Housing need and desirability

Ensuring that the social homes we build don't just meet housing need, but are desirable to tenants and the wider community

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Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru

TYFU TAI CYMRU

In collaboration with

Shelter Cymru

Shelter Cymru is a registered charity dedicated to supporting the right to a safe home in Wales. We campaign on Welsh housing issues with a view to influencing positive change. Our vision is that a decent, secure home is a fundamental right and essential to the health and well-being of communities.

We exist to defend the right to a safe home and fight the devastating impact the housing emergency has on people and society. We do this with campaigns, advice and support – and we never give up. We believe that home is everything.

Nikki Cole Consulting

Nikki is a highly experienced social housing professional with over 40 years' experience of working within the social housing sector. Nikki has worked Pan Wales at director level in the development of social housing solutions and as Strategic Housing lead with Cardiff Council. Nikki is a successful freelance consultant passionate about sharing knowledge and experience with housing professionals.

TPAS Cymru

TPAS Cymru has supported social housing tenants and landlords across Wales to develop effective participation in Housing for over 30 years. They work on the wider citizen engagement agenda, promoting good practice in public services through training, support, practical projects and policy development. They have extensive knowledge of social housing and focus on issues from the tenant's perspective and for the benefit of tenants.

Tyfu Tai Cymru (TTC)

Tyfu Tai Cymru (TTC) is a five-year housing policy project funded by the Oak Foundation, and hosted by the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH), which aims to provide insightful analysis and fill evidence gaps to support policy progression. One of its areas of focus is to ensure that we're building the right homes to meet demand.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who supported the research. We would also like to thank all the tenants who responded to the survey and took part in focus groups as well as the stakeholders working in the housing sector.

Introduction

In spring 2023, Tyfu Tai Cymru commissioned Shelter Cymru to undertake research which explored the development of new social housing whilst ensuring that homes are desirable to both the tenants who will live in them and the wider community.

The research aims to:

- Provide a snapshot of the perceptions that exist around new social housing developments including the opportunities and challenges of these developments
- Suggest what steps are needed for communities to be involved in the assessment of housing need and subsequent development planning
- Reflect on the suitability of policy, legislation and resources provided.

Methodology

A mixed methodology approach was adopted for this research combining the reflections on existing knowledge with quantitative and qualitative insight from tenants and stakeholders working in the housing sector.

- **A literature review** was undertaken to provide an overview of the policy and legislative context and relevant research evidence.
- **An online tenant survey** was held, hosted by TPAS Cymru through their Tenant Pulse Network asking what was important to them about their homes and whether tenants should be more involved in the design, planning and development stages of new social housing developments. A total of 266 responses were received.
- **Two online workshops for tenant representatives** were held, facilitated by TPAS Cymru through their Tenant and Disability Network and attended by a total of around 30 people.
- **A focus group of Shelter Cymru case workers** was held exploring the key themes in their work involving the review of the suitability of individual offers of social housing.
- **Semi-structured stakeholder interviews or group discussions with** a range of stakeholders were held, which included developing residential social landlords (RSLs) and local authorities across Wales and Planning Aid Wales[1]. Questions focused upon the extent to which engagement takes place with tenants and communities during the planning process and the wider context influencing development.

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[1] Planning Aid Wales – Community engagement in planning

Context setting

In light of the current levels of housing need in Wales we need to ensure that we not only build the right number of homes but that these homes are the right type in the right place. This will ensure that everyone can access a home in their local community that also meet the needs of future generations and our ageing population.

Key issues:

- Local authorities assess housing need in their area through the development of a local housing market assessment which informs strategic plans such as the Local Development Plan (LDP) and funding priorities. A key data source is the social housing register.

- There is a conflict between a hard, minimal assessment of need and creating a desirable and sustainable home. This is impacted upon by the shortage of social housing and growing demand which severely limits opportunities for choice.

- Consultation is built into the LDP adoption process and individual planning applications but relies upon individuals being proactive in expressing their views. A shift toward better engagement is being seen through placemaking.

- The design of social housing is subject to Welsh Government requirements and technical scrutiny.

- Stigma against social housing is often expressed through the planning process and there is a need for early engagement to ensure that it is well accepted by the wider community.

- There are increasing examples available of where community-led housing development is happening with grass root groups being supported by organisations such as Cwmpas.

- Housing enablers play an important role in rural areas by providing an independent point of contact between the community and developing landlord.

Assessing housing need

All local authorities in Wales are required to undertake a periodic review of housing need, i.e. the number of homes needed in the area to provide for those living in unsatisfactory housing circumstances (i.e. homelessness, overcrowding, or other specific housing requirements) as well as the general growth of new households in the population. Through the preparation of a **Local Housing Market Assessment** (LHMA)[2], they also consider the affordability of the housing market by comparing household incomes to housing costs.

LHMAs are a crucial part of the evidence base for preparing Local Development Plans and local authorities' Local Housing Strategies. They also provide evidence which forms the basis of the local authority's priorities for Social Housing Grant, the main capital funding programme for new social housing development, as well as the commissioning of care and support. They should be used to plan for the diverse needs of different people and communities, including ethnic minorities, disabled people, and people of different ages to ensure homes meet those needs.

A key information source for the calculation of need is the local authority's **social housing waiting list**. This and their allocation scheme are required by the 1996 Housing Act as the source of applicants for social housing vacancies, where housing need is the key factor in determining priority. As the Welsh Government guidance[3] recognises, allocation schemes should aim to make best use of the available social housing whilst also offering applicants the widest possible choice of accommodation.

Previous research carried out by Tyfu Tai Cymru: Right place, right home, right size?[4] clearly put into the spotlight the conflict between a hard, minimal assessment of need and creating a desirable and sustainable home. The report also highlighted that **housing supply** was a key barrier to limiting choice for tenants and placing organisations on

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[2]https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-03/local-housing-market-assessment-guidance-2022_0.pdf

[3]https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2019-03/allocation-of-accommodation-and-homelessness-guidance-for-local-authorities.pdf

[4]0489-ttc-right-place-right-home-right-size-final.pdf (cih.org)

[5]https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-63373590

a backfoot when considering how to both alleviate urgent housing need and also ensuring a sufficient supply of homes to allow people choice and mobility as their circumstances change.

Across Wales, around 90,000 households are currently waiting for a social home. Research by Shelter Cymru and the BBC reveals that this figure is 40 per cent higher than it was in 2018[5]. The Welsh Government has increased its spending on social housing for rent and has committed to a target of 20,000 new social homes during this term of the Senedd. It's pretty much accepted though, that the target is unlikely to be met due to the rising cost of construction, skills shortages and delays in the planning system.[6]

The Right Place report also suggested that the '**bedroom tax**'[7] was a systematic barrier limiting people's choice ad control and the ensuring the viability of new housing developments against delivering homes that would maximise mobility.

Work undertaken to inform the current White Paper Consultation[8] on Ending Homelessness in Wales considered allocations in the context of homelessness[9] with its conclusions including the following:

• A significant discrepancy between the existing supply of social housing stock in Wales, and the demand "There is a sense that the pressure building in the system because of this inherent mismatch is reaching boiling point[10]"

• Taking all individual factors into account at the point of allocation builds sustainability, but it makes it hard to adhere to rigid policies and processes.

The White Paper itself contains some recommendations to reform the allocations system which could have an impact on housing need calculations:

• Having a common housing register for all social landlords in an area

• Removing people from the waiting list if they are not in housing need- Even though this is a recommendation of the white paper we would prefer to see waiting lists remain open to all with data returns not including people assessed as having no housing need at that point in time.

Community engagement in planning processes

Our planning system is shaped by the Planning Policy Wales framework[11] which aims to ensure the delivery of sustainable development and improves the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. At a local level the LHMA assessment of need is then used to inform the LDP and specific planning policies in relation to affordable housing provision within a local authority area.

Where affordable homes are to be provided, it will be formalised as a section 106 agreement. This will state either the percentage of affordable homes you agree to provide (outline applications) or the actual plots and house types (full or reserved matters applications).

The adoption of the **Local Development Plan** itself is subject to an extensive consultation process. The planning process requires the applicant to consult with communities and statutory stakeholders before an application for approval is submitted, known as the **pre-application consultation** (PAC) stage. The community consultation aspect of the PAC often involves an online platform run by the applicants' planning consultants. The neighbourhood surrounding the planned development are contacted with the details of how to view and respond to the PAC, the onus being on individuals to be proactive in engaging in the consultation process, rather than on the developer.

Planning Aid Wales promotes and facilitates meaningful community engagement in the planning process in Wales. They suggest[12] that a 'community of place' refers to those living within a small loosely defined geographical area. A 'community of interest' can be any group of individuals who share interests and 'stakeholder' includes any other individual or associations of individuals with a 'stake' in a plan or project.

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[6]https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-63315441
[7]https://sheltercymru.org.uk/housing-advice/paying-for-housing/housing-benefit-and-council-tax-reduction/the-bedroom-tax/
[8]https://www.gov.wales/ending-homelessness-white-paper
[9]https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2023-10/allocations-understanding-more-context-homelessness.pdf
[10]Allocations Understanding more, in the context of homelessness in Wales (pg. 3) https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2023-10/allocations-understanding-more-context-homelessness.pdf
[11]https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-02/planning-policy-wales-edition-11_0.pdf
[12]https://planningaidwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Summary-Report-Value-of-Engagement-in-Planning.pdf

The Planning Aid report, Value of Engagement in Planning[13] suggests that the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act has begun to shift focus towards better engagement approaches. In particular, **Placemaking** has called for collaborative working across sectors and disciplines to comprehensively consider the future development of distinctive and vibrant places. Place Plans are a mechanism introduced by Welsh Government for communities to engage creatively with the planning process and for planners to support in place-making initiatives with local people.

The 2020 Placemaking Wales Charter[14] outlines key placemaking principles including people and community. The local community are involved in the development of the proposals and the needs, aspirations, health and well-being of all people are considered at the outset.

Engagement in the development of social housing

Whilst the LHMA will be used to determine the number of social homes needed in an area and the mix of unit sizes, there are other Welsh Government design requirements that need to be taken into account by a developing housing association or local authority. **Design Quality Requirements**(DQR)[15] and the **Welsh Housing Quality Standard**(WHQS)[16] must be considered when designing the accommodation and determining what facilities should be included. Whilst WHQS has recently been reviewed including consultation with tenants, we're unclear how much DQR has been shaped through tenant involvement.

Individual social housing schemes receiving grant funding must also go through **technical scrutiny** from Welsh Government to agree the detailed design. This will normally be before a planning application is submitted. The PAC can be the first a community has heard about a proposed development, and they have limited opportunity to influence the design and mix of homes.

Whilst it is commonplace for new housing proposals to attract negative opinion from the neighbouring community, the **stigma** attached to social housing and often expressed through the PAC process about a proposed new development is well documented[17]. Tyfu Tai's own research into stigma found that negative perceptions of social housing are strongly concentrated among those individuals who do not live in that tenure. Tyfu Tai feel that there is a need to look at ways to involve the community and potential tenants in assessments of housing need and development planning to ensure that the homes developed are well accepted into the wider community.

Community led housing development

It would be amiss to not mention here the growing movement of community led housing development, supported by organisations such as Cwmpas.

"Co-operative and community-led housing means bringing people together to decide what kind of homes and communities they want to live in. People with a shared vision can come together and have an influential voice. They play an essential role alongside councils, developers and investors to create affordable homes which meet local community needs.

Co-operative and community-led housing comes in many shapes and sizes. Small groups of friends buying a house to share, leaseholders setting up a tenant management committee, community members buying local land on which to develop new housing, and people who want to develop sustainable homes – these are all examples" Cwmpas[18]

In rural areas, such initiatives can be borne by the work of a **rural housing enabler**[19], a now longstanding WG funded network of officers focused on negotiating the complexity of delivering rural affordable housing and engaging with local communities to both quantify and address housing need.

[13] https://planningaidwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Summary-Report-Value-of-Engagement-in-Planning.pdf
[14] http://dcfw.org/wp-content/themes/dcfw-child/assets/PlacemakingGuideDigitalENG.pdf
[15] https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-08/development-quality-requirements-for-housing-associations.pdf
[16] https://www.gov.wales/welsh-housing-quality-standard-2023-0
[17] https://www.cih.org/media/wlmc11bd/0456-its-not-okay-v2.pdf
[18] https://cwmpas.coop/what-we-do/services/co-operative-community-led-housing/
[19] https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2018-12/140117-evaluation-rural-housing-enablers-summary-en.pdf

Insight from tenants

The research aimed to learn from social housing tenants about what is important to them about their homes and whether they should be more involved in the design and planning stages of new social housing developments. The findings here are informed by an online survey hosted and promoted by TPAS Cymru as well as two workshop sessions with tenant representatives.

Survey analysis

Overall, the survey received 266 responses[20]. Responses were received from 21 of the 22 local authorities with the following regional geographical spread:

Figure 1: Which local authority do you live in?

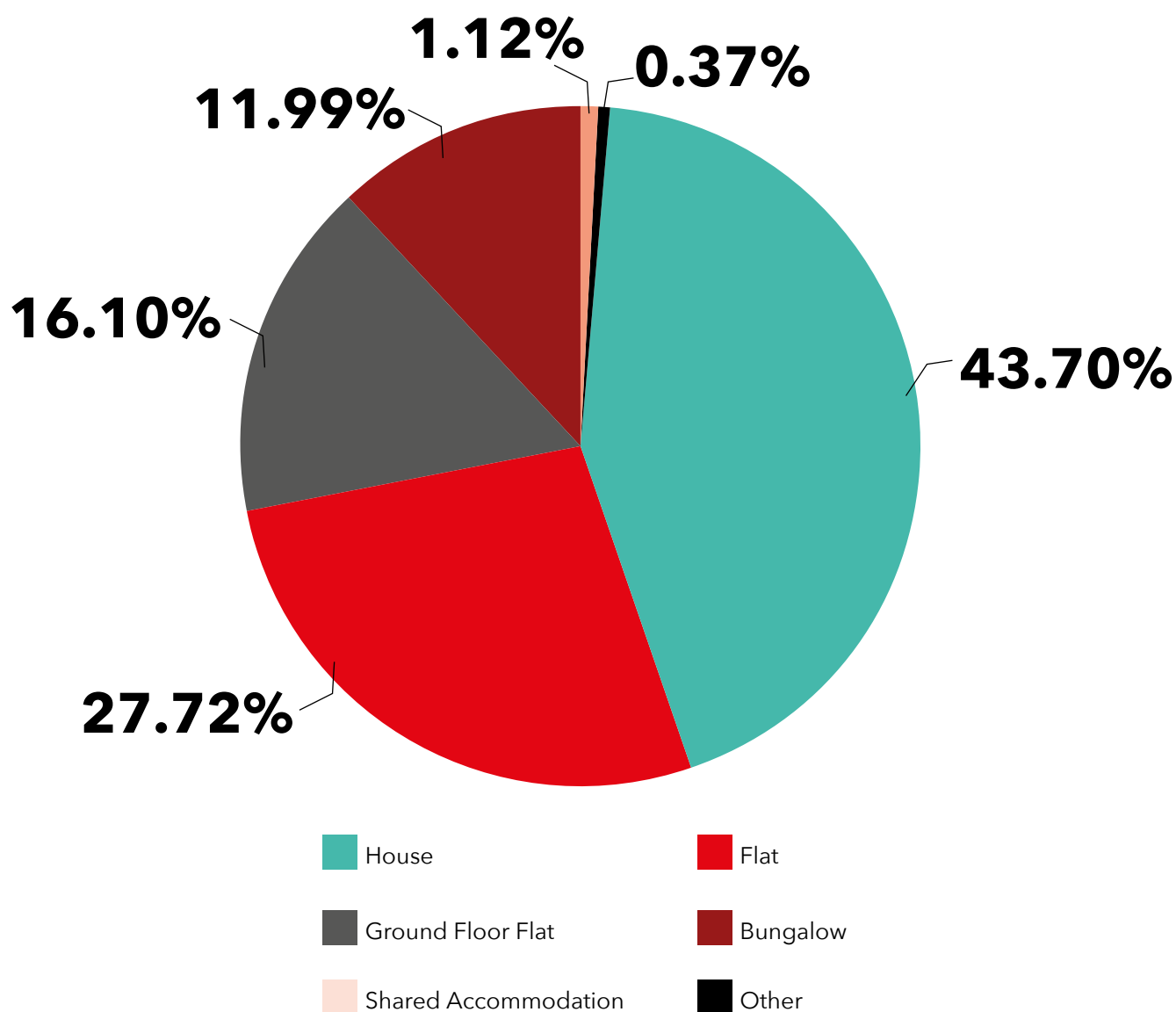| ■ Mid Wales	■ North Wales	■ South East	■ South West
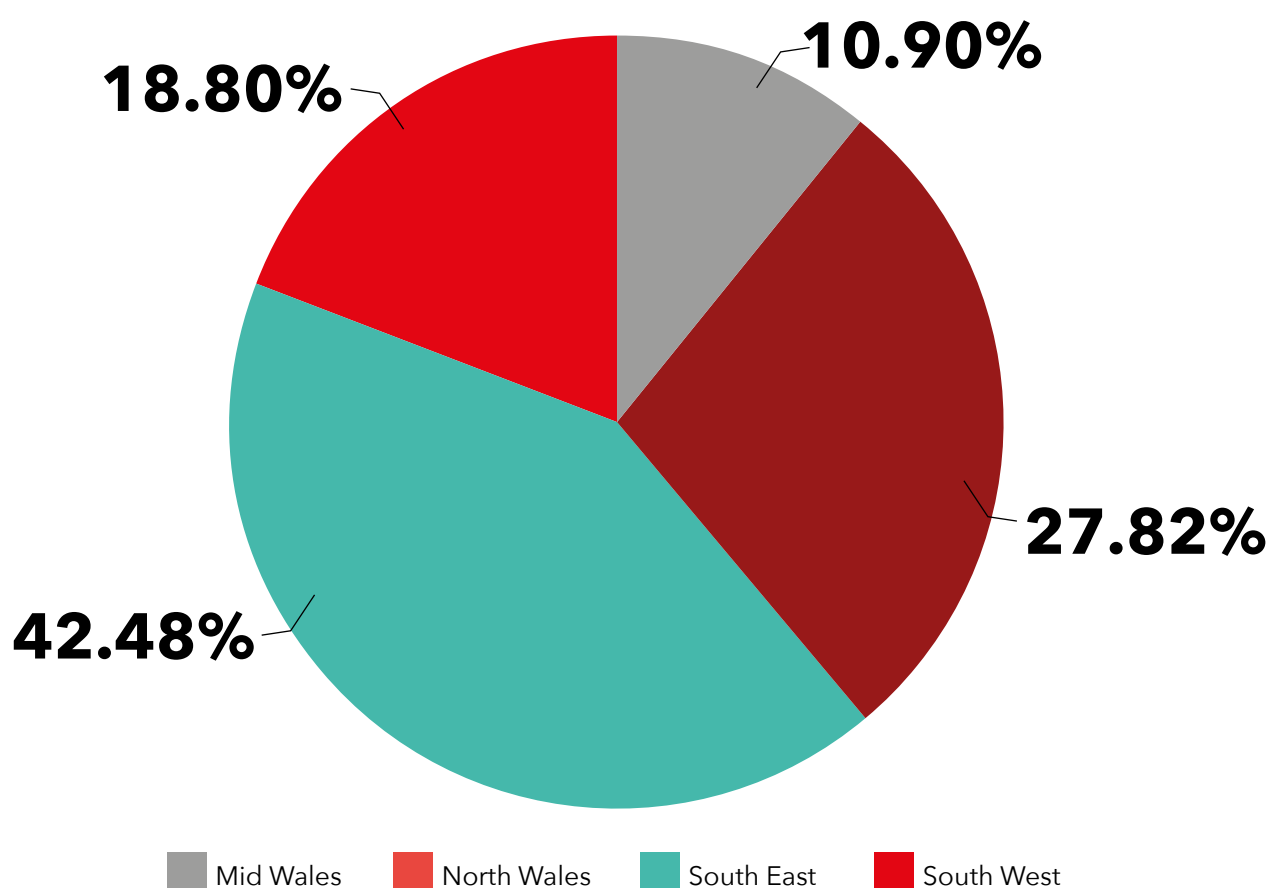
41 per cent of respondents were aged over 65 and a further 22 per cent were aged 55 to 64 so there is some bias in the insight towards older households. Only six per cent considered themselves to come from a Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) background and over half (55 per cent) considered themselves to have a disability.

In terms of current housing circumstances, 73 per cent were housing association tenants and the rest rented from a local authority. Nearly half lived in a house and a further 28 per cent were in an above ground floor flat.

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[20]The survey was hosted online on TPAS social media. It was open between 28/09/2023 and 10/10/2023.
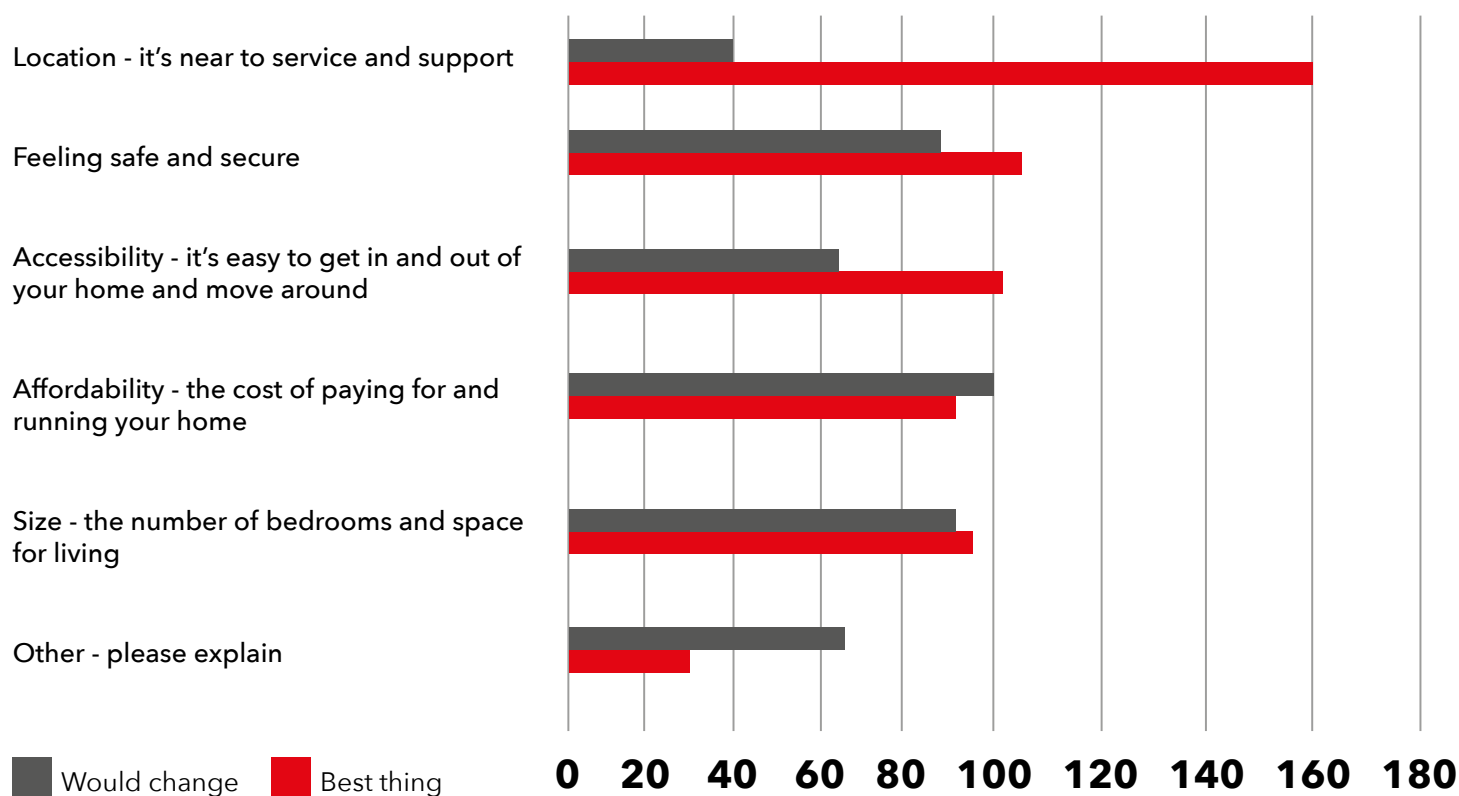
Figure 2: What type of property do you currently live in?

Legend:
- House (teal)
- Flat (red)
- Ground Floor Flat (grey)
- Bungalow (dark red)
- Shared Accommodation (pink)
- Other (black)

Pie chart values: 43.70%, 27.72%, 16.10%, 11.99%, 1.12%, 0.37%

Respondents were asked to indicate both the best thing about their current home and what they would change about their home. They were allowed up to three responses to each question.

The highest response by tenants for the best thing about their home was location (160), followed by feeling safe and secure and accessibility.

Table 3: What is the best thing about your home? What would you change?

Chart showing responses by category (Would change = grey, Best thing = red):

Category	Would change	Best thing
Location - it's near to service and support	40	160
Feeling safe and secure	90	105
Accessibility - it's easy to get in and out of your home and move around	65	100
Affordability - the cost of paying for and running your home	100	92
Size - the number of bedrooms and space for living	92	95
Other - please explain	65	30

The most popular response for what they would change was affordability (100), followed by the size of the property and feeling safe and secure. The issue of affordability is likely to be of heightened concern in the current cost of living crisis, however it is a marker that even those living in what we would consider to be the most affordable housing tenure have concerns about their housing costs.

The survey also asked respondents if they understand terms used to describe various forms of social housing. As would be expected or hoped from a group of social housing tenants, the highest response rate for understanding was for social housing (94 per cent). The level of understanding of other tenures was lower ranges from 88 per cent of respondents for affordable housing and on 71 per cent for low-cost home ownership.

In relations to terms and understanding, individual respondents said:

"The government should publish the definition of affordable housing as most people haven't a clue."

"There are too many terms, too confusing for most. And often the differences are not made clear."

Some respondents also shared their frustration at the current social housing supply issues.

"Supported accommodation is good and has helped me. I am ready for independent accommodation now. I can't move on from supported because there are no social properties available. I can't rent privately because the cheapest rent is nearly 70 per cent of my earnings. Going into temporary supported accommodation only works if there is a functioning process toward independent living."

"Affordable housing is great, but we cannot continue to wait on an infinite list in a hellish situation, we are trapped in and isolated."

Key themes

There were a number of key themes across the engagement with tenants during the research:

- Appropriate design
- Accessibility
- Existing community infrastructure
- More community engagement

Appropriate design

The physical design of their homes, notably what they described as '**space**' was important to focus group members, as was the design of the surrounding area/community. Having plenty of space within their homes was important for a range of reasons including study, remote working and space for visitors. It was felt that it was important not to feel claustrophobic, which especially important for people who spend the vast majority of their time at home.

One survey respondent also provided a comment on space.

"Accessible housing is often not spacious enough and assumes that people only have the bare minimum of possessions after a lifetime. Poky kitchens too, nothing comes smaller because someone lives on their own. Not enough storage space either."

DQR was regarded as the absolute minimum in provision and in reality, households were said to need more space than this to be able to live healthily and happily. The workshop participants who lived in older, bigger social housing were the ones who reported most satisfaction with the space and design of their homes. Several expressed their dislike of open plan designs as they preferred to be able to have 'space' from others in the household. They also felt that separate rooms were easier to keep warm.

Accessibility

The accessibility of their homes was also a major concern for tenants. One survey respondent reported:

"I know what accessible housing should look like but unfortunately where I live is not. It was built over 25 years ago and did not allow for wheelchair users."

Focus group discussions centred around three main themes – mobility aids, electric vehicle charging and outdoor spaces.

Several of the tenants reported exasperation that they had nowhere for **storage of electrical mobility aids** with suitable charging facilities. This was a major issue for many, and they felt they had been set up to fail in being allocated homes that could not accommodate the mobility aids on which they rely. It was suggested that their social landlords would not bear the cost of any adaptations needed to accommodate mobility aids despite other adaptations being grant funded. They suggested that safe spaces for charging should be incorporated into all new properties and that mobility aid users should be consulted with at the design stage to ensure appropriateness.

It was evident that the issue of **charging electric vehicles** was also pressing for disabled people who rely upon the popular Motability Scheme for leasing specially adapted vehicles[21]. One workshop participant described how the combination of her disabilities and household make up dictated that there was only one make and model of car that met her needs, which would only be available as an electric vehicle from 2024.The Disability Network members were unanimously concerned about 'future proofing' for electric vehicles and also providing charging points sensitive to the needs of disabled car drivers.

Focus group members expressed that they needed green energies such as solar PVs to aid with the running costs of their homes and charging requirements.

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[21] https://www.motability.co.uk/

The final discussion regarding design was the accessibility of **outdoor spaces**. While many were reasonably happy with the accessibility within their home, many were frustrated about the lack of access to outdoor spaces. For some this was the inability to access a garden, or an outdoor space would help improve their general health and mental wellbeing. For others it was concern about the suitability of the location where they were housed. Steep slopes and a lack of safe pedestrian spaces such as pavements and no dropped curbs were problematic. Some reported that they were simply 'miles from anything', 'cut off from everything' as there was no public transport or any way that they could reach local services such as the shop or pharmacy.

Existing community infrastructure

Focus group members expressed concern about how much consideration was given to existing services in communities where new homes were developed and the capacity of these services and the existing local infrastructure to cope with increased demand. Members of TPAS Cymru's Disability Network who attended the second workshop session described the difficulties they already experienced when trying to access already stretched health services such as GP appointments and worried about the capacity of services to cope with extra homes and residents needing these services.

One person described how a significant number of new (private sector) homes had recently been developed in their community without any additional health or education facilities. They described a 106 agreement that was to include amongst other things, a new school that was never delivered. Group members discussed and concluded that local authorities must pursue unmet obligations and that with future developments any S.106 obligations or community benefits should be delivered alongside the housing, not afterwards.

To aid community cohesion and develop 'communities not just houses' group members felt that community halls or centres were needed where a variety of activities can be carried out. Without these, they felt housing was simply being developed as 'four walls to sleep in' based in 'commuter hubs' with no sense of local community.

More community engagement

When asked whether they thought communities should have more of a say about the homes that are built in their area, 86 per cent of the survey respondents believed that they should. Within the focus groups, tenants also agreed with this principle and expressed that they would like to be involved in the planning for and designing of new homes, feeling that they were well placed as tenants who already live in social housing to do so. They did however express some concern that members of the community who held a stigmatised view of social housing should not hinder development.

People with mobility issues and disabilities should be involved in the design and delivery of all new homes to ensure good design and the cost borne by the developer at the beginning, not later by the tenant.

Only one workshop participant had experience of early pre-planning consultation involvement with a developer. Others reported being aware of planning notices being placed on telegraph poles near development sites and that these were they only indication of development being planned. Participants with reduced mobility reported not being aware of these as they were unable to walk around their local community. Local Authority online planning portals were discussed but considered to be complicated and inaccessible to those with poor IT skills or no access to technology. It was very much felt that the onus was put on them to be proactive in seeking information rather than the developer making the effort.

Good practice example

The participant with experience of engagement shared details of the positive actions taken by their developing social landlord which were recognised as good practice by others. The process included:

- In-person consultation events at local venues with the opportunity to meet and speak with development staff and architects/designers

- Door-to door visits to those living in the area by staff explaining about the development

- Printed copies of development plans readily available and delivered to people free of charge and available at community hubs and places frequented by local people such as shops, GP surgeries

- The opportunity to feed into design processes in terms of size, style, layout and sometimes tenure mix

- A good relationship being established between the developing landlord, tenants who wanted to be involved and on the whole, local community members.

It was felt that this housing association has shown a commitment to engaging with and listening to tenants, valuing their input. A Rural Housing Enabler had been employed to work independently as an advocate for local residents and the community which had led to a positive experience for all. It was suggested that such a role would be beneficial for all new social housing development, regardless of whether it is in a rural or urban location.

Insight from stakeholders

Questions focused upon the extent to which engagement takes place with tenants and communities during the planning process, the wider context influencing development as well as the importance of tenant choice and constraints which may restrict it. Interviews and a focus group were undertaken with a range of stakeholders from across Wales including:

- Housing Associations - Cardiff Community Housing Association Cynon Taf Community Housing Group, Pobl East and West, Linc Cymru, Hafod Housing Association, Clwyd Alyn Housing, Newydd Housing Association, United Welsh, Melin Homes, Wales and West Housing Association

- Local Authorities - Cardiff Council, Powys Council, Vale of Glamorgan County Council

- Planning Aid Wales

- Shelter Cymru Caseworkers.

There were some regional variations in the responses given, specifically in respect of the various allocation policies of the relevant local authority and the understanding of local housing demands. There was also variation in the way in which stakeholders understood the term 'community'. Landlord focused stakeholders largely considered the term community to be the social housing community of a development and not the wider community surrounding it.

Key themes

A number of key themes emerged:

- Evidencing need
- The right mix of properties
- Design
- Location and land availability
- Financial viability
- Community engagement
- Language and the perception of social housing
- The impact of limit choice.

Evidencing need

All stakeholders called for better data to evidence housing need. Local Housing Market Assessment (LHMA) data is limited and can be dated. There are gaps between LHMA data which is quantitative and focuses on the overall housing needs and the Local Development Plan consultation and engagement processes that focus on the local level and specific sites/areas. It was felt the qualitative side is missing from the process, for example the lack of identification of overcrowding and multigenerational households. Existing engagement and consultation with tenants and communities tends to be around the design and specification of properties rather than what type and size of homes are needed.

LHMAs also fail to recognise any hidden housing need. This can be especially prevalent in areas where there is little social housing availability, rural areas can be disproportionately affected. There might be plenty of people in housing need, but as they do not see social housing as a viable solution, they do not proceed to register their need through a housing register application.

Processes should focus on Local Housing Needs Assessments – rather than market - and community engagement rather than desk-top exercises, ensuring that grass roots data is gathered from the local community with the aim of meeting their needs. Qualitative data is needed at a local level to determine the needs within that community and to provide the opportunity to influence the mix and type of properties being developed.

One stakeholder suggested that Welsh Government should lead on a regular Wales-wide census-like housing survey to ensure that robust housing need data is captured.

Good practice example

Many local authorities in Wales operate a common housing registers or waiting list for social housing which is used for lettings in both the local authorities and housing association stock. This provides one point of contact for applicants and removes any duplication across waiting lists when analysing unmet housing need. This can be supplemented with data from the authority's statutory homeless services as suggested by the Welsh Government Guidance.[22]

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[22]https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-03/local-housing-market-assessment-guidance-2022_0.pdf

The right mix of properties

Registered social landlords and local authority stakeholders recognised the need to achieve the right mix of properties and believed that tenants and communities should have a role in helping evidence the need for the types of properties that are built. Not knowing who the future tenants will be was said to be part of the challenge of developing new homes. At the point of planning a scheme it will just be known that there is demand on the waiting list. Given the length of time the development process takes, the tenants who will live in those homes won't be selected until the scheme is nearing completion.

It was also said that *"new homes will always be occupied, but it would be great if those new homes were built, to be the best they could be for tenants."* It was also noted that improving the allocations process would help support future housing delivery of suitable homes and creating the right balance, by supporting existing tenants to move to a more appropriate home to meet their needs. Making better use of the existing housing stock could better help determine future need.

Design

Stakeholders working in development expressed the need for designs that reduced management costs for the tenant. Well thought out outdoor and communal spaces that were low maintenance were thought to be beneficial. Open spaces for flats especially need to be good quality and well designed.

Finding the balance between the tenants need for good quality, enjoyable outdoor spaces that are low maintenance, reduce service charges but can also meet the increasing need for facilities such as mobility aid charging, and storage or electric vehicle charging is challenging. It is imperative that existing and potential future tenants have a voice in the design of such spaces.

It was also felt that there was a need for research into and development of more homes that are suited to multi-generational families – currently there is little accommodation available for such households. With the housing crisis and accessing housing and affordability becoming increasingly difficult, many young people remain living with family for far longer than they might have done previously. Few social housing homes are suitable for large, multi-generational families.

Location and land availability

Building new social homes to meet housing need is dependent upon suitable land opportunities being available in that community. Finding suitable brownfield sites in town and city centres when demand is high can be especially challenging. In order to meet housing needs, stakeholders called for flexibility in planning policy through development exception sites. The planning system was said to be a slow and cumbersome process. Identifying potential development sites in partnership with the local community could potentially unlock additional development sites for new housing.

Good practice example

In recognition of the challenges of finding brownfield sites to deliver family homes it may be necessary to prioritise the desirability of the location over the ability to deliver a traditional unit. The Housing Development (Enabling) Team and registered social landlord partners in Cardiff are assessing whether three-bedroom flats can be successfully delivered. There are specific challenges with this, such as land availability and financial viability, as well as current planning policy which requires size specific dedicated garden space/amenity for each unit. However, these larger flats could be restricted to occupation by adults and/or families with older children, especially if they are close to or adjacent to parkland or other open spaces.

Financial viability

Land availability and financial viability both have a significant influence on what and where new homes are built. Social housing schemes are usually funded through a combination of Welsh Government capital funding and private finance and a viability assessment considers the costs of development against future rent levels. The levels of capital funding are set for different property types and are subject to a value for money test. Viability ultimately drives whether a development scheme will be taken forward. Stakeholders agreed however that this does not take away the need to ensure the right mix of new homes is provided at a community level. A balanced mix of property sizes is required, with a view to meet current and anticipated future housing need.

Stakeholders reported that the financial viability of a scheme was often the determining factor in the mix and type of home developed. Increased build and development costs are making the delivery of new homes increasingly challenging. Development finance, or the lack of, was said to be a barrier to innovation.

Some local authority partners referred to the continued disparity in areas between the rent charged by them and that charged by a registered social landlord with Local Authority rents being more affordable. This disparity further impedes the choices available to tenants when considering the size of homes they can afford to live in

Engagement and consultation

Most stakeholders across local authorities, registered social landlords and Planning Aid Wales felt the sector is "more in the community than ever before" as a result of the placemaking agenda. Discussions centred around the approaches developing landlords were already adopting in terms of consultation and engagement. Many had existing tenant scrutiny panels within their organisation's structure and depended upon these as a 'first port of call' when consulting on new schemes.

Good practice example

Powys Council, have in place a Tenant Scrutiny Panel and a subgroup for new council housing schemes. Representatives visit schemes and provide feedback to supplement tenant satisfactions surveys. *"The representatives and tenants see things that colleagues don't necessarily see".*

It was reported that when early engagement is undertaken with communities, development teams are careful not to raise expectations. Having something tangible to consult on is preferable as the community can see from visuals what may be built and how it will fit in with the area.

Stakeholders working in rural areas highlighted the benefit of the Rural Housing Enabler role. Enablers provide a role in undertaking local surveys and running open days for specific communities. Local knowledge and the evidence secured ensured the right housing solutions can be identified for communities.

Good practice example

Clwyd Alyn Housing Association recognised that there was a need for a housing management link officer within the development function to manage the handover process, the tenant profile, and who understands the needs of the tenant. The officer within Clwyd Alyn also works within the communities to capture information and manage expectations. The data gathered and the support of the community strengthens the argument for additional housing in certain communities who may have been overlooked by the planning policy process.

It was suggested that demonstrating involvement and engagement with tenants and communities should be a fundamental part of the Social Housing Grant process. The community should be kept informed throughout the process and after the completion of the development to check if their expectations have been met.

Stakeholders involved in housing management did report that in some areas they were housing more vulnerable households with higher support needs. This can involve more intensive housing management which reduces capacity to undertake tenant and community engagement.

Language and the perception of social housing

Development Teams reported that when consultation or engagement is undertaken the general feedback and objection centres around who will be living in the homes rather than what is being built. Social media can also 'whip up' negativity. All stakeholders reported that once a scheme has been completed and the new residents settled into their new homes any concerns or objections initially raised tend to disappear.

The language used by the Social Housing Sector and in Planning Policy can be confusing for many people, including officers within Local Authorities and elected members. Terminology can also be vague or hold different meanings to different people. For example, social rented housing – many still only recognise this to be 'council housing'. The term 'affordable housing' conjures different ideas and images. Like all sectors, in housing, we can also be guilty of using acronyms that make little sense to others. Stakeholders reported that even staff within their organisations struggled with understanding what the broader term 'affordable housing' means. The language used throughout development consultation stages needs to be plain and clear for all.

It was reported that many communities do not understand the role of registered social landlords i.e. their purpose in providing homes and the way in which the homes are managed. The term homelessness is emotive and there is a lack of understanding as to what it actually means, both within communities and for staff who are not directly involved in running frontline services.

The impact of limited choice

Having a slightly different viewpoint, a focus group of Shelter Cymru Caseworkers provided some insight into the impact of limited choice in social housing either through the availability of stock or allocation processes. Their views are informed by their work in supporting people to review the suitability of accommodation offers to discharge homelessness duties.

Location was a significant theme in the discussions. *"Location is key – people need to be accommodated near their work, education and support networks. Tenancies cannot be sustained if people cannot access these."* Caseworkers reported that being housed, even temporarily outside of someone's community is "massively problematic". Even if the distance isn't far geographically, the impact can be significant on vulnerable households.

They reported that transport links are crucial, but not everyone can use public transport. Areas that are hilly or have steep slopes aren't suitable for those with limited mobility.

Across our research, all stakeholders were conscious of the need to consider language and cultural needs. For example, Welsh speakers need to be housed within Welsh speaking communities with Welsh medium schools for children. Equally, refugees and asylum seekers need their new home to be close to existing support networks.

Caseworks were mindful of the impact of the current housing emergency on choice and the generally lack of social housing.

"We need to put ourselves in other people's shoes when allocating or developing new properties."

"A shortage of supply is obviously the underlying issue – without sufficient housing we'll never be able to address housing need let alone desirability. "

Conclusion

This research has brought together a wide range of insight into housing need and desirability of social housing, the opinions of what is important to the people living or hoping to live in these homes and the challenges facing developing landlords.

The limited supply of social homes is an all-prevailing influence on the current position. Whilst everyone acknowledges that choice and sensitivity in addressing a household's housing need is a vital factor in ensuring sustainability in their future tenancy, the reality is that this is just not happening given the pressure in the housing system. Accessing any social home in itself is a long waited for and sought after thing, let alone one that is in your community of choice, which is fully accessible and close to your support network.

The finance available to support development and the constraints on land supply, are all barriers to providing homes which are truly able to fulfil both need, choice and desire.

The starting point for driving change in wider policy and resource allocation is to provide more robust evidence of need at a local level and empower communities to understand local needs and campaign for them to be met. Early and meaningful engagement is essential for this to happen.

Our recommendations consider the steps that are needed for communities to be effectively involved in the assessment of housing need and subsequent development planning. They also touch upon areas of improvement to facilitate development where it is needed most:

Recommendations

1.   Communities need to be involved in the calculations of housing need to ensure the right homes are built in the right place.

a)   Data on housing need must be strengthened through effective use of waiting list information as well as greater qualitative insight through effective engagement with communities those in housing need and those facing homelessness.

b)   Welsh Government should consider taking the lead on data collection through a regular housing survey to ensure hidden need is identified. It is only through a robust evidence base demonstrating the scale of housing need in Wales that the shortfall in supply can be fully quantified.

c)   There is a need for research into the development of homes that are suited to multi-generational families.

d)   Housing enablers should be employed within each local authority area and act as the key link between communities and local authorities. To not only ensure qualitative data on housing need is captured but that communities are engage with throughout the development process.

2.   Look at ways to eradicate stigma around existing and proposed new social housing developments.

a)   Registered Social Landlords and local authorities should work collaboratively to raise awareness of different housing tenures and their role in our housing market.

b)   A myth busting education programme is needed which focuses on "who" in the community could be in housing need and the importance of social housing provision to form part of a national campaign to end the stigma around social housing.

c)   Ensure consistent language is used around social housing when interacting with communities where new social homes are to be developed.

d)   Utilise different communication methods as part of a jargon busting process around the language used when looking at developing new homes.

e)   Develop a commonly used terminology guide as part of standardising the language used around social homes and development.

f)   Improve the community understanding of what Social Housing is and the positive impact it can have on the community.

3. Further work is needed to understand what is important to existing and future tenants in terms of where and how social housing is delivered

a) This should consider the design, space and accessibility of homes as well as the wider community infrastructure.

b) The views of people with mobility issues and disabilities are particularly important.

c) Tenant scrutiny panels are an excellent opportunity for increasing engagement with existing tenants and the wider community.

a) Further research should consider the impact of supply issues and the limitations on choice in the allocations process on the sustainability of new social housing tenancies.

4. Make community engagement a mandatory part of the social housing grant process

a) As part of the social housing grant process all social housing providers to demonstrate how they have engaged with the community, those in housing need and those facing homelessness throughout the process including at the design phase together with demonstrating how they plan to continue to work with the community as the development progresses and post completion.

b) Ensure staff are well informed and able to address queries promptly and provide a consistent message to the community. Housing enablers would be the ideal person to facilitate this.

c) Make sure that everyone in a community is able to participate fully in the engagement and consultation process. Work proactively to encourage and enable participation from under-represented groups.

d) Provide alternative means of engaging to anyone who cannot attend a consultation event, including follow up opportunities for anyone to speak with the housing enabler.

e) Use social media as a positive information sharing platform as well as a tool for engagement with the community.

f) Learn from the process and be willing to amend plans and designs to accommodate community needs.

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Housing need and desirability