

## Inside Housing 28 November 2008

### Letters

It seems ironic that at a time when confidence in the free market is at such an all time low, private enterprise is still the only solution proposed by Dr Julie Cowans (last week's Comment) for the apparently international problems of social housing.

Perhaps we should take the opportunity of global financial melt-down to question the dominance of liberal market solutions for our housing need and to examine some of the perceived truths about social housing.

We might usefully ask whether the concentrations of deprivation witnessed in some areas of social housing are a factor caused by the tenure itself, or a consequence of market economies that create inequalities of wealth and poverty.

It might be timely to re-examine the strengths of the social housing tenure and to learn from empirical research such as that by the Centre for Policy Studies for the Department for Work and Pensions who earlier this year showed that security of tenure provides a platform to enable people to access the flexible and uncertain employment market while sub-market rents act as an incentive in a low wage economy.

Social housing management organisations – though far from perfect – already off a great deal of advice and assistance to social housing tenants and their supportive, professional approach is better tailored to today's harsh economic climate than the inflexibility witnessed in some of the banks and in many a private landlord.

We might also reflect on some of the ideals of the social housing movement and remember that before the days of Right to Buy and public spending cuts, social housing offered some of the best designed homes with the most spacious room sizes and that the original ambition was to provide sub-market renting as a secure tenure for all.

This was a social policy ambition founded on good economic sense and the provision of cost renting as a public initiative to raise standards and influence supply across the housing market was successful in other European countries, until rendered unfashionable by the sweeping tide of neo-liberalism. Julie Cowan encourages us to take an international view on our housing problems, but she fails to point out that everywhere we look today we see the flawed dominance of free market solutions.

It is time to see beyond this fetishism of the market. Home ownership has not proved to be a passport to wealth and social mobility. As John Hill's pointed out in his 'Ends and Means' review, the housing tenure that receives most public subsidy in the UK is home ownership so let us stop this denigration of social housing. What matters to people is to have a secure affordable home and that is what the social rented sector offers. But it has other advantages, one being that social housing tenants are able –

in the best examples – to hold their landlords to account and to influence decision-making in a peerless model of democracy in action.

So if the sector is less subsidised than market alternatives, better managed, more democratic, provides more work incentives, and once offered excellent quality, before so much was privatised or left to rot, why are people still putting it down?

The problems associated with social housing are not specific to that tenure model and most could be solved by building a great deal more affordable rented homes. Let's argue for a social housing sector that is no longer reserved for the most vulnerable in society. Let's campaign for a right to social rented housing for all.

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