

NHMF Study Tour, Cardiff

16 to 17 October 2014



Report

Study tours remain an important fixture in the NHMF calendar and, in past years, visits have been made to locations in various parts of the UK, as well as overseas. For the 2014 tour, it was decided to visit Cardiff, a city that provided a number of fresh insights to the issue of social housing provision. One problem that is particularly acute in Wales, owing to the age of its housing stock, is the solid wall construction and housing types that are difficult to modernise. The low market value of the stock, makes it hard to raise funds for development. Therefore, one key issue that the tour was keen to explore was how solid wall insulation could be used to address fuel poverty and improve the quality of life for residents.

The Welsh Government has had devolved responsibility for housing since 1999, since then it has slipped down the list of priorities. House building in Wales is at its lowest level since the Second World War. Only 5,291 new dwellings were started last year, but with an estimated 90,000 households on waiting lists, an average 14,200 new homes are required annually. This emphasises the absolute importance of not only maintaining but also improving the existing housing stock.

The first full day of the visit was held at the impressive Millennium Stadium, of which we were given a memorable lunchtime tour. The first item of the day's proceedings was a meeting of the full NHMF committee. This was followed by a presentation from Mike Owen, Chief Executive, Merthyr Valley Homes, who spoke about the particular challenges faced by housing providers in Wales, as well as the current strategy for addressing them.

The UK has a commitment to reduce carbon emissions by 80% by 2050, and to generate 15% of its energy from renewable sources. The residential sector was responsible for around 24% of UK greenhouse gas emissions in 2011, with carbon dioxide being the most prominent gas for this sector. In the first session after lunch David Bolton, Greener Homes, Project Director Arbed, talked, inter alia, about Arbed, a Welsh Government programme which aims to reduce climate change, help eradicate fuel poverty and boost economic development in Wales.

The programme, which was established in 2009, has the following cross-cutting objectives:

- **Environmental:** to increase the energy performance of existing homes in Wales, particularly the most energy inefficient homes, and achieve carbon savings;
- **Social:** to reduce the impact of fuel poverty on households in Wales;
- **Economic:** to generate employment opportunities for Welsh residents and economic opportunities for Welsh businesses in the design, manufacture, distribution, installation and maintenance of domestic energy efficiency measures and renewable technologies.

The final session of the day was led by Greg Wheeler, Director for Housing and Public Sector, Savills, who gave an informative and thought provoking presentation on how information and technical background can be presented to assist effective asset management and investment decisions at Board level within housing providers.

The day was brought to a close with an excellent meal at the San Martino restaurant, which overlooks Cardiff Bay, followed by drinks in the hotel bar, which allowed for further discussion of the day's events and other topics of mutual interest.

Day Two

The second day started with a visit to Rockwool, a company that specialises in the production of external wall insulation. Of particular interest to the tour was the fact that Rockwool products are sustainable (97% recyclable, using recycled stone wool); deliver a strong acoustic performance (the insulation helps to dampen noise from the outside and from adjacent rooms); act as a critical fire barrier and are durable (made from rock, the products have a unique physical structure that enables them to retain their shape and toughness for many years).

Following an introduction to the family owned, Danish company which has been an important employer in Bridgend since the late 1970s, Paul Williams gave a talk which provided a valuable insight into the following areas:

- energy efficiency in social housing;
- the Rockshell walling system (a new build solution for affordable homes meeting CFSH levels);
- an External Wall Insulation (EWI) technical brief;
- particular possibilities for the refurbishment of high rise blocks; and,
- regional attitudes to social economic and energy saving strategies (ECO/Arbed).

The group discussion centred on EWI materials, correct specification and the importance of surveys by qualified persons, as EWI is not suitable for all properties. The treatment of high rise blocks was of considerable interest to delegates. Also the importance of resident engagement, not only during the works period, but afterwards to ensure that subsequent interventions did not compromise the material was considered. It was felt that more education was needed in terms of care and cleaning of the material to ensure maximum performance over a period of 25 years.

This was followed by a tour of the factory.

The final point of the tour was a visit to a housing regeneration scheme in Maesteg. It is an Arbed scheme, and therefore attracts high levels of resident engagement and Welsh Government focus. Part of the estate had been treated under Arbed 1, and was therefore three years old while the remaining properties were being addressed under Arbed 2. Delegates were therefore able to see the stages of installation.

Lessons learned from the two phases of the scheme suggest that the programme delivers benefits in terms of upgrading homes and energy saving. It also suggests that there are wider benefits beyond improving the fabric of the building, in terms of strengthening relationships with residents and communities. It was found that there were often misconceptions over why the work was being carried out, in that it was often thought to be purely cosmetic or solely for the benefit of the landlord.

The period of the work offered an opportunity for resident engagement through social events rather than formal meetings, where messages to emphasise the importance of changing wasteful energy behaviour were more easily received.

Some difficult decisions had been faced regarding the replacement of roofs and other improvements to the estate, for which funding had simply not been available at the time of the first phase of EWI works. The group considered the importance of wider engagement with housing management teams, resident groups and planned maintenance during a major works project. There was consensus that,

although regrettable, such projects generally did not have adequate resources to extend the brief to include additional elements which might contribute to further estate improvements.

Choices have to be made. Among our group opinion differed as to which of the following potential improvements would add value: replacement windows, replacement doors, servicing of rainwater goods, bin stores, new fences, play equipment, more parking, car park resurfacing, conversion of grass areas to allotments, seating areas, creative planting. There wasn't time to ask the residents for their views, but it is likely they would have had as many differing ideas.

As with all previous tours, the visit to Cardiff provided a different perspective on a range of familiar and difficult issues. It provoked lively discussion, both during the formal sessions and in the downtime, when colleagues were again able to share views and experiences in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. These discussions will continue at the NHMF Maintenance conference in January, and next year the NHMF study tour is likely to go either to Denmark, to see examples of how residents have assumed total management responsibility for their estates, or to Germany, to learn more about Passivhaus in practice.