Great expectations

Despite the recent Inverclyde yes vote, the Scottish Executive’s stock transfer programme appears to be in trouble. Although transfer was once viewed as central to Scotland’s community regeneration agenda, the executive now claims the policy is not a key goal after all. It all looked very different when in 2000 the newly formed executive laid out its priorities in the better homes for Scotland consultation.

‘Community ownership is a way of empowering tenants, maximising the total resources available for investment in social housing and securing additional benefits for the wider community,’ the better homes report proclaimed. Initially there was some success, with tenants in Glasgow and two other authorities voting in favour. But more recently tenants have rejected the option in four out of seven local ballots. And now there are no councils queuing up for the community ownership programme, bar a handful considering partial transfer.

The Scottish National Party’s shadow community minister Tricia Marwick, MSP, who recently lambasted communities minister Malcolm Chisholm in the Scottish Parliament on the issue, claims that there is a yawning policy chasm.

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The whole of Scotland’s housing renewal was predicated on stock transfer...now it has been seen after council rejig this...and ...the executive has got to an ownership model, what is it called?’ Mr Marwick asks.

Mr Marwick complains that the executive has not allowed the housing budget to expand. George Freeman, the council’s housing spokesperson, says the council was united in favour of transfer — and the fact that, as a tenant himself, he was recommending it helped persuade many. I continued to tell them that I would not support the stock transfer proposal unless I was sure that it was the best option for them and for the housing staff within the council,” he says.

Lack of opposition

The existence of a strong anti-campaign does seem to be a significant factor in rejection of transfer. In Argyll & Bute, for example, there was no opposition to the transfer and 90 per cent of the tenants who voted were in favour. Councillor George Freeman, the council’s housing spokesperson, says the council was united in favour of transfer — and the fact that, as a tenant himself, he was recommending it helped persuade many. I continued to tell them that I would not support the stock transfer proposal unless I was sure that it was the best option for them and for the housing staff within the council,” he says.

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This is not an ideological argument, it is an economic one. The executive doesn’t have any room for manoeuvre with the Treasury if the SNP does form the next administration. ‘This is not an ideological argument, it is an economic one. The executive doesn’t have any room for manoeuvre with the Treasury. I have asked Tricia Marwick what the SNP would do if the Treasury said ‘no’ and she failed to answer my question.’

The executive, meanwhile, says it has no plans to force councils to transfer stock and it is ‘up to them’. It has set its sights on the twin objectives of meeting 2012 homelessness targets and the 2015 Scottish housing quality standard. To achieve those goals it will make more money available for affordable housing, but opponents claim it is not enough. They say a question mark hangs over the extent to which transfer-refusing councils will be supported in meeting the quality standard – or affordable housing targets.

As the policy-makers quibble, councils are starting to take matters into their own hands. Midlothian, for example, plans to use prudential borrowing to build a thousand new council houses. Edinburgh has opted for a plan of selected demolition and rebuild and West Dumbartonshire may settle for partial transfer. These councils, along with the majority in Scotland that have set their faces against stock transfer, seem already to be moving on.

Scottish stock transfer: a turbulent history

Stock transfer in Scotland got off to a spectacular start, with almost 88,000 homes changing hands, in the first week of March 2003. Since then, only a further 29,000 have been earmarked for transfer. And in recent ballots, the no votes have outnumbered the yeses.

Scottish Borders Council went first, by a hair’s breadth. But its total of 6,000-plus houses looked puny next to Glasgow’s 81,000, transferred a few days later. The sums of money involved with the big city transfer were huge too, with the Treasury offering £1.3 billion to wipe out Glasgow’s housing debt.

Not long after, Dumfries & Galloway Council quietly divested 14,000 houses. Then there was a pause, until the latest tranche of community ownership transfer ballots, starting last year.

This time around the Scottish Executive’s flagship housing policy has suffered mixed fortunes – with three ballots in favour and four against. The gap between the ayes and the nays is greater still, when number of houses is put into the equation. Successful ballots in Argyll & Bute, Inverclyde and the Western Isles have released far fewer houses for transfer than would have been available in Highland, Edinburgh, Stirling and Renfrewshire if their tenants had voted in favour.

For the moment, future balloting is on hold. The majority of Scottish councils have decided against transfer, though some are seeking a mix of retention and partial transfer. Only one, West Dumbartonshire, has so far formally indicated its plans to the executive.

Recent community ownership programme votes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Council</th>
<th>Votes for Transfer</th>
<th>Votes against Transfer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edinburgh</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argyll &amp; Bute</td>
<td>89.6%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stirling</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Renfrewshire</td>
<td>50.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highland</td>
<td>59.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inverclyde</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>29%</td>
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