

Land Reform (Scotland) Bill: stage 1 evidence

Shelter Scotland submission

Shelter Scotland helps over half a million people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help.

The Scottish Government's refreshed focus on land reform is much-needed and we welcome the opportunity to submit stage 1 evidence to the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee on the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill. Shelter Scotland believe that central to the Scottish Government's long-term programme of land reform should be an ambition to reduce inequality and improve the wellbeing of everyone in Scotland. To achieve this it is essential that the Scottish Government focus their attention on housing.

Housing is one of the most significant forms of land-use in Scotland. There are currently 1.46 million owner occupied homes, 99,000 empty or second dwellings, 368,000 homes in the private rented sector, 277,000 homes rented from housing associations and 318,000 homes rented from local authorities.¹ At the same time there is significant pressure being felt by thousands of people as a consequence of Scotland's housing crisis. 150,500 people are on local authority housing waiting lists across Scotland.² In 2013-14 29,565 people were assessed as homeless by local authorities³ and there were 10,488 households in temporary accommodation as at the 31st of March 2015.⁴

These are all clear markers of the strain being exerted on Scotland's housing system, and in its objectives relating to land reform the Scottish Government should clearly articulate how this process will play a role in addressing housing inequality and improving the wellbeing of Scotland's population.

It is in this context that we are submitting evidence at stage 1 of this Bill to the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. Consequently we have only

¹ Scottish Government, Housing Statistics for Scotland, 2014

² *Ibid*

³ Scottish Government, Operation of the Homeless Legislation in Scotland, 2013-14

⁴ Scottish Government, Quarterly temporary accommodation reference tables, June 2015

submitted evidence where there is a clear link to our interest in ensuring that everyone in Scotland has access to a safe, secure and affordable home.

We also note that proposals, such as the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership's 'Housing-Re-use Power',⁵ have not been considered by the Scottish Government at this point. This proposal could act as an important 'backstop' where voluntary approaches to bringing empty homes back into use have failed, and we would welcome further policy discussion around this and other land reform issues.

⁵ Section 22.2, The Land of Scotland and the Common Good: The report of the Land Reform Review Group, May 2014

Part 1: Land rights and responsibilities statement

Shelter Scotland welcomes the requirement for the Scottish Government to prepare a land rights and responsibilities statement setting out government's objectives for land reform. It is essential that housing is given detailed consideration as part of this.

It is also vital that the statement relates to specific policies on land governance and initiatives on land reform covering the five year period it is in effect for. Thereby ensuring government's progress can be monitored and scrutinised.

To ensure the statement receives the highest level of scrutiny it should also be put before the Scottish Parliament. We also note that this falls short of the Land Reform Review Group's recommendation for a National Land Policy and we see merit in this recommendation being considered at a later date.

Part 2: The Scottish Land Commission

The establishment of a Scottish Land Commission is another welcome reform. This should allow for land reform to be driven forward by a body completely independent of government and for organisations, such as Shelter Scotland, to actively engage with the Commission on issues of land reform and scrutinise the effectiveness of law and policy in relation to land in Scotland.

Given its significance both in terms of land-use and the needs of Scotland's population Shelter Scotland believe that housing should be a key part of such a Commission's work.

Part 5: Right to buy land to further sustainable development

Shelter Scotland strongly supports the introduction of a community right to buy land to further sustainable development.

We find it particularly encouraging that the Scottish Government mention a lack of affordable housing and secure tenancies as factors which can have a detrimental impact on communities where those communities are unable to influence development decisions. Affordable housing and secure tenancies are both absolutely crucial to economic sustainability and ensuring that local economies are balanced.

Where housing costs are high it can be difficult for potential employees to afford housing, stunting economic growth. High housing costs also put people into poverty and reduces the spending power of consumers, which in turn has a detrimental impact

on local economies and communities. The effects of this can be particularly stark in rural areas.

Another key aspect of this proposal is the ability for a community to nominate a third party purchase partner, for example a housing association, to help deliver the development. This could have a significant positive impact on communities – both urban and rural – where there is a severe lack of affordable housing and secure tenancies.

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