

Learning from others at the International Social Housing Festival

Report by Sian Gwenllian



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Introduction

In early June 2025, I joined policy makers and practitioners from across the world to explore the key challenges facing housing today and how we can best respond.

A global housing crisis

I was struck by the common challenges. Wales is far from alone in facing a housing crisis. Similar experiences across the world highlight a global housing crisis. Responses in different cities, regions and nations are proving more or less effective in tackling this.

We can do more by working together and I welcome efforts to establish a Global Charter for Housing Equality being driven by Professor Dave Adamson and colleagues in Australia. I look forward to further opportunities to engage.

Stories from Melbourne, Vienna and Winnipeg described how housing affordability, whether rental or home ownership, has rocketed well out of proportion to people's incomes.

Local and national interventions make a difference in how people experience international trends. The high proportion of social housing in Vienna has acted as an important buffer and I want Wales to have the same.

There is a common story of demand outstripping supply. We need to build and acquire more affordable housing and there is learning from how different countries are achieving this, from different financial incentives to planning policies.

Affordable finance is key. I heard the difference that Ireland's Housing Finance Agency is able to make with access to European Investment Bank long term fixed interest finance. Brexit means that Wales cannot access European funds, but how can Wales create alternatives? What lessons can we learn from Ireland's finance agency?

Ireland has also established The Housing Agency whose purpose is to accelerate housing supply. It brings together a range of stakeholders and provides an enabling role. That includes through high quality data and insights, expertise and technical assistance and support for innovation. Welsh Government established Unnos under the Cooperation Agreement with Plaid Cymru. There are lessons from Ireland about



Sian Gwenllian MS with Casey Edwards and Kathryn Robinson from Cwmpas.

how it can now develop effectively as a national development and land agency, in line with the Local Government and Housing Committee's recommendations.

The experience in Vienna also highlights that it is not simply a story of supply and demand. Even when the housing supply in Vienna grew to meet demand, prices continued to increase and far outstrip incomes. Governments need to understand and take action on other factors that are driving the crisis, not least housing being treated as a commodity. Housing policy must treat housing as a social good.

Learning from responses elsewhere

The right to adequate housing is already enshrined in international law under the UN International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. But too often this is not reflected in practice. I am interested in how legislation introducing a right to adequate housing elsewhere is driving improvements.

As a member of the Senedd's Local Government and Housing Committee, I am interested in exploring how introducing fair rents in Wales could address affordability in the rental sector. Several other European countries have already introduced a maximum threshold for rent. I heard about the different approaches being taken in Denmark, Spain and Ireland as well as current proposals in Scotland. Representatives from Barcelona underlined the moral imperative to provide affordable housing for key workers and a just transition to clean energy that is driving their work, as well as preventing escalating social unrest. I'm pleased we are also taking action in Wales with a bill on licensing short term holiday lets being introduced within this Senedd term, thanks to the Cooperation Agreement between the government and Plaid Cymru.

Short term lets for tourism are part of the jigsaw, reducing housing supply for residents and driving higher prices. In response, Barcelona is phasing out all short-term rentals by 2028. What can we do to manage similar rural housing challenges in Wales?

Policy makers and developers across Europe are also racing to respond to climate change. Energiesprong's session outlining its innovative projects in factory-made whole-house renovations in France, Germany and the UK underlined that policy in Wales will need to be flexible to secure the benefits of emerging solutions.

Finance can often feel an insurmountable barrier. But I was inspired to hear how innovation in housing finance is enabling different responses. If we focus on clear goals, financial experts can often develop solutions. I am keen to explore how affordable financing schemes for retrofits in Estonia and Bulgaria can be adapted to enable a greater pace and scale of retrofit in Wales.

Wales can lead the way

I was pleased to see Wales is spearheading initiatives that are making a positive difference. Through the Cooperation Agreement, we have seen progress on addressing rural housing, including through changing taxes on second homes and the work of the Commission for Welsh-speaking Communities. European colleagues are keen to learn from our initiatives, not least to tackle housing problems in the Gaelacht in Ireland.

A new drama commissioned by Cwmpas for the conference demonstrated powerfully that housing is a story about people. Housing impacts fundamentally on our relationships, our communities and our life-opportunities. This was one of the innovative projects demonstrating how the arts can not only to tell this story, but enable better conversations about future housing choices across different groups of people.



Sian with Amanda Oliver, United Welsh and Dr Jennifer Hoolachan, Cardiff University.

United Welsh has been working with others to pioneer new housing and support services created with and for young people. Hearing about their Tai Ffres project and the difference it is making to young people was inspiring. I look forward to seeing the project first hand in Cardiff.

These are just some of the examples of ground-breaking work based in Wales that were highlighted.

Wales is facing a housing crisis. We have much to learn from the way other countries are responding to similar challenges globally. But I want to ensure that Wales is also an equal on the international stage, leading innovative housing solutions with communities across Wales.