

Community ownership: turning a right to buy into lasting community power

By Co-operatives Wales 13 October 2026

The discussion highlighted by Community Energy Wales following Cwmpas' Communities Creating Homes conference raises an essential question: how can communities secure meaningful control over the places, services and resources that shape their lives?

Co-operatives Wales welcomes the proposed Community Right to Buy as an opportunity to strengthen community ownership and retain wealth locally. However, legislation must do more than create an opportunity to purchase. It must enable communities to exercise that right fairly and sustain the benefits for future generations.

Our central concern is the protection of community value. Public investment, volunteer effort and locally generated wealth should remain dedicated to community benefit. Effective asset locks must prevent these gains being diverted into private enrichment, including when an organisation dissolves or sells an asset. Democratic governance, inclusive membership and accountability to the community are equally essential.

A right to buy also needs the means to buy. Where will acquisition capital come from, and who will fund surveys, legal advice, refurbishment and initial operating costs? Buildings require maintenance, insurance and energy; community enterprises need skilled people and reliable income. Accessible grants, patient finance and continuing development support must accompany legislation. Otherwise, communities risk acquiring liabilities they cannot sustain.

This matters particularly because communities do not start from equal positions. Poverty, insecure employment, disability, caring responsibilities and poorer health can restrict people's capacity to volunteer, raise finance or navigate complex procedures. More affluent communities may have easier access to professional networks and investment. Support must therefore be proportionate to need, with practical assistance reaching those facing the greatest barriers.

Ownership should also be a choice. Where a local authority already owns a building, some communities may prefer a secure, affordable, long lease with fair terms. This can offer stability and meaningful control without the capital costs of purchase. Councils should explore these options collaboratively, recognising that community empowerment does not require residents to assume every financial and operational responsibility.

Where Pride in Place investment is available, there is an opportunity to connect it with community ownership and long-term sustainability. Funding could support preparation, acquisition and viable co-operative enterprises that generate income, provide services and keep expenditure circulating locally. Communities must shape these decisions themselves.

We should also question why purchasing assets receives so much political attention compared with other potentially less costly routes to empowerment. Fairer public procurement, accessible leases, shared decision-making, stronger co-operative

development support and simpler administrative processes could unlock significant community benefit. These measures deserve equal ambition.

Scotland introduced its first Community Right to Buy in 2003. Wales should ask why it has taken so much longer, examine experience elsewhere and learn from both achievements and barriers. The aim should be legislation suited to Welsh communities, supported by an effective delivery system.

Experience in England offers both encouragement and caution. Community groups have rescued valued pubs, meeting places and other facilities, with the Community Ownership Fund supporting purchases and refurbishment. However, England's original Community Right to Bid under the Localism Act 2011 provided time to prepare an offer, rather than a guaranteed right to purchase: a six-month pause could still end with the owner selling to another buyer. The lesson for Wales is that an opportunity to bid must be accompanied by a realistic route to securing ownership.

Scotland demonstrates the wider possibilities. Community-owned assets are supporting housing, employment, renewable energy and local services, with the Scottish Land Fund providing an important foundation. Yet the Scottish Land Commission's 2026 assessment also identifies persistent difficulties with funding, governance, access to specialist advice and lengthy, resource-intensive acquisition procedures. Scotland's own review of Community Right to Buy proposes simplifying legislation and improving guidance, showing that even established rights need continuing review and improvement.

For Co-operatives Wales, these experiences reinforce a practical principle: securing an asset is the beginning of community ownership, not the end. Wales should learn from the achievements and difficulties elsewhere, combining effective rights with protected community value, accessible finance, democratic accountability and sustained support. Communities need the resources to develop thriving assets, rather than being left to carry the costs and responsibilities alone.

Success in five years should be judged by who participates, whose wealth is retained and whether services endure, alongside the number of assets acquired. Community ownership can build resilience, belonging and agency. To fulfil that promise, Wales must protect collective value and make community control achievable across all our communities.

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