

**Senedd Cymru's Local Government and Housing Committee Inquiry into
Social Housing Supply
Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council**

1. Progress towards meeting the target of 20,000 low carbon social homes for rent; and the extent to which current and projected levels of social housebuilding are likely to meet housing need.

This was a bold objective at the outset and was an objective that most housing professionals believed would come with its challenges. Low carbon social homes will be an important part of moving the country towards net zero and aiding the housing sector to meet the ever-growing need for affordable homes, but it should only form part of the solution for housing need. If we are to meet the needs of our residents, then utilising current stock must come into our thoughts. With the new WHQS it is becoming more and more difficult and expensive to use perfectly good quality housing to combat the needs we have, just because they were built at a different time. All new dwellings quite rightly should have the correct and adequate space and environmental standards, but to discount the stock that has housed families for multiple generations, in the owner occupier market would make achieving the target of meeting our affordable housing needs, far more difficult.

2. The challenges faced by social landlords in increasing supply.

RCTCBC holds regular meetings with RSL's who have raised concerns over increased material costs during the pandemic and as a result of Brexit. They have also found 'borrowing' more difficult, due to the significant rise of interest rates in recent times. RSL's have informed the Council that they have had to dispose of stock because they are not economically viable to bring up to the WHQS. This is taking away a vital resource, in areas where social housing is most needed. In year grant funding is also becoming a problem, with the delays in planning and drainage applications, capital grants such as TACP are putting pressures on RSLs to do things more quickly, only to lose the properties they could have obtained because of delays in delivering the grant at Welsh Government.

3. How housing standards and decarbonisation affect the delivery of new social housing.

Costs are an issue, meaning less housing is being delivered per pound than before the Covid- 19 pandemic and Brexit but, all new homes should be built to WHQS and decarb standards, to ensure sustainable units for the future. There is also a large skills shortage in the skills needed to decarbonise homes, as well as the number of SMEs to be able to deliver at the scale needed. This is already being shown in the challenges some RSLs are facing when letting contracts. Although progress is being made by WG around addressing the skills gap there is currently and in the near term still going to be a shortage of local supply and delivery.

4. The opportunities and risks in increasing government borrowing and institutional investment.

More government borrowing could mean that more affordable housing could be delivered to our residents. These new or refurbished homes could provide a sustainable and safe home for people to be prosperous, healthy and comfortable for generations to come. This levels the playing field, giving residents who currently don't have the opportunity to engage with work or education to do so. However, RSLs need to ensure they have a strategic approach to borrowing and value for money through good governance, good decision making and strategic thinking. Without these key elements RSLs run the risk of borrowing and spending more than necessary to achieve objectives. Borrowing more results in lower surpluses and reducing the capacity available for investment in new developments and improving current stock.

5. How effectively the planning system is supporting social housebuilding.

The provision of social housing across Wales is highlighted in paras 4.2.26-30 of Planning Policy Wales 12 (February 2024). It is considered that the Welsh planning system does recognise this issue as an important one and that local planning authorities seek to ensure that suitable policies supporting such provision are contained within their local development plans and that planning applications that will deliver social housing are processed and determined in an efficient and timely manner.

Experience would suggest that delays can be caused by the quality of some applications submitted, with errors in the ownership certificates, inadequate supporting technical/ecology reports non-requested in-application amendments and not taking heed of advice given in the pre-application process.

However, feedback received from RSL's and developers has highlighted that the planning system is lengthy (this is mainly due to the time it takes consultees to feedback on applications due to capacity and resource issues) and overly complicated. More flexibility from the system would be welcomed when delivering affordable housing sites as some grants that are provided by Welsh Government are time sensitive.

6. How to improve the strategic management of public and private land for social housebuilding, including compulsory purchase.

Local Authorities should be given more power to streamline CPOs as there are key buildings that are owned by distance landlords that are being left to deteriorate with no active occupants. Public land that is difficult to develop should be provided further grants to bring it to a developable standard and this is to be excluded from any other grant funding that would ordinarily pass through the standard viability model.

7. The potential for increasing income from land value capture mechanisms to invest in social housing.

Land value capture mechanisms could reduce speculation in the market and would also allow fewer landowners and developers the opportunity to hold out for higher values. This however may have an impact on S106 sites as developers may be reluctant to pursue developments where the land cost is high as well as contribute to their community infrastructure responsibilities.

8. The Welsh construction sector's capacity to build new low-carbon social homes; the potential for acquisitions of existing homes and remodelling of existing buildings.

As mentioned in point 1, low-carbon and existing stock need to combine in order to deal with the housing need as it is. All new builds can be and will be built to take into account the low-carbon agenda and where old stock can be adapted to fit then it should. However, the use of existing buildings also plays a huge part in dealing with our housing issues, and we know that in 2050 over 80% of the homes that are currently in existence now will remain, so these buildings should be brought to the highest standards possible but only as far as viability will allow. These factors should be considered with perhaps an alternative WHQS standard for remodelling/retrofitting existing homes that balances areas of conflict such as space standards and wall insulation opportunities. For example, for some homes external wall insulation is not suitable and therefore internal wall insulation is more appropriate, however the result of this reducing the size of rooms. In order to create a warmer home, help reduce the energy needed to create a warmer home and move towards decarbon/low carbon homes, it would seem more appropriate to compromise on space standards. It is more carbon intensive to demolish and re-build a home not to mention the community impact from clearance schemes or empty properties and increasing housing need shortages.

9. How local communities can be effectively engaged in social housing developments in their areas.

Co-production on the development of social housing can play a huge part in developing sustainable communities that people want to live in for generations. Some tenants feel segregated from society while living in social housing developments that were built in the 80's and 90's. Local people could be employed to work on building their future homes is just one example but ultimately, future tenants need to be asked what they want and although housing professionals are key to developing the new units, just as much emphasis should be put on community engagement.