

WLGA evidence to Local Government and Housing Committee – Right to Adequate Housing

Welsh Local Government Association - The Voice of Welsh Councils

The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) is a politically led cross party organisation that seeks to give local government a strong voice at a national level. The Association represents the interests of local government and promotes local democracy in Wales. The 22 councils in Wales are all members of the WLGA and the 3 fire and rescue authorities and 3 national park authorities are associate members.

We believe that the ideas that change people's lives, happen locally

Communities are at their best when they feel connected to their councils through local democracy. By championing, facilitating, and achieving these connections, we can build a vibrant local democracy that allows sustainable communities to thrive.

The main aim of the Association is to promote, protect, support and develop democratic local government and the interests of councils in Wales.

This means:

- Promoting the role and prominence of councillors and council leaders
- Ensuring maximum local discretion in legislation or statutory guidance
- Championing and securing long-term and sustainable funding for councils
- Promoting sector-led improvement
- Encouraging a vibrant local democracy, promoting greater diversity
- Supporting councils to effectively manage their workforce.

Senedd Cymru's Local Government and Housing Committee is undertaking an inquiry into the **right to adequate housing**. This is the WLGA's submission to that inquiry.

The terms of reference for the inquiry, which the Committee has invited contributors to share views on, are to:

1. Examine how incorporating the right to adequate housing into Welsh law would work in practice;

The WLGA would support the general principle of the appropriate incorporation of human rights into Welsh law. Therefore, in the case of the right to adequate housing it is, as suggested, most useful to focus the

Committee's inquiry on the practical implications of incorporating the right into Welsh law.

The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) has set out seven conditions that must be attained for the full realisation of the right to adequate housing. These are security of tenure, habitability, availability of services, affordability, accessibility, cultural adequacy and location.

This provides a useful framework against which to assess the current position of the citizens of Wales in relation to the availability to them of adequate housing, to plan for detailed implementation to meet any identified gaps, and to measure future progress and achievement.

We would support the general concept of progressive realisation, through which the right to housing may be fulfilled progressively, over time, and meaning that the government is required to make progress towards the fullest possible realisation of the right through the application of maximum available resources. In this context, due consideration would need to be given to identify the key resources and levers for change which lie within the competence of both Welsh and UK Governments (e.g. welfare policy and support). Ensuring that sufficient resources and capacity were available to all stakeholders, particularly local authorities and their partners, to support implementation and realisation would be critical to delivering success.

2. Identify any challenges and barriers to taking this policy forward;

As part of the WLGA's "A Manifesto for Localism" covering the Senedd period 2021-26, in order "to create good quality homes and safer communities for people to live and work", the WLGA identified that the Welsh Government should:

- Support the work of local authorities in tackling and preventing homelessness and rough sleeping and ensuring that those brought into temporary accommodation during the pandemic are supported into permanent housing while transforming current and future temporary accommodation provision and homelessness services;
- Support delivery of increased plans for building council houses across Wales; A cross Government approach to new-build, improvement and retro-fit housing projects can provide simultaneous action on: meeting housing need and tackling homelessness; energy efficiency, fuel poverty and climate change; inclusive local economic growth; and improving health, well-being and general social cohesion;
- Support work focused on the decarbonisation of existing homes, including identifying resource implications; and
- Continue to contribute to on-going work to improve building safety following the findings of the Hackitt Review.

These issues, and the associated “asks” of Welsh Government provide a useful summary of the current key housing-related challenges facing Councils and their partners in Wales, and also indicate a number of the barriers to be overcome. Further information on some of these significant challenges faced by Councils in delivering their housing services is outlined below : -

Homelessness

Driven initially by the pandemic and changes to the statutory guidance from Welsh Government, there has been a significant change in approach to the provision of emergency temporary accommodation for homeless households. Increasing numbers of people are being accommodated in emergency temporary accommodation provided by Councils (9,247 individuals as at end of December 2022). Since the start of the pandemic over 31,200 people who were previously homeless have been supported through emergency temporary accommodation. The numbers of people presenting as homeless to Councils continue to be very high, and the challenges of providing and maintaining appropriate levels of suitable temporary accommodation, along with difficulties in securing long term homes for people to move into, means that the numbers of people in emergency accommodation continue to increase with a consistent upward trend which shows no sign of reducing.

As well as increased household costs for everyone, including rising energy costs, there have been significant increases in rents in most areas, with an increasing gap over Local Housing Allowance support means that the Private Rented Sector is increasingly difficult for many households to access and afford. A sustained period of rising consumer costs and increased interest rates, without any increase in household incomes, is also very likely to impact on owner-occupiers who will find their mortgage payments more difficult to meet. All leading to increased demand for homelessness services and the use of temporary accommodation.

The Housing Support Grant (HSG) is the Welsh Government’s principal funding stream for preventing homelessness, supporting more than 60,000 people each year to live independently in their communities. Through the provision of refuge, supported accommodation and tenancy support services, the HSG allows people to exit homelessness, leave abusive relationships, maintain their tenancies, overcome mental health and substance abuse issues, build on their strengths and fulfil their aspirations. The current annual HSG funding of £166m is under considerable pressure to meet the increased demand related to these homelessness pressures outlined above, and the need to ensure that services commissioned by Councils receive enough funding to pay their staff a fair wage and provide them with the support they need.

Housing Supply

Part of the response to dealing with increased homelessness, and to meet housing need more generally, is the building of more social rented homes.

Councils and Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) are making significant efforts to meet the Programme for Government target of 20,000 new low carbon homes for social rent.

Councils with housing stock are playing an increasingly important role directly developing a growing number of these much-needed new homes, and all Councils continue to work with their RSL partners to ensure that new homes meet strategic housing needs.

The Welsh Government budget contains a significant increase in the funding to support the development new social rented homes by Councils and RSLs, with more than £1Bn in total across the current and next 2 financial years covered by the budget.

However, even with record levels of investment support and borrowing by Councils and RSLs, there are many growing challenges to developing enough new homes including the availability of land, phosphate restrictions, rising costs of materials, constraints on the supply of materials, shortages in necessary key skills, capacity within some Council functions, capacity within utility companies, etc.

Decarbonisation of Council housing stock

It is estimated that the current housing stock in Wales is responsible for 27 per cent of all energy consumed in Wales and 15 per cent of all our demand side greenhouse gas emissions. The initial focus on achieving effective decarbonisation in existing Welsh homes will be via improvements to the social rented housing stock (including c. 87,000 Council homes).

As well as utilising existing funding support to further improve the condition of the current stock of social housing, the Welsh Government's current budget confirms an increase in funding for the Optimised Retrofit Programme for the current financial year and each of the next 2 years to support the continued development of an evidence base around effective measures to deliver improvements in decarbonisation.

Further work is required to clarify the total funding required to retrofit existing homes, and to identify sources for this funding. The funding currently identified will not allow Council's to deliver on both the twin objectives of delivering significantly increased numbers of new low carbon homes for social rent and retrofitting the existing stock of Council homes.

Properly developed and implemented, the right to adequate housing could have an important role in enabling and underpinning a joined up approach regarding a focus on apprenticeships and vocational skills to help bridge the current and forecast future gaps in the construction sector to support our ambitious retrofit and new build programmes.

Housing Quality & Standards

The pre-conditions of habitability and accessibility, as set out by CЕСSR, pose particular challenges when addressing the condition of Wales' existing housing stock. For the social rented stock, Welsh Government are able to set standards and drive improvement via WHQS – the latest version of which has been consulted upon. However, influencing and supporting improvement in housing quality and standards in the private rented and owner occupied sectors (including issues such as adaptations) will be much more challenging

3. Consider the impact a right to adequate housing would make across Welsh housing policy.

As previously set out in the housing pact jointly agreed by Welsh Government, WLGA and Community Housing Cymru during the previous Senedd period, the housing sector in Wales has been one of the most successful partnerships of public, private and third sectors across the UK in recent years. The partners jointly undertook to continue to deliver on the objectives they share – by creating and investing in communities meeting people's housing needs, making a positive difference to their lives and helping to give children the best possible start in life. Increasing the supply of rural and urban affordable housing is a vital part of this, as is meeting and maintaining Welsh Housing Quality Standards. To achieve our mutual goals, the Welsh Government, housing associations and local authorities must continue to work in partnership and ensure we encourage an environment in which we can thrive and deliver.

By further underpinning this kind of shared ambition across public, third and private sector bodies, a right to adequate housing which is fully resourced, jointly developed, mutually agreed and understood by all stakeholders, and progressively realised, has the potential to improve the lives of the current and future citizens of Wales who may not otherwise enjoy the benefits of adequate and appropriate housing.

Jim McKirdle
Housing Policy Officer, WLGA
Jim.Mckirdle@wlga.gov.uk