's Call for Evidence on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill. Our response has been developed by members of the Forum and reflects their experiences of working alongside local people in their communities for the past four decades. We have answered the Committee's specific questions but begin by offering some overall comments.

- We support the duty which the Bill places on Scottish Ministers to “develop, consult on and publish a set of national outcomes for Scotland, which must be reviewed at least once every five years. We also welcome the fact that Ministers must regularly and publicly report progress towards these outcomes. However, we would caution that the outcomes in relation to community empowerment must be developed in conjunction *with* communities and must be meaningful *to* them.
- The overall policy aims of the Bill in relation to community empowerment, including supporting subsidiarity and local decision making and taking an assets-based approach, echo the core values of the community controlled housing movement. Consequently, we are extremely happy to endorse them.
- We strongly believe that *true* community empowerment can only be achieved as a result of action taking place at local level with local people leading, supported by trusted community anchor organisations. As the community controlled housing model demonstrates, when community empowerment happens in this way it leads to sustainable and enduring physical and social regeneration within communities. We are therefore delighted that the Bill highlights the important role of community anchor organisations, and community controlled housing associations specifically.
- However, we would like to reiterate here our concerns (as stated in our previous consultation responses) that the Bill does not develop thinking about how to support the role of CCHAs and other community anchors (e.g.

Community Development Trusts). We would like to see the Scottish Government more clearly setting out the key characteristics of community anchors, and to use this as a platform for promoting innovative and collaborative approaches to public service planning and delivery in our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods. GWSF's working definition of a community anchor is an organisation that:

- Operates within a particular neighbourhood;
  - Has the interests of the community in that neighbourhood at the core of its purpose and activities;
  - Operates at a local level and is both trustworthy and stable;
  - Has a governance structure based on control by local residents and accountability to them.
- The potential savings to public sector budgets of the early prevention and intervention activities which community Controlled Housing Associations are involved in are huge. Our model is based on *real* community empowerment which has stood the test of time over the last 40 years.
  - We know that the Scottish Government recognises this and we are delighted that the Government's Third Sector Directorate has recently provided funding for one year for a GWSF post of Regeneration Partnership Coordinator. The aim of this post is to support CCHAs who wish to further develop their role as community anchors, improving on the social, economic and physical outcomes for their tenants and local areas. This type of formal acknowledgement and support will help to underpin our members' work in their communities as we move into the next 40 years.

**To what extent do you consider the Bill will empower communities, please give reasons for your answer?**

Overall, we believe that the Bill includes measures which have the potential to empower communities. But, we would add, not on its own, and with the following caveats and comments on particular sections. (Please note these draw upon our previous responses to CEB consultations).

We are pleased that the Bill highlights the fact that "community empowerment means different things for different communities." As our members know from years of experience all communities are unique, and all are equipped with distinctive assets and often face distinctive obstacles.

Subsequently, we believe that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to community empowerment. Different approaches will work in different communities and some aspects of the Bill will be more relevant for particular types of communities. Furthermore, some communities will have an advantage/be better placed to take advantage of the measures in the Bill than others. (We have elaborated on this issue in our response to Question 3.)

## **Community Planning Partnerships**

We support the emphasis on delivering better outcomes. We strongly welcome the proposed focus on outcomes, and a shared plan for outcomes is a sensible approach.

However, our view is that community planning has been (and is likely to continue to be) a mechanism for improving the way that public sector organisations work together to achieve agreed objectives. It has generally operated at a local authority level, and we believe is likely to continue. The current proposals do not challenge this 'top down' view of community planning.

There has been a serious disconnect between the (valid) objective of public sector organisations agreeing common and shared outcomes and the need to effectively engage communities in the decisions that affect them.

The most effective community engagement takes place at a neighbourhood level or within particular communities of interest. So there is currently a serious mismatch between the scale of community planning and the scale at which community engagement is likely to be effective.

Community planning partners have (on occasion) tried to bridge this gap by encouraging community activists rooted in particular geographic or thematic communities to 'represent' the community at a local authority wide level. This has led to frustration (on both sides) and to community engagement in community planning being ineffective.

In our view, there is a real need to redesign community planning from a neighbourhood level up, to allow effective community engagement and empowerment. This would make sure that the outcomes for community planning were directly relevant to the communities which were affected and that there was a direct interest in the planning, resourcing and integration of services. We see no way that this can be achieved at a local authority wide level.

We believe that community anchor organisations (suitably supported by resources from community planning partners) should have a key role in co-ordinating community planning at a sub-local authority level. This approach is being encouraged in Glasgow where New Gorbals Housing Association has been spearheading the new Thriving Place approach outlined in the Glasgow SOA, and Govanhill Housing Association has hosted the Hub – an operational joint tasking approach across all the main agencies operating in the area.

## **Participation Requests**

We strongly support the participation of communities in the decisions that affect them. However, we are not convinced that legislation is the best way to deliver this. For example, our experience is that most public bodies have not embedded the National Standards of Community Engagement in the work of their organisations.

We believe that this has to do with the culture of the organisations and their leadership (and a fear of giving up any power to communities): legislation, certainly on its own, is not going to bring a major improvement here, in our view. The process that is suggested seems designed to introduce a confrontational, 'stick rather than carrot' approach between the community and the public body rather than a partnership or co-productive approach.

### **Community Right to Buy**

We recognise that the Community Right to Buy provisions of the Bill refer to a specific legal mechanism. More generally, though, we would assert our strong support for community ownership. After all, each of our 63 members is a community owner and collectively our members own around 75,000 homes. This is beyond doubt the most effective community ownership approach in the UK.

Community controlled housing associations are the best and most enduring example of community ownership in Scotland today. They have achieved this through:

- well supported capacity building for community members;
- a balance of local accountability and appropriate external regulation;
- the creation of substantial community controlled housing assets;
- their local offices and staff resource;
- longevity and sustainability and a degree of resilience that is highly unusual in community based organisations;
- the development of a wide range of services; and
- providing the 'social glue' that holds communities together, strengthening local networks and making people in communities more connected with each other.

### **What will be the benefits and disadvantages for public sector organisations as a consequence of the provisions in the Bill?**

We can envisage several benefits for public sector organisations as a consequence of the provisions in the Bill. These include:

- Meaningful engagement with communities and an opportunity for genuine co-production of services with Third Sector partners and communities themselves;
- The opportunity to develop innovative ways of working;
- The opportunity to align key policy areas including Reshaping Care for Older People and Health and Social Care Integration with community empowerment and a preventative agenda which incorporates a grass-roots, locally focused approach;
- The opportunity to overcome 'silo' style working and its associated perspectives and behaviours.

In our experience, public sector organisations often perceive these potential benefits as disadvantages. Framed in this way this, the key disadvantages might include:

- The need to relinquish control to the Third Sector and to communities themselves;
- The need for a top-down and extensive culture change in public sector organisations.

**Do you consider communities across Scotland have the capabilities to take advantage of the provisions in the Bill? If not, what requires to be done to the Bill or to assist communities, to ensure this happens?**

As we have stated already (paragraphs 1.2 and 1.3), all communities are different and we believe that there is no ‘silver bullet’ approach which can be used to engender community empowerment.

Furthermore, some communities will be better equipped to take advantage of the provisions in the Bill since they are already farther down the road to empowerment and have more assets and skills at their disposal which will enable them to potentially benefit more. Consequently, an unintended outcome of the Bill might be increased inequalities between communities.

Most of our members operate in the most deprived communities in Scotland – and the achievement of real community empowerment in these areas has been an enormous influence in increasing confidence and self-esteem for individuals and communities in these areas.

We would like to have seen the Bill directly draw upon this experience and set out a coherent and explicit strategy for community capacity building with the community anchor model at its core. Although, we do welcome the Bill’s intention to ‘build on existing guidance and the experience of communities themselves in becoming more empowered, as well as those who have been working over the years to support communities.’

**Are you content with the specific provisions in the Bill, if not what changes would you like to see, to which part of the Bill and why?**

Whilst we broadly support the overall aims of the Bill we feel that there are two main areas of missed opportunity. In our preliminary comments we have already stated our concerns over the lack of a clearer recognition of the main characteristics of community anchor organisations.

As we have stated in our previous responses to consultation on the Bill, we are also disappointed that the explicit link between community empowerment and community-led regeneration has disappeared. We passionately believe that the two operate in tandem to deliver tangible results. This has been demonstrated time and time again through community-led physical and social regeneration initiatives in our neighbourhoods.

Dr Kim McKee<sup>1</sup> (2011) highlighted this success stating *“the success of localised interventions is nonetheless dependent on engaging the community in regeneration, so initiatives can be sustainable and genuinely reflect the vision of residents.”*

As representative sector bodies both GWSF and the SFHA agree that the opportunity that this Bill afforded in terms of effectively making the links and establishing a frame-work between community empowerment and community-led regeneration may not be as obvious now as once was hoped.

**What are your views on the assessment of equal rights, impacts on island communities and sustainable development as set out in the Policy memorandum?**

We believe the assessment of equal rights, impacts on island communities and sustainable development as set out in the Policy memorandum is both reasonable and adequate.

**Further information**

The views we have expressed in this response reflect the community controlled housing movement perspective on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill. We hope that they are of value to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee in its evidence gathering process. If the Committee wishes to follow up on any of the issues we have discussed we will be happy to provide further information.

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<sup>1</sup> McKee, K. (2011) Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations' Response to the Scottish Government's Regeneration Discussion Document: Building a Sustainable Future.