

## **REVIEW: HOUSING AND PUBLIC POLICY IN POST-DEVOLUTION SCOTLAND**

*Kenneth Gibb*

Duncan Sim (ed.), **Housing and Public Policy in Post-Devolution Scotland**. Coventry: Chartered Institute of Housing, 2004, 285 pp, pb, £20, ISBN 1 903208 63 7.

This book is a welcome addition to the still small collection of research and commentary on Scottish housing policy. Duncan Sim has included many of the 'notables' of Scottish housing studies (plus Steve Wilcox and Alan Murie who work in England) and has produced 14 substantive chapters that reflect on important and different dimensions of Scottish housing post-devolution. In recent years, the Chartered Institute of Housing has moved strongly into housing policy publications and this includes national textbooks, of which this is the second one on Scotland (the first, edited by Currie and Murie, was published in 1996). These books straddle a number of markets: housing students, housing professionals and commentators and analysts. As an independent source of material in a highly politicised policy area, this direction is to be welcomed.

Why might this book be of interest to non-housing specialist readers of *Scottish Affairs*? First of all, housing in Scotland tells an interesting devolution story. Prior to 1999, Scotland enjoyed administrative devolution and this was reflected in distinctive nuance and policy instruments aimed at tenure change, urban regeneration and the like. The policy aims would be close to those operating in London but the context was different and the proposed solutions could be dissimilar, too, if only sometimes by degree (e.g. more generous housing association funding).

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*Kenneth Gibb is a Reader in the Department of Urban Studies, University of Glasgow.*

### *Scottish Affairs*

A second reason is to consider devolution in practice through the lens of the substantial Housing Act in 2001 and further (progressive) legislation on homelessness and now promised laws to reform private housing. The 2001 Act introduced many reforms but, taken as a package, it can be viewed as a set of policies to ease the transition to council housing stock transfer in Scotland. Third, housing is an important dimension of Scottish social policy in its own right but also increasingly the location of wider policy debates on, for example, community safety, and anti-social behaviour and, at the other end of the extreme, is a principal conduit for the redistribution of wealth through house price inflation and inheritance. Finally, Scottish housing policy is of interest post-devolution because of the different ways Whitehall and English housing policy continues to tug at the aims and instruments of the Executive's social housing aspirations.

This is a wide-ranging collection, and yet that makes the omissions all the more apparent (see below). Most of the chapters focus on policy changes that have been introduced since devolution, but there are also other chapters such as by Bramley and Morgan on private house building and by Shucksmith (rural housing) that do not sit so obviously with the others. Chapters by Scott (housing management), Jones (the Right to Buy), the funding and affordability of social housing (Taylor and Wilcox), stock transfer (Taylor), homelessness (Fitzpatrick) and the strategic role (Goodlad) are all ideal for teaching on their respective subjects. Moreover, the chapters by Murie (critically examining the distinctiveness of Scottish housing within a UK context), Petch (social care regulation), Sim (social justice), Laird and Flint (reforming property management) and Bailey and Hastings (housing and neighbourhood regeneration) all stand in their own right as worthwhile topic overviews.

But there are important omissions. First, there is hardly any mention of the Scottish housing quality standard, prudential borrowing and the rapidly accelerating community ownership programme that is taking more and more councils to the brink and beyond of whole stock transfer (as the only way to achieve statutory minimum housing standards). Even since late-2003, there has been considerable movement in this respect, and the volume already looks a little dated, confronting likely extensive tenure and organisational change of social housing. Again, in this area, one might have expected to see more written about the single most radical stock transfer in the UK, the two-stage transfer of Glasgow's council housing, ultimately to community-level local housing organisations. Although the Scottish model of community ownership

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stresses localism and tenant involvement as part and parcel of stock transfer, it contrasts sharply with the wider range of options and resources, though less wedded to decentralisation, available in England.

Second, the private housing sector receives limited exposure. This may reasonably be a function of the legislation thus far. Also, it is true that there are chapters on property management, the right to buy and house building. But where are the owner-occupied housing market, the mortgage market and the private rented sector? In a broader sense, it might have been more useful to include an additional contextual chapter that set out trends in housing in Scotland a little more clearly and tried to elaborate on these themes prior to the analysis that follows. Scotland's housing is changing rapidly in terms of tenure and through household aspirations. We have known for some time that private sector legislation was on the way, and I do think that space could have been found to consider these important questions in a more integrated fashion.

Finally, a topic touched by some to different degrees in the book, but one of permanent interest to many, concerns whether Scottish and English policy is converging or diverging. We have seen examples of both since 1999 but, as with other policy areas, it will be fascinating to see how housing policy evolves once different parties are in power in Edinburgh and in London. Many of the chapters in this collection provide illustrations or examples of where tensions might come to be exposed. Taylor and Wilcox identify the pivotal financial problem surrounding housing benefit and its treatment within the Parliament's funding but there will be countless other rubbing points. Perhaps we will not have to wait for different parties in power?

The chapters in this book are all well written and edited. They should provide a lot of useful material for housing students, public policy practitioners and those interested in housing for its wider impacts. The book reflects a need for commentary and analysis arising from the speed and extent of legislation and policy development in Scotland. That fact alone probably ensures that it will not, nor should it, be the last edition of this type of textbook.

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