Written Evidence to
Scottish Parliament
Local Government and Regeneration Committee

Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill
5th September 2014

On behalf of

Assemble Collective Self Build
www.assemble-csb.co.uk
Background

Assemble Collective Self Build is currently in the process of registering as a Community Interest Company with the purpose of enabling community-led housing projects within Scotland.

Assemble believes that traditional mainstream housing options do not suit a growing sector of society, whether based on affordability, design, sustainability or community involvement grounds.

The role that Assemble seeks to fulfil is to guide groups through the entire process, including agreeing suitable governance structures and tenure, land identification and procurement, planning, design, construction and management.

In this respect, Assemble wishes to provide a brief general response to the Community Empowerment Bill and specifically address Question 3 of the Committee’s Call for Evidence invitation, which asks:-

“Do you consider communities across Scotland have the capabilities to take advantage of the provisions in the Bill? If not, what requires to be done to the Bill, or to assist communities, to ensure this happens?”
Community Empowerment Bill – the benefits

Assemble supports the Government’s key aim of creating the conditions for community empowerment. Specifically, Assemble considers that there is a real opportunity to address a number of core social, economic and environmental aims through the control of suitable land and buildings by appropriate community bodies. These include addressing the housing affordability issue, direct participation in local decision-making, energy efficiency, financial sustainability and more varied and smaller-scale urban design. The need for a legislative framework to support these aims is clear and the emerging Bill provides the basis to continue previous community and land reforms in Scotland, and seek to address elements of the Land Reform Review Group recommendations.

Community control of land and buildings

Assemble believe that land control is a core requirement to enable greater community engagement and empowerment. As is widely accepted, land control (whether outright ownership or under a secure long lease) provides direct power in terms of ability to control use and associated security of tenure and management.
Local Government and Regeneration Committee

For community groups to benefit from the same degree of control that is afforded to large public and private landowners, the opportunity must not just be for one-off community buildings but areas of land of a scale that can deliver local homes, workplaces and recreation.

**Community Right to Buy (Part 4)**

Assemble supports the legislative changes to allow for community bodies to acquire abandoned or neglected land without a willing seller and more importantly, to extend community right to buy across urban areas. This will enable ‘mainstreaming’ of community empowerment throughout the greater population of Scotland. The definition of community-controlled bodies is critical in delivering these aims - representative groups are required but obstacles to delivery through over-prescriptive requirements must be avoided. For example, the ability for existing groups such as non-profit housing co-operatives to avoid overly onerous administrative changes required by registered charity status requires to be examined.

**Asset Transfer Requests (Part 5)**

The process of public asset transfer to community groups has to be fully embraced by the public sector – when assessing a request, the relevant authority must be obliged to give equal weight to social, environmental and economic benefits.
so that best value against perceived market value doesn’t remain the key determination (clearly with regard to Common Good land, there should be a presumption in favour of asset transfer unless there are strong material reasons why the public authority should retain control).

Community Capacity

In terms of Question 3 and the capability of community bodies to access these opportunities, programmes and funds linked to the 2003 Land Reforms generated expertise to advise communities but it is considered that community groups still generally suffer from lack of resource and access to information to assist with delivering these aims.

Assemble believes that, with the extension of community right to buy to urban areas in particular, a clearer framework should be provided for public authorities to minimise impact on pressurised resources (including staffing). In this respect, both advisory and funding assistance will require to be addressed if the aims are to be delivered.

With regard to advice, there should be opportunities for community empowerment ‘enabling’ organisations to be appointed to assist in delivering the desired outcomes through matching community groups with land and funding
opportunities. This could involve a **framework agreement for each local or public authority** and the Bill should perhaps address this requirement at the outset.

Whilst those groups with funds and knowledge will be able to move forward in the short term, more disadvantaged groups will require guidance if aspirations are to be met.

In terms of funding, whilst it is appreciated that it is not the remit of the Bill to identify specific mechanisms, work should be developed in tandem with the finalisation of this legislation to identify where support can come from. Government funding either from existing or new programmes for communities should be linked to social investment funds to generate a deeper resource to really make a difference and deliver community-led housing for example on a larger scale.

**Linking the two aspects of community ‘enabling’ and community funding is critical to the success of this legislation** whereby a clear framework should exist so that groups seeking to improve their living environment or protect and develop local assets can get **immediate access to required expertise and/or financial assistance.**
Assemble Collective Self Build

www.assemble-csb.co.uk