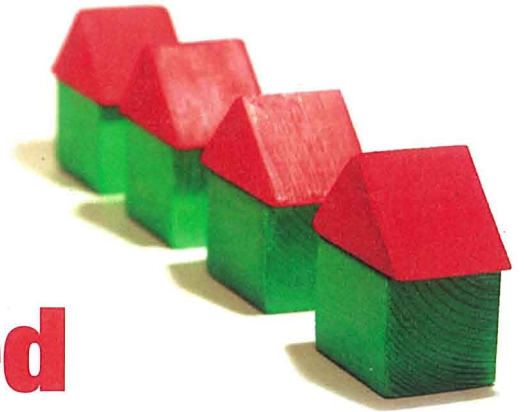


Mutual Housing Futures Explored



By **Ben Reid**, Chief Executive of The Midcounties Co-operative, Chair of Co-operatives^{UK} and a Co-operative and Mutual Housing Commissioner.

The independent Commission on Co-operative and Mutual Housing, which was launched at Co-operative Congress in June last year, is exploring how housing co-operatives and mutual housing organisations can play an expanded role in the UK's housing system.

Today's UK mutual housing sector is relatively small at 0.2% of total housing in contrast with 18% in Sweden and 14% in Norway, for example. The Commission intends to unravel the reasons for this numerical under-development and seek ways to help expand the sector based on robust evidence and through practical recommendations for action.

Developing an up-to-date picture of the mutual housing sector in England, its history, successes, barriers to further development and lessons to be learnt has been the first task of the Commission. But we are also carrying out an analysis of the environment in which the mutual housing sector operates and through a series of case studies of existing co-operative and mutual housing organisations we are illustrating their valuable housing and community roles.

Assembling evidence through regional hearings with co-operators, encouraging written evidence from a wide-ranging number of organisations and individuals, and holding a series of roundtables with housing, community and related sectors, backed-up by original research by CURS, University of Birmingham and the Human City Institute, is enabling a comprehensive view to be compiled. Our 'Call for Evidence' paper, which is a major element in our inclusive consultation, is available at www.ccmh.coop.

The Commission is independent but is supported by social housing representative organisations including the Chartered Institute of Housing, the National Housing Federation, Housing Associations Charitable Trust plus the Building Societies Association, as well as co-operative organisations The Confederation of Co-operative Housing,

Co-operatives^{UK}, CDS Co-operatives and The Midcounties Co-operative. Also supported by social housing providers Accord, Preston Community Gateway, Hanover, Matrix, Trident and WATMOS, the Commission is building upon the work of the 2001 Co-operative Commission which sought to capture the 'co-operative advantage'.

From objective research we will make recommendations for the long term strategic growth and management of mutual housing in our final report to be published in autumn this year.

Our research to date shows that co-operatives and mutual housing organisations are effective housing managers and perform well on nationally established indicators of performance such as repairs, rent arrears and resident involvement. Yet above and beyond these competencies, many provide added value services that contribute to the sustainability of communities in economic, environmental and social terms. Many offer considerable community benefits including mutual support networks while individual self-reliance is fostered.

Their potential to provide affordable and accountable solutions to some of today's housing problems in the wake of the credit crunch may be considerable if co-operative and mutual housing are supported more vigorously by Government and funders. Offering mutual home ownership as well as renting options, and making wider community ownership an attractive option, are perhaps the most appealing characteristics of the mutual housing sector in the context of the current economic situation.

We hope that the wider co-operative movement will assist the Commission's work by getting involved and providing evidence and views. We are also seeking further financial support for the Commission's work, and we hope that co-operatives across the country can rise to the challenge of supporting this important work about a sub-sector of the co-operative movement that is more than ready for growth.

