The State of our Communities report: Wales needs a say and the means to act

The Co-operative Party's *State of Communities* report starts by listening to people already doing the work. The report makes a welcome case for government to back the expertise already present in communities. For Wales, the test will be whether local people can influence spending, secure the premises they need and keep services affordable long after the initial funding has ended.

Its Welsh participants spoke about the long decline of former mining villages and the failure of successive regeneration efforts to rebuild local opportunity. Across Britain, participants described how the loss of libraries, youth centres and other shared spaces has made it harder for people to meet and organise. We welcome the report's recognition that reversing this requires long-term investment, stronger local organisations and accessible public services.

The report's survey of 1,500 people captures the gap between belonging and influence. Sixty per cent felt a strong sense of belonging to their community, while only five per cent strongly agreed that they had a genuine say in local decisions. Among respondents who felt they had a say, 46 per cent felt more hopeful than ten years earlier, compared with 13 per cent of those who felt they did not. Those figures give governments good reason to take local influence seriously.

We welcome the proposed Community Power Council, particularly the report's suggestion that Wales could establish its own equivalent. Welsh communities should help design that body and choose how they are represented. Its membership should include people from small, volunteer-led groups as well as established organisations, with funded, accessible participation in Welsh and English. The Welsh Young Co-operators' principle, "Nothing About Us Without Us," should apply here too. Children and young people, including disabled young people, should have a route to shape priorities and see how their views changed decisions.

The report calls for development support for co-operatives, social enterprises and community businesses. Its recommendations could go further in explaining who will provide that support, how communities will find it and how it will be funded. In Wales, that means connecting 'Pride in Place' with the proposed 'Community Right to Buy', secure and affordable leases, and specialist co-operative development. Groups need early grants for surveys and legal advice, affordable finance where they want to buy, and help budgeting for repairs and running costs. Public authorities can also help community enterprises become viable by making suitable public contracts accessible to them.

We welcome the report's case for community ownership and the long-term finance needed to make it possible. Its recommendations should go further on community wealth building. When public investment and years of local effort increase the value of a building or piece of land, who controls that value and who benefits from it? In Wales, we want 'Pride in Place' and the proposed 'Community Right to Buy' legislation to come with practical safeguards: democratic governance, asset locks or equivalent protections, transparent arrangements for reinvesting surpluses, and affordable access for the people who already use these places. Public authorities should also give grassroots groups a fair chance to acquire or lease an asset before it is committed to a preferred partner. The test is whether regeneration leaves working-class communities with more control and more wealth to put to work locally.

We would also like the report to go further on who keeps the value created by regeneration. A refurbished building can become unaffordable to the working-class communities that sustained

it. Asset locks or equivalent protections, affordable access and a continuing voice for existing users can help prevent displacement and the extraction of publicly funded value. Where councils propose to sell, lease or hand management of a community asset to a preferred partner, the opportunity and criteria should be published early. Grassroots groups should have a fair chance to make a proposal, and councils should explain their decisions.