

Homes, land and power in community hands

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The existing pipeline of homes currently being planned by community organisations across Scotland exceeds 1000 in number. Delivery would make a significant contribution to our national Housing Emergency, particularly across rural Scotland.

South of Scotland Community Housing (SOSCH) is the Community-led Housing enabler working across Southern Scotland. We collaborate closely with Communities Housing Trust (CHT), our equivalent organisation in the North, and work in partnership at a regional, national and international level. Our technical support helps groups to secure assets in community ownership, providing permanent stewardship of affordable homes that meet local need.

Land Reform enhances social justice by enabling more equitable patterns of land ownership – particularly the stewardship of Scotland's land by the communities who live and thrive here. Without appropriate housing for people to remain, return or relocate to repopulate our communities, our rural places face continued decline. We must, therefore, ensure that communities are genuinely empowered to make these critical decisions and, most importantly, act upon them.

The provision of high-quality homes by communities is an integral part of the Land Reform journey, not a byproduct of Land Reform. In fact, from the outset of community ownership in Scotland, large-scale buyouts of land have been inclusive of housing or, at least, land for homes and crofts.

But, in policy terms, the Community-led Housing approach can be regarded too narrowly, simply as a means of delivering affordable homes where others are not; this is just part of a critical equation and – in our rural places – big impact can derive from the delivery of a small number of homes integrated with effective Place Planning. This is a positive model that should be promoted, not simply reserved for instances of market failure.

Our national Housing Emergency requires a broad mix of housing to be delivered – urban and rural, affordable and market, flexible, accessible and future-proofed. Community-led Housing is part of this and can be a significant contributor. But this important housing story is also part of our Land Reform journey, with much wider benefits for communities and society at large, and must be regarded as such by policy makers, stakeholders and communities alike.

Scotland's Community-led Housing sector is not limited to the provision of affordable homes. Housing is fundamentally about people – communities need these homes to retain and attract younger people, key workers, families. Suitable and appropriate housing is required to enable our older population to remain within the communities they call home. Communities are best placed to understand their own needs, but also to align these considerations to a more holistic view of creating sustainable, vibrant, resilient, low-energy places. This includes the relationship between locally affordable housing, the provision of critical services and the capacity for economic growth.

Our research, undertaken in collaboration with a range of partners, has concluded that the model can continue to grow at pace in Scotland and, indeed, that growth can occur via the delivery of the pre-existing pipeline of projects. To achieve this, a robust and flexible policy framework is required that places Community Empowerment at the centre of decision making and entrusts community organisations to plan and deliver the best outcomes for their place.

This is not to say that Community-led Housing has not been well supported – it is prioritised within the Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan, and the Rural and Islands Housing Fund has been in place for eight years (and extended, in principle, to March 2028). Many communities across Scotland have delivered groundbreaking projects. The level of innovation tends to be groundbreaking and award winning – Closeburn, Langholm, Whithorn, Ettrick and Yarrow, Gairloch, Staffin, Colonsay to name a few. But these projects are never straightforward. It often feels we are to believe that Community-led Housing is supposed to be “difficult”, least of all to ensure risk is fully understood and absorbed at a community level.

In Southern Scotland, a positive collaborative framework has formed around the South of Scotland Housing Action Plan, led by the efforts of the Regional Economic Partnership. Community-led Housing is regarded as no less of a contributor than those delivering at scale, but instead as a key mechanism to align housing delivery to Place Planning, resilience and growth. The capacity for communities to partner with Housing Associations, landowners, employers and others is recognised and encouraged with SOSCH, as an enabler, considered a key stakeholder within an impressive mix of organisations.

We welcome this approach; partnership is critical to empowering communities and ensuring much needed homes, vested in community asset ownership, are delivered. To complete this journey, housing owned and delivered by communities must be regarded as a key element of Land Reform, integrated across policy domains and underpinned by empowerment. To ensure fair distribution of delivery and access to decent, locally affordable homes, we must ensure a substantial proportion are in the control of local communities, removed from market speculation and locked as permanently affordable.