

SEP candidate replies to letter on housing crisis in Wales

7 May 2007

I have read your article on the Web (“SEP election campaign: Welsh Labour denounces antiwar opposition”). In detail, it says, “There are 20,000 homeless people in Wales, of which 7,000 are dependant children.”

This, as it stands, means nothing. Such round figures are unlikely. Who are these people? Why are they homeless?—there are many possible reasons. How many are families, and of what size in terms of housing units to be found? The numbers and ages of the homeless are significant. How many are employed/unemployed? Where do the people live? How many are getting aid from help organisations?

Where do your figures come from, and how were they collected and collated? Your prompt and detailed response is requested and will be appreciated. Please note, I have no hidden agenda and write as an individual member of the public seeking accurate and meaningful information.

Yours,

Sue H, Wales

Dear Sue,

According to Homelessness Policy Watch www.crisis.org.uk/policywatch/, there has been an increase in homelessness in all areas of the UK in recent years, but the rate of increase has been most rapid in Wales.

Figures for homelessness are collected by local authorities, and in Wales they are published annually by the Welsh Assembly. They are broken down into households with dependent children, without dependent children and “in priority need.” There are also those without dependent children, not “in priority need” and the “intentionally homeless.” These categories were defined in the 1996 Housing Act.

The figure of 20,000 homeless people, 7,000 of whom were dependent children, is the number of people who were recognised by local authorities in Wales as homeless in 2005. This official figure must be taken as a minimum, beyond which are many single homeless people, those who have found some sort of temporary accommodation, and those whose needs have not been made known to the council. Others are simply not recognised by the council as homeless.

In addition, there are many people living in substandard housing that does not reach the Welsh Housing Quality Standard (WHQS), the official standard laid down by the Welsh Assembly itself. Many of these houses are council houses. It is estimated that more than £3 billion will be needed to bring Welsh council houses up to this minimum acceptable standard. I refer you to the Welsh

Housing Quality Standard and Social Housing Renewal Cost Model Report (Welsh Assembly Government, SJRRR 4/05, November 2005).

You ask who the homeless are. This is an important question. The official categories of homelessness according to the 1996 Act and the Homelessness (Priority Needs) (Wales) Order 2001 include those whose parents are no longer able or willing to accommodate them, those who do not have friends or relatives able or willing to accommodate them, those who are homeless because their relationship with a partner has broken down. It includes those who have had to leave their home because of violence or harassment. People who have just left institutional care such as a children’s home, mental hospital or prison are included in the figures, as are those who have left the armed services. People who have lost rented accommodation because they cannot afford to pay the rent are included, and so are those who have lost their rented accommodation for other reasons. Those who have lost their home when it was repossessed by their mortgage lender are included (see Welsh Housing Statistics, 2005, which is available as a PDF from the Welsh Assembly website).

Clearly, this does not include the many young people who now continue to live with their parents because they cannot afford to establish their own homes. The most recent Social Trends Survey from the National Statistical Office showed that in 2006, 58 percent of men and 39 percent of women aged 20-24 in England lived with their parents, an increase of around 8 percentage points since 1991. The reason for this is not hard to find: Between 1995 and 2005, the average price paid by a first-time homebuyer increased by 204 percent.

Comparable figures for Wales are not available, but would probably show a similar trend because Wales has become one of the least-affordable areas of the UK for housing, outside of southeast England. The average house price in Wales was just over £157,000 in February 2007; for Cardiff, the average was more than £182,000; and in the nearby Vale of Glamorgan, the average price was more than £194,000, according to the Land Registry figures for England and Wales. In every area of Wales, house prices have risen since the same time last year, in some cases by as much as 21.5 percent.

The official figures we cited in the article are just the tip of the iceberg. The true extent of the housing problem is much greater than these figures suggest. Socialist Equality Party candidates have met many people in the course of their campaign for the Welsh Assembly elections who would not be considered homeless

according to the official figures, but did not have a home that was adequate for their needs. We have met single people who are relying on the hospitality of friends or are paying high rents but cannot afford to buy a home of their own. We have also met young people buying homes on shared-ownership schemes, which will mean they can never buy the whole of their home but must continue to pay for a part of it even when the mortgage is finally paid off at the end of their working lives.

The UK government has promised to increase new home building from 180,000 in 2006 to 200,000 by 2016. But as the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) has pointed out, the 1951 Conservative government set a target of 300,000 new houses a year, an increase of 100,000 a year, which was achieved by 1953. Labour managed to increase house building to 425,000 a year in 1968.

“Compared to what was delivered in the 1950s and 1960s,” said Martin Weale, director of the NIESR, “it is difficult to conclude that the government is seriously concerned about the consequences of the failure to expand housing supply.”

In the past, council houses have played a major role in the supply of housing. But council houses are a diminishing resource in Wales, as they are elsewhere in the UK. Many houses have been sold to tenants and taken out of the public stock. Now, councils are confronting the remaining tenants of publicly owned houses with a blunt offer. Either they accept the transfer of council houses to the private sector so that the property can be used as collateral to raise a loan to pay for repairs or, if they refuse privatisation, they have to accept that their homes will be allowed to deteriorate. Tenants in Wrexham and Swansea have just voted against such proposals. But the councils will probably continue to put the question to them until they accept. Camden council in London put privatisation to the vote seven times until tenants eventually accepted it.

When our candidates spoke to members of the Vale of Glamorgan Older People’s Forum, they told us about their concerns over the proposed transfer of council houses to private ownership.

Mrs. Winnie Davis said, “There is no option. And don’t say tenants are in control—tenants are in the driving seat—the tenants are not in the driving seat. If you want your houses done up, then you have obviously got to vote yes. All these promises that are made to the tenants are not being carried out.”

“Take Cardiff,” said Mrs. Davis, “There are 14,000 council houses in Cardiff. Where are they going to find all these workmen for 14,000 baths, 14,000 kitchens? And there are 22 local authorities. We want honesty.”

Mrs. Davies was one of the participants at a Housing Forum meeting at which members of the public were invited to put their concerns to candidates of the four main parties. When asked about the backlog in council house repairs, Mark Whitcutt for Labour said, “In life there are choices.”

Other members of the audience asked about provision for vulnerable members of society such as the mentally ill, drug addicts and rough sleepers. Paul Lindoewood of Space for People, a charity that provides help for the disabled, asked, “What do the parties intend to do about adapted housing for the disabled?” None of them got a satisfactory answer.

Stuart Nolan, Socialist Equality Party candidate for South Wales Central, spoke from the floor and asked the Labour candidate Mark Whitcutt how he could justify the Labour promise to build just 6,500 new affordable homes when there were 20,000 officially homeless in Wales. “And what do you mean by affordable?” he asked.

“The appalling levels of debt facing homeowners should be ended by capping repayments at no more than 20 percent of income,” Nolan said, “and a ban imposed on house repossessions.”

Nolan called for a massive social housing programme to be implemented that would “provide comfortable, secure and affordable accommodation for students, workers, the unemployed and pensioners. Banking and the financial institutions should be nationalised to provide the funding for such a programme of house building.”

What was clear from the Housing Forum meeting was that none of the major parties had a perspective for dealing with the housing crisis in Wales. Labour proposed its paltry 6,500 houses. The Liberal Democratic candidate Dominic Hagan feebly suggested that perhaps councils could buy back individual council houses when their present owners moved. Conservative candidate Mark Isherwood called for the social housing grant to be restored to its level under the Tories, who began the process of privatisation. The Plaid Cymru candidate Leanne Wood, who declared herself to be a “committed socialist,” said that her party would provide a £5,000 grant for first-time buyers who had saved the same amount over three years as a deposit on a house. This would barely pay the legal fees, let alone provide a deposit on a house of £180,000 in Cardiff.

The only programme that offers any real solution to the housing crisis in Wales and elsewhere in the UK is that put forward by the Socialist Equality Party.

Thank you again for your e-mail, and please have a look at our article on the UK housing crisis.

Yours sincerely,
Chris Talbot



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact