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25th January 2008

Dear Andrew

Response to Firm Foundations: The Future of Housing in Scotland

Forward Scotland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Scottish Government's consultation on its discussion document, Firm Foundations: The Future of Housing in Scotland. Overall, we support the proposed actions outlined in the paper.

Our enclosed submission recommends the following key actions. Forward Scotland believes the Scottish Government should seek to:

- emphasise the need to ensure that sustainable development is placed at the heart of the national policy framework, with the long-term social, environmental and economic wellbeing of Scotland's people the ultimate objective of all planning and housing policies
- ensure that planning policies and guidance are closely aligned to the principles of sustainable development in order to ensure that the proposed increase in housing supply is managed appropriately and results in the social, economic and environmental benefits outlined in the document
- focus not only on the energy performance of buildings, but on improving the ecological footprint and sustainability of the methods and materials used during construction and maintenance of both buildings and open spaces
- ensure that developers actively engage with communities as early as possible regarding potential developments, informing and empowering communities, and helping to reduce blockages in the planning process at a later stage

Forward Scotland is very keen to continue working with the Scottish Government and its agencies to develop a number of initiatives to further sustainable development among communities. Our experience in coordinating numerous projects and identifying new approaches to foster thriving communities will support the government's goals of achieving a greener, healthier and stronger Scotland.

Yours sincerely

Frazer Scott
Acting Chief Executive

Firm Foundations: The Future of Housing in Scotland

A CONTRIBUTION FROM FORWARD SCOTLAND

Forward Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond and provide feedback to the Scottish Government's discussion paper, *Firm Foundations: The Future of Housing in Scotland*. We are happy to have this response placed in the public domain, and invite questions or further discussion on any issues raised in this document.

Forward Scotland supports action for sustainable development through practical projects and research. Our mission is to champion innovative approaches to sustainable development. We work to inspire a culture where the benefits of sustainable development are understood, valued and achieved. To do this we aim to promote sustainability in the widest sense in ways that change people's perceptions, attitudes and behaviour, while also achieving economic vitality, social wellbeing and a good quality environment for all.

Our response is based on over ten years of experience promoting sustainable development in Scotland, and of managing and delivering grant schemes which have supported a significant number of communities, social enterprises and other organisations to increase capacity and improve their local environments.

Sustainable Development and Wellbeing

Sustainable development can be interpreted as being concerned with improving the wellbeing of people and the communities in which they live, for the long term. This can be achieved by integrating economic, environmental and social impacts. Through the pursuit of sustainable development, it can be expected that society will maintain or improve its levels of wellbeing in the long term.

In her covering statement, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Wellbeing acknowledges the vital link between housing and her portfolio. Forward Scotland's report¹ on wellbeing and sustainable development highlights the close connections between these two interdependent constructs and explores the effect of local urban and rural environments on residents' feelings of wellbeing. Wellbeing is clearly influenced by an array of environmental, social and economic factors, so a change in policy focus is required in order that resources be channelled into addressing the causes of societal concern. Uppermost in these considerations should be investment in issues or activities which have been clearly demonstrated to improve wellbeing, including increasing funding for green spaces and improving the quality of local environments. In addition, our findings suggested that investments should be tailored to suit the individual needs of communities, with rural and urban areas having particularly distinctive needs.

Overall comments on the proposals

Overall, Forward Scotland supports the vision and actions outlined in the consultation document. We welcome the focus within the vision on contributing to the creation of sustainable, mixed communities, reducing economic inequalities in the housing market by increasing the choice of affordable housing and delivering housing on the basis of higher environmental and design standards in order to "meet the challenges of climate change and sustainable development".

¹ Forward Scotland (2007), Wellbeing and Sustainable Development www.forward-scotland.org.uk/View-document-details/121-Vital-City-Well-being-and-Sustainable-Development.html

In particular, Forward Scotland would like to make the following key points in response to this consultation. The Scottish Government should seek to:

- emphasise the need to ensure that sustainable development is placed at the heart of the national policy framework, with the long-term social, environmental and economic wellbeing of Scotland's people the ultimate objective of all planning and housing policies
- ensure that planning policies and guidance are closely aligned to the principles of sustainable development in order to ensure that the proposed increase in housing supply is managed appropriately and results in the social, economic and environmental benefits outlined in the document
- focus not only on the energy performance of buildings, but on improving the ecological footprint and sustainability of the methods and materials used during construction and maintenance of both buildings and open spaces
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Our Responses to Specific Questions

Sustainable development is an approach that covers all policy areas, and therefore has a bearing on all aspects of social wellbeing and on the future of housing in Scotland. This response, however, focuses only on the areas of the consultation document where there are clear opportunities for taking a sustainable development approach, resulting in improvements to Scotland's housing, and thus the increased wellbeing of the Scottish people. We have highlighted the sections and questions that we have responded to specifically.

PRIORITIES FOR ACTION ON HOUSING SUPPLY

Boosting Housing Supply

Forward Scotland welcomes the vision described to create sustainable, mixed communities and sustainable places. We support the assertion of generating long-term social, economic and environmental benefits through the development of "sustainable, successful settlements" by investing in quality.

Q1: Do you agree that aiming to increase the rate of new housing supply in Scotland to at least 35,000 a year by the middle of the next decade is a sensible and realistic ambition, and that this will help set a necessary political context for acceleration in housing supply?

We do not wish to advise on the target itself, but we would urge the Scottish Government to ensure that planning policies and guidance are closely aligned to the principles of sustainable development in order to ensure that this increase in supply is managed appropriately and results in the social, economic and environmental benefits outlined in this document.

Higher Environmental Standards

We welcome the recognition in the consultation document of the opportunity available to make housing and communities sustainable through approaches such as 'sustainable urbanism', and by reducing the carbon footprint of homes in Scotland.

Forward Scotland supports the aim of the proposed Low Carbon Buildings Standards Strategy for Scotland of moving the construction of new buildings towards Scandinavian energy performance levels, and we look forward to seeing further details of these levels and related targets, and how they will be achieved. This should not only focus on the energy

performance of the buildings themselves, but the ecological footprint and sustainability of the methods and materials used during construction and maintenance.

Similarly, the route map to zero-carbon buildings is a welcome objective, and we look forward to seeing further details of this proposal.

Strengthening the Housing and Planning Delivery Framework

Forward Scotland strongly welcomes the actions towards integrating land-use planning and housing strategy. We wish to emphasise the need to ensure that sustainable development is placed at the heart of the national policy framework, with the long-term social, environmental and economic wellbeing of Scotland's people the ultimate objective of all planning and housing policies.

Through our work on practical projects with communities and our own research, it is clear that a long-term, strategic approach is required to housing and planning policy.

Q3: Is there a role for a specialist national function to provide expert support for local authorities in strategic planning for housing? What expertise do you think this function would require?

Although we believe that expert support on strategic planning would be advantageous, Forward Scotland is not in a position to judge how this should be delivered. However, it is our view that such a function should consider the infrastructure and coordination required to make Scotland's communities and housing more vibrant and sustainable. This may include, for example:

- maximising the long-term sustainability and minimising the likely ecological footprints of future residents in planned developments;
- ensuring the safeguarding, creation and maintenance of high quality, public places (including green spaces);
- assessing the potential for district heating networks;
- ensuring adequate public services are available and encouraging the retention of local businesses within a locality; and
- maximising the use and availability of active travel and public transport around communities and avoiding the need for extensive commuting and car use.

Q4: Even when land has planning permission there are still blockages that prevent new housing being built. What additional arrangements would, or could, accelerate development on land with planning permissions to help ensure that future housing supply targets are met?

It is vital that developers actively engage with communities as early as possible regarding potential developments. Not only will this ensure that communities are kept informed, but it is likely this will benefit developers by improving relations with communities, reduce the likelihood of opposition and may speed up the planning process.

New Settlements

Q5: We have proposed that much expanded or new, stand-alone settlements may be a valid solution. How should we best encourage the development of new, sustainable communities that are sympathetic to Scotland's landscape and environment?

The criteria proposed for selecting successful proposals for Scottish Sustainable Communities are all appropriate. We would, however be interested in seeing further details on which of these criteria (if any) will be weighted more heavily than others, and how proposals will be judged against each criterion.

We support the inclusion of using renewable and clean energy technologies. We would suggest that such proposals may or may not be “innovative” as stated in the criteria, as long as they are effective. There are numerous examples of such technologies embedded within settlements already in use across Europe, including the UK, so effective, working models exist and need only be adapted to suit Scottish requirements.

The criterion requiring “high environmental and design standards”, as mentioned previously, should not only focus on the energy performance of buildings, but the ecological footprint and sustainability of the methods and materials used during construction and maintenance. This applies to infrastructure and communal spaces as well as buildings.

Public Sector Land

Forward Scotland supports the prioritisation of identifying surplus public sector land as a potential resource. However, it is crucial that the development of such land is preceded by appropriate consultation and engagement with communities.

In response to the Scottish Government consultation on the Disposal of Land by Local Authorities Regulations, Forward Scotland rejected the revision removing the requirement for local authorities to publicise proposals to dispose of land at less than the best consideration that could reasonably be obtained. Through our experience of helping community groups manage and secure assets we have learned that community involvement and management of assets is fundamental to the sustainability of communities.

We believe that the requirement to consult in these cases would:

- Allow for greater involvement of communities in assets, leading to more sustainable, empowered communities in Scotland
- Safeguard the disposal of land held as Common Good Assets and provide an opportunity for communities to highlight Common Good status where local authority records are incomplete
- Ensure that communities with legitimate interests in securing sustainable development through the management of local assets would be given the opportunity to influence land use and development

Such disposals should contribute to the wellbeing of an area, or offer significant community benefits. This, however, can only be achieved through active consultation with communities in advance of any sale.

ASSISTANCE FOR FIRST-TIME BUYERS

Direct Support for Home Ownership

Q7: How could the Government stimulate more innovative mortgage and related products and services to assist people in purchasing their first home?

Forward Scotland is not in a position to comment on the proposals for support; however we support the action to assess the potential of the emerging market in 'green mortgages' as part of the aim to create innovative financial products to help deliver affordable home ownership.

THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

Bringing Empty Properties in Disrepair Back into Use

Forward Scotland welcomes the proposals to help bring empty properties back into use. This follows a more sustainable approach to residential development; recycling existing properties, and helping to revitalise town centres.

PROPOSALS FOR STIMULATING INNOVATION AND CHOICE IN SOCIAL HOUSING

Better Neighbourhoods

Q30: Do you agree that we need to find new ways of focussing on the quality of place/open space and greenspace within deprived neighbourhoods?

Forward Scotland welcomes the recognition given to the quality of public spaces in this consultation. We support the intention to create a fund enabling project partners to develop high quality public spaces and proposals for long term management.

Research by Forward Scotland into the links between sustainable development and health and wellbeing has found that there are clear correlations between the quality of local environments and individuals' wellbeing². Improving this quality will involve creating attractive streetscapes and green spaces in some circumstances, but this should only be done as part of a wider strategy to ensure those spaces are regularly maintained, safe (e.g. well-lit) and respected by the community to encourage use and avoid deterioration.

Summary

Forward Scotland welcomes the focus within the discussion document on contributing to the creation of sustainable, mixed communities and helping to meet the challenges of climate change and sustainable development. In order to realise the Scottish Government's vision, sustainable development must be placed at the heart of the national policy framework, with the long-term social, environmental and economic wellbeing of Scotland's people the ultimate objective of all housing and planning policies.

Sustainable development by its very nature seeks to create the conditions whereby society can thrive. The environment will be protected and improved, the economy can grow and society will be pushed to greater equity.

Forward Scotland is very keen to continue working with the Scottish Government and its agencies to develop a number of initiatives to further sustainable development among

² Forward Scotland (2007), Making the Connections: Health and Sustainable Development
www.forward-scotland.org.uk/index2.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=145&Itemid=209

communities. Our experience in coordinating numerous projects and identifying new approaches to foster thriving communities will support the government's goals of achieving a greener, healthier and stronger Scotland.

The government has consistently recognised that knowledge and experience of Forward Scotland as we work across the spectrum of sustainable development related activity with public bodies, private companies and community organisations.

As a result the organisation, with its multi-disciplinary team, has developed a range of skills and experiences that we intend to apply to meet the emerging challenges of sustainable development in Scotland. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this consultation and we look forward to supporting the work of the Scottish Government in promoting sustainable development and wellbeing. We would be pleased to meet with you if clarification or further detail is required.

Frazer Scott

Acting Chief Executive

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