

Written evidence 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 Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee's call for written evidence on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill. We also look forward to giving oral evidence at the Committee's session on 3rd December.

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. It draws upon our response to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee's call for evidence on the Bill earlier this year and on our previous consultation responses to the Bill.

The Role of Community Anchors

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 Association Movement. Consequently, we are extremely happy to endorse them.

Sir Harry Burns, Professor of Global Public Health at the University of Strathclyde (and formerly Chief Medical Officer for Scotland) wrote the foreword for our most recent publication¹. In it he summed up the contribution that Community Controlled Housing Associations (governed by local people) have made, and indeed, continue to make in their local neighbourhoods. He said.

"Local residents in CCHAs took control of local assets long before we all started talking about asset based approaches, The Christie Commission, co-production and community empowerment. But there can be no doubt that they demonstrate the characteristics that we now aspire to in Scotland and have been doing this successfully since the early 1970s."

¹Glasgow & West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations (November 2014) "Community Controlled Housing Associations – Still Transforming Local Communities"

In the urban context in Scotland 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, as stated in our previous consultation responses, we believe that the Bill does not develop thinking about how to support the role of CCHAs and other equally important 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, and other community anchors, 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. Therefore, we believe that there is a real opportunity for the Bill to set out a framework that could progress this model.

Community Empowerment

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 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.'

We welcome the Scottish Government's establishment of the Community Capacity and Resilience Fund and we are pleased to be members of the stakeholder group who are considering how the fund will be most effectively delivered to support communities.

Community Regeneration

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 McKee² (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.

Community Planning Partnerships

In our members' experience 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.

² 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.

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.

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 Rural Affairs, climate Change and Environment 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.