

# Blog

## The Housing Quality Network Cymru

13 September 2018

### HQN Cymru members' update – 13 September 2018

**HQN Cymru lead associate Keith Edwards introduces our new look Wales members' update and makes the case for case for improved cross border conversations.**

In the twenty years since Wales said yes to devolution we have taken a starkly different approach to housing from England. From homelessness to regulating the private rented sector, the policy and practice environment is increasingly different.

Perhaps most distinct of all, we have a sector here that consistently goes with the grain of government. Housing associations, councils and – significantly – the more progressive parts of the private rented sector, have all accepted the offer to come into the government tent and work together with ministers to deliver new homes and improve existing ones.

The exception of course are the larger housebuilders, where relationships remain much warmer on the English side of the border. Not surprising of course as the Westminster government continues to ride a one-trick policy pony: Home ownership above all else. What's not to like if your sole driver seems to be maximising shareholder value?

In Wales it's been a bit frosty lately between politicians and the housebuilding big boys who complain about the 'added burden' of higher standards here, including mandatory requirements for sprinklers. And every six months or so, a CEO will be splashed over the press and media saying they will no longer build above the valley's 'snow line' to the north of Cardiff and hinting that they might withdraw from large parts of the country altogether.

This stark policy split on homeownership was initially philosophical, depending on whether you wanted a major role for the state in providing homes for its citizens or saw salvation in a property-owning democracy. But the debate is shifting as homeownership recedes as a practical option for millions and generation rent become a burgeoning demographic group.

England may have been slow to get this and the rehabilitation of social housing as an essential part of the system has some way to go. But who'd have thought you'd hear a conservative prime minister – yes a conservative prime minister – say as Theresa May did in her introduction the recent [green paper](#):

*“Everyone in this country deserves not just a roof over their head but a safe, secure and affordable place to call their own – and social housing has a vital role to play in making sure they do.”*

Jules Birch pointed out in his recent HQN briefing [which can be downloaded from the HQN green paper resources section [here](#)] that whilst the green paper may not have heralded the major policy changes many hoped for that at least it *“includes few proposals that will actively make things worse and scraps some of the most damaging ones”*. Of course, the parts that deal with attacking the stigmatisation of social tenants would carry more weight if the UK government had not stood idly by as the press and media stuck their metaphorical boot in for at least a decade. Worse still, welfare reform and austerity in general have surely encouraged this incessant bullying and demonization.

But that doesn't mean we should ignore the green paper here in Wales and we should be open minded enough to take a look at the detail. We may not agree with everything but there are some new ideas on standards and empowering residents. And HQN CEO Alistair McIntosh has made some interesting observations on [league tables](#) for landlords.

All this leads me to the view that we should not just be taking the occasional glance across our borders; we should be encouraging much more dialogue and debate, developing ways of sharing ideas and lessons and having adult conversations about what works best and what we need to avoid.

In Wales we can offer an insight into an interdependent 'one housing system'. We understand the need to join housing up – across government and professions, involving all sectors in a shared mission: to provide decent affordable homes for all.

But we need to be big enough to recognise that the sector in England has the scale and appetite to drive innovation – from new technology to developing new financial models.

Above all we need to value our different approaches but avoid turning a blind eye to cross border learning. HQN Cymru aims to play a major role in opening and continuing this debate

## About the author

Keith Edwards is a former Director of CIH Cymru and TPAS Cymru. He came to the housing sector via the trade union, co-operative and community development movements. As a consultant, he has worked for Welsh Government Ministers, the Housing Regulator and a number of local authorities, housing associations and private companies.

He has wide experience of stakeholder involvement, developing strategy, option appraisals, designing new service models and supporting co-operative and mutual housing. He has particular expertise in helping organisation get the maximum social, economic and environmental benefits from their investment and service delivery, having set up and run the innovative i2i project for Welsh Government.

Keith is Lead Associate for HQN Cymru.