

Developing dialogue

Bruce Black writes an open letter to Malcolm Chisholm

DEAR Minister, Welcome to your new post, which you will by now have realised is no less challenging and vital than others you have held. A vibrant Scotland where people want to live is tied into the future development, and sometimes redevelopment, of our cities, towns and communities.

Homes for Scotland represents the house building and residential development industry in Scotland. Our member companies build over 90 per cent of all new homes and they are keen to work with you to shape the way in which we build the nation of tomorrow.

House building companies in Scotland are efficient and productive, more so than in England, as the *Barker Review of Housing Supply in the UK* pointed out. But all too often, they feel that they are building fewer houses than Scotland needs, and are building them in spite of, rather than with the help of, the system.

Let me list just some of the key issues and challenges we face, and which we hope you will address in partnership with us.

In recent years, housing issues, and new homes supply in particular, have been too far down the political agenda – something we were starting to redress with your predecessor in a dialogue we hope we can continue with you.

We need to look at taking forward the agenda for increased housing supply that was set out in the *Barker Review*. We regard this as a seminal report whose conclusions should be adopted by both government and the industry.

It is vital to address the inadequacies of the planning system, particularly the development plan system that is falling into disrepair and disrepute. We would, for instance, urge you to take immediate action on out-of-date local plans, ensuring

that in the short term they are brought up to date and with a statutory requirement for them to be kept up to date.

There is also a need for clear policy guidance, leading to workable action plans that recognise the commercial parameters within which the industry works, to support the provision of low cost homes for sale and other forms of affordable housing. With such a policy framework, and the necessary public funding in place, the industry is ready to play its full part.

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The threat of the introduction of a form of third party rights of appeal in planning must also be tackled. Like very many other interests, we have argued strongly against this proposal, which we believe will make a bad situation worse in respect of the planning system. We strongly support greater public and community involvement, but in the right way at the right time, which we firmly believe to be at the stage where the local development plan is being put together by the local authority.

The continuing shortage of land with planning consent on which development is possible is a pressing issue. This arises both from the snail's pace at which the planning system too often works and from local resistance, including from some local authorities, to change and development. Kate Barker commented that the planning system benefits the 'haves' rather than the 'have nots'.

Then there is the subject of development constraints – the widespread and seemingly intractable problems arising from Scottish Water's inability to cope with the needs of new development. This, I regret to say, is a problem almost entirely of the Executive's own making, and only the Executive can resolve it, through increased investment by Scottish Water and a requirement on Scottish Water to play an integral part in planning and building the Scotland we all want to see.

We want to play a full and responsible part in Scotland's development. We are engaging with local authorities and communities, and we are responsive to the views of environmental and consumer interests. We recognise that we are building not just for today, but also for tomorrow and we take our responsibilities very seriously.

You will recognise that we represent a significant part of your portfolio. Not only do we provide the homes that people want, we are the largest user of the planning system and of development land in Scotland. The industry is a major employer, with over 100,000 direct and indirect employees and the industry generates over five per cent of GDP in Scotland.

We were pleased to forge close links with your predecessor and we look forward to continuing that process. The issues I have highlighted are an agenda for dialogue and, more importantly, for action. We hope to have the opportunity to meet you in the very near future.

With good wishes for your new role,



BRUCE BLACK
Executive Director,
Homes for Scotland