

July 2022

Report on a Visit to Vienna: Social and Affordable Housing

For

Peredur Owen Griffiths MS

Introduction

Between Wednesday the 20th of July and Sunday the 24th of July, we (Mabon ap Gwynfor MS for Dwyfor Meirionydd, Peredur Owen Griffiths MS for the South Wales East Region, and our Group Research Officer on Housing and Climate) visited Vienna, Austria.

The visit had several aims, including:

- Improving our understanding of social and affordable housing by learning from the historical experience of Vienna following a century of municipal housing work;
- Sharing experiences in the realm of housing policy with experts in the field, whilst learning about the current reality of social housing in Vienna;
- Reflecting on the challenges and opportunities that the City of Vienna have faced in their efforts to increase their stock of affordable/social, green housing;
- Analysing the various dimensions of contemporary social housing policy in Vienna including land policy, ecology, society, design and architecture;
- Considering international perspectives on social and affordable housing by reviewing the implementation of policies in other European and global cities;
- Promoting links between Wales, the City of Vienna, and Europe;
- Learning lessons from our experience in Vienna that could be applied practically to social and affordable housing policy in Wales.



Figure 1: A map of the Karl-Marx-Hof Municipal Housing Complex, with some local urban 'art'.

The first leg of our trip involved a visit to one of Vienna's largest *Gemeindebauten*, or municipal housing complexes, Karl-Marx-Hof. We were initially provided with an in-depth historical account of social housing in Vienna between 1919 and 1934 (the period known as Red Vienna) by two local history graduates who worked the official 'Das Rote Wien' (Red Vienna) exhibition. The visit also involved a guided historical tour of the Karl-Marx-Hof housing complex, along with several other municipal housing complexes in the local area, and their ancillary facilities. The guided tour was followed by a visit to an exhibition which covered the contents of the tour, from the history of Red Vienna and the architectural design of the complexes, to the history of the Social Democratic Workers' Party and their role in the development of Vienna's unique social culture.



Figure 2: The 'Wie Wohnen Wir Morgen?' or 'How Will We Live Tomorrow?' exhibit.

The second leg of our visit consisted of a guided tour of the 'Wie Wohnen Wir Morgen?' or 'How Will We Live Tomorrow?' exhibit, part of an the International Building Exhibition Vienna 2022 on contemporary social housing in Vienna, as well as the future thereof. The exhibition was run by IBA Vienna for The City of Vienna (City Authority). The aim of the exhibition was to stimulate, enable and support the implementation of new developments for the future of social housing, and their realisation. The exhibition was wide-ranging, covering themes such as:

- The history of social housing development in Vienna over the last century;
- Contemporary social and affordable housing in Vienna and the wider world at present;
- The future of social and affordable housing policy in Vienna and beyond;
- Land policy and sustainable, equitable urban growth;
- The financing of affordable housing development;
- Future-proof housing - The relationship between affordable housing, climate change and ecology;

- Societal issues of concern to the housing sector such as gender equality; racial equality; migration; digitalisation; physical and mental health; employment and more;
- International perspectives on housing from Europe and beyond;
- Construction materials, local supply chains and architecture.

For us, our visit served as an opportunity to see for ourselves the numerous, innovative social housing projects that had served the housing needs of the people of Vienna, in response to current societal challenges, taking lessons and inspiration for our own country's social and affordable housing policy moving forward- that is to say, how might Vienna's approach benefit us in Wales?



On our third day of the foreign excursion, we had the opportunity to actually visit one of the newer municipal social housing complexes, Wienerberg's *Biotope City* - the material realisation of a dense urban neighbourhood at one with nature: a built in relationship between people, their homes, nearby shops, schools, kindergartens, and species of all kinds, each with their own, closely interlinked sphere of life. We were given the opportunity to explore the core purposes or rather concepts of the Biotope City, those being:

- The concept Biotope City: the City as a form of Nature;
- The Biotope City as a Building Construction Program;
- The Biotope City as a Program for Biodiversity; and
- The Biotope City as Civil Society Program.

The reason for our visit to Wienerberg was, at least in part, to experience a newer manifestation of Vienna's social housing agenda, one that aims to truly respond to the growing climate crisis in a meaningful way. To state the obvious, climate change will affect every sector in every country on the planet - the housing sector in Wales is no exception. Therefore, another core aim of our visit to the biotope city was to learn from Vienna's approach to climate adaptation through housing policy, and to subsequently apply these lessons to own policies on housing, health, climate change and biodiversity, particularly for low-income neighbourhoods.

The Past: The History of Social Housing in Vienna

As expressed in the introduction, the core focus of first leg of our journey was on the history of social and affordable housing in Vienna- it provided us with valuable historical context, and taught us of the challenges Vienna faced in the realm of housing a century and more ago, how Vienna gained worldwide renown for its housing policy, and how it might be possible for us to face our own housing challenges too. Now for some context: let's begin at the beginning, over a 100 years ago. In order to really understand the achievements of municipal housing in interwar Vienna, one has to go back some time. In 1910 almost 100,000 people were subtenants; another 75,000 were considered *Bettgänger*, or rather those who rented a space to sleep on, with no roof over their heads at all. Many flats consisted of a kitchen and a single room accommodated around six to ten people, with no windows, and no running water. It goes without saying that the housing situation at the time also led to widespread health problems. To put this into perspective, the average life expectancy of an unqualified worker in the year 1900 was a mere 33 years, with 24% of children during their first year of life.

So, how did things change? How did Vienna come to be world renowned for its social housing? In sum, the earliest initiatives were undertaken following the First World War in 1919. Following the conflict, Vienna was no longer the imperial capital it once was, and it faced a myriad of significant societal issues including an empty treasury, unemployment, an energy supply crisis, mass hunger, severe and widespread health problems and a dire need for housing. However, the city was considered a province and a city, therefore it had control over its own powers of taxation, which in turn allowed the ruling Social Democrats, who won in a landslide in Vienna's first council elections, to enact an ambitious agenda of public housebuilding, funded by taxes.

In 1923, the City took the decision to build 25,000 flats, large blocks of affordable accommodation built with green inside courts, communal gardens. For the first time, tens of thousands of residents had clean, running water, toilets, gas mains, windows. By 1934, the end of the Red Vienna period, more than 60,000 flats were built, which could accommodate more than 220,000 people- an immense achievement, and a revolution in housing policy. The main objective lay in providing healthy living conditions for the inhabitants of Vienna, in keeping with the motto "fresh air, light and sunshine". To this day, the City of Vienna has remained true to this guiding principle for the construction of municipal housing estates.

So, how did this revolution come to fruition? As expressed earlier, the programme was made possible in part by a constitutional law which separated Vienna from Lower Austria turning Vienna into a separate state with financial sovereignty and her own taxing authority. Having been elected, the Social Democrats were able to introduce a tax system, which was coordinated by the city's councillor for finances, Hugo Breitner. One of the taxes introduced as a so-called Luxury Tax- taxes on land, rents, commercial units, traffic as well as the Housing Tax adopted in 1922, and a tax on domestic servants and on luxury goods.

The revenue raised from city taxes went further because the city government was able to buy out property owners buffeted by hyperinflation and economic crisis. This gave the public housing programme access to land all over the city that otherwise would have been prohibitively expensive (if it were for sale at all). The massive economic dislocations of the post-war years gave the Social Democrats' housing plan an edge. By 1924, the municipal government was the biggest property owner in Vienna.

[Karl-Marx-Hof: Beyond Housing](#)

Perhaps the most famous example of Vienna's municipal housing blocks is none other than Karl-Marx-Hof, which we were fortunate to visit, and be given a fully guided tour thereof. Red Vienna's 'superblocks', of which Karl-Marx-Hof is the longest, was constructed to flow into the larger city, and built with large arched entranceways that act as natural wind tunnels, which ventilate for the inner courtyard, and serve as shade, whatever the weather. Karl-Marx-Hof, like many other blocks of its type, is studded with communal facilities, be they gardens, playparks, pools, post offices, bike sheds, basketball courts or tool-sheds, among other amenities.

The vision for blocks such as Karm-Marx-Hof went beyond just housing: public policymakers in Vienna intended not only to build dwellings, but neighbourhoods. On most social and affordable housing blocks, including the ones we were lucky enough to have visited, commercial storefronts with local produce are installed at street level, tram-stops and metro stations are mere minutes away in walking distance, and so are schools. The blocks' interior courtyards include laundrettes, kindergartens/day care services, public libraries, as well as cultural amenities such as theatres. This is where housebuilding meets community-building.

If anything, our journey through Vienna's historical experience in the realm of housing and community building taught us what's possible with the right policies, and the right political will. A city beset by poverty, poor health, vast inequality and substandard housing, was able to undertake a radical programme of social and affordable housing construction, which today houses around 60% of Vienna's population (which is just short of 2 million people). They showed us that it was possible not only to house your population in high-quality accommodation in response to a crisis, but also to transform society in the process, creating a functioning, accessible, green city, full of vibrant and sociable neighbourhoods. At a time when we ourselves, our constituents, our nation, face a cost-of-living crisis, of which our housing crisis is a core component, it was clear to us that radical and solutions are required, particularly in the realm of affordable housing, if we are to escape our current predicament here in Wales.

The Present: Social and Affordable Housing in Vienna Today

Our visit to the '*Where Will We Live Tomorrow?*' exhibition, as well as our visit to Wienerberg's *Biotope City* provided us with valuable statistics and qualitative information which will help feed into our policy on social housing, with the hope that this could improve the lives of our constituents, and all the people of Wales. Let us take a look at the contemporary reality of social housing in present day Vienna. Today, 60% of the city's residents live in homes that are either owned by the city government or by state-subsidised non-profit cooperatives. Admittance is not restricted to the poorest, which is to ensure a diversity of demographics can live together in these buildings so the poor, working class and middle class are integrated among one another. Beyond these public-backed units, rent regulations guarantee that private market prices aren't astronomically higher.

Further to the above, we learnt from architects, city planners, designers and other public policymakers that today at least half of the subsidized apartments, still 6,000 to 7,000 units per year, are to be built in inner city areas. There, land costs are higher there but the infrastructure already exists, and a better demographic and social mixture can be achieved. Larger new housing projects are normally carried out in the form of *Bauträgerwettbewerbe* (housing developers' competitions). These are based on free competition of developers for social housing subsidies.

The procedure mentioned above differs from architecture competitions, as the project applicants are the housing developers themselves and, in addition to the architectural quality, economic and

ecological qualities of the projects are judged equally within a complex score system. Competitions aim at the reduction of construction costs in multi-storey housing as well as a simultaneous improvement of planning and environmental and technical qualities. We learnt that the jury consists of architects, representatives of the construction sector and of the city of Vienna, and of specialists in the fields of ecology, economy and housing law- one can only imagine what this would look like in Wales. The result of this process often results in high-quality, experimental social and affordable housing concepts being constructed, such as family-oriented or female-oriented accommodation which cater to specific needs through specific architectural design, such as in the Frauen-Werk-Stadt , a whole housing area including infrastructure, planned exclusively by parent-child oriented architects, aiming at family-friendly layouts, a direct view from the kitchens to the playground, and the noteworthy kindergarten designed by Elsa Prochatzka.

With regards to this present day experimental building, the IBA_Vienna exhibition we visited showed us that this form of social housing construction is manifested in the form of 'theme-oriented' estates with topics pre-determined by the city council, which has a major share in the qualitative development of Vienna's public housing. For example, nearly 750 apartments in the Thermensiedlung Oberlaa are heated with waste water from the neighbouring hot springs, at the same time a grey water system and rainwater collectors to water the lawns were installed.

New housing estates are required to connect to the city-owned district heating system; as far as technically feasible, this is also the case with all subsidized renewal projects. Currently, some 212,000 apartments – about 25% of all housing in Vienna – as well as a large number of offices and business premises are connected to this heating system. Roughly a quarter of the necessary energy is provided by waste incineration, the rest comes from linkages to several power stations and a large refinery. Only at peak times, close to 4.5% of the annual consumption has to be produced in five gas or oil power stations. Thus 64.6% of all primary energy can be saved, equalling a reduction of CO₂ output of one million tons. The present capacity of the district heating company is extended continuously.

Further to this, the Autofreie Mustersiedlung (car-free model estate) transferred the facilities needed for carparks into greened roof-gardens, bike storage, internet-cafes, meeting rooms, other communal spaces etc. A comprehensive ecological concept was realized: low energy consumption levels, the wider use of solar energy, a loading station for electric cars, heat recovery from waste water, a grey water system, hot and cold water metres with electronic measuring in every apartment, green areas with humid biotopes and intensive planting, use of recycled materials for the design of open areas. We were fortunate enough to visit such a municipal housing complex to see for ourselves one of the promising examples of ecological, green social housing in the city- Wienerberg's *Biotope City*.

Wienerberg's Biotope City: Social Housing and the Needs of People, Nature and our Climate

The concept of the Biotope City, and its manifestation in Vienna's Wienerberg area, can best be summated in the words of the Biotope City foundation's Founder and Urban Planner, Helga Fassbinder, and in the words of IBA-Vienna (see below):

"It's about re-naturalizing the city: leafy green is by far the most efficient and cost-effective means of mitigating heat stress and environmental impacts. Biotope City proves that high-density yet green living is possible and affordable." - Helga Fassbinder

"Today all areas of life are impacted by climate change. The built environment must also respond to it. The densely built city is both a role model due to its short distances and a

problem due to the sealing that generates heat. Biotope City Wienerberg shows how dense development can be combined with effective greening.” - IBA_Vienna

On our final day in Vienna, we were taken to the Biotope City for a fully guided tour of the complex. The complex located in the south of Vienna on a former coca Cola factory site in Wienerberg, was surrounded by business parks and high-rise buildings to the west and predominantly single-family homes to the east. We were told that the main goals of the Biotope City model, which are to be achieved through an intelligent use of nature's regenerative mechanisms through innovative cooperation between people, technology, flora and fauna were to see:

- a reduction in heat pollution;
- greater biodiversity;
- more green in the residential environment; and
- intelligent rainwater management.

So were this principles and goals achieved in the Biotope City? Had green found its way into the grey, built up city? Well, with a healthy dose of practical expertise, Viennese developers have devised a range of solutions. In Biotope City, large trees with a trunk circumference of up to 35 cm are planted right from the start, because in the summer heat the shade of a tree is much more effective than the shade of a building. The inner courtyards and roof areas are used for gardening, the facades are greened, and the loggias and balconies are equipped with plant troughs already integrated into the building. The areas between the buildings are also made climate-effective by unsealed collection and seepage areas.

What struck us as an impressive element when it came to planning the Biotope City, the implantation of the guiding principles involved an interdisciplinary team of planners, developers, consultants and municipal departments subsequently drew up a detailed quality catalogue. The implementation of ecological goals across building sites was also part of the program from the very beginning. To relate this to our own predicament here in Wales, a nation facing a growing housing crisis as well as a nature crisis, surely, it would benefit constituents in both rural and urban settings if the planning process reflected that of Vienna's. This clearly showed us that people's housing needs can be met, to a high standard, while also meeting the needs of nature, and responding to climate change. Again, I'd ask, why isn't this model reflected in Wales, and at what cost? What's abundantly clear is there is much scope for change.

From Vienna to Home: Practical Lessons for Social Housing in Wales

It was Plaid Cymru's first MP, Gwynfor Evans, who described Wales as "a community of communities" and I'm honoured to serve the communities of South Wales East, the region I represent. One of the primary issues affecting communities in Wales, no less the region I represent, is the housing crisis: while media attention may be rightfully directed towards the astronomical rise of property prices in the coastal towns and villages in Welsh-speaking heartlands, it's a problem throughout our country - the region of South Wales East is no exception.

As one of the regional representatives for South Wales East, and Plaid Cymru's spokesperson on communities, I want to ensure communities are not only able to survive in my region, but thrive. Much of this comes down to issues surrounding housing – and in this regard, housing affordability, true affordability is a core issue for families, friends, neighbours and constituents in my region. The issue of affordability among other core issues affecting the residents of South Wales East means that

all too often, people are not able to buy homes in the place they call home. In effect, this means, that all too often, communities begin to weaken, and disappear.

As mentioned previously, the housing crisis is not confined to coastal villages in Welsh speaking heartlands – many constituents of mine are unable to buy homes in the towns and villages they grew up in, or rather, for many, the communities they choose to live in, where their families have lived for generations, and where they have access to the facilities they need. The bottom line is this – people are being priced out. Between 2019/20 and 2020/21, average property prices grew by over 10%, in Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen, Newport and Merthyr Tydfil. In comparison, average weekly wages only increased by 0.31%, making houses unobtainable for many hoping to remain in, to build, and improve, their chosen communities.

What this means is that people in some of the most deprived parts of Wales are being priced out of their communities. It is not a new phenomenon as wages have been losing pace with house price increases for decades, but the gap has grown so large in recent times that the dream of owning a home for many young people remains just that – a dream. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of people are facing the risk of homelessness. This situation simply can not continue. So what do we do to resolve this crisis?

Clearly, there is the need to provide more affordable housing in Wales. But before we explore this further, we need to deal with some fundamentals: affordable housing is different from houses we can afford. I would like to see developers compelled to build more housing that is affordable and compelled to build these homes at the beginning of any project so that they cannot avoid their responsibilities towards the end of the construction period. Furthermore, I firmly believe that solving the crisis in housing and in our communities requires more than just efforts to address affordability – we need to build houses, in communities, where people can live, and to that end, live well. This means we have to look toward building communities, sustainable communities, that are well-planned-out, and cater to the needs of their residents – this is where Vienna has truly succeeded.

Across the city, the authorities that be in Vienna have managed to construct housing for thousands of people, high-quality housing, where rents are capped at a low proportion of people's average monthly incomes. However, this housing isn't just for people on low incomes: people from all kinds of social, economic, generational, religious and cultural backgrounds live in Vienna's municipal housing blocks, which has the effect of creating mixed communities, cohesive communities, with strong cross-cultural and cross-class ties. Many if not most of the municipal blocks also have exceptional facilities, with many having in-built childcare and medical centres, launderettes, gardens, greenhouses, bike storage, education facilities, grocery shops and gyms – the list goes on, and the list is long. So, we find a situation where people are where they need to be, and have what they need.

But let's not talk about these blocks in isolation from the wider urban landscape in which they're situated – let's consider how seamlessly they're weaved into the tapestry of the city. Social and affordable housing complexes in Vienna, which, as aforementioned, house over a million people, from numerous backgrounds, are connected to the city by a functioning and affordable, sustainable public transport network, with trams, trains, bikes and tube-trains within walking distance of all social housing blocks. This enables people to access the extensive services Vienna offers, allows residents to access childcare, education, work, and more. Further to this, the social and affordable housing residents have access to a myriad of communal spaces, which in turn allows for communal activities, which certainly help with cohesion. If this is possible in Vienna, one must ask, why can't it work in Wales?

[Vienna: How 2022's most liveable city earned its place in housing history \(citymonitor.ai\)](#)

[Experiments in socialist urbanism: From Red Vienna to Red Bologna - City Monitor](#)

[The Enduring Lessons of Red Vienna \(tribunemag.co.uk\)](#)

[Municipal politics: "Red Vienna" - a success story \(wien.gv.at\)](#)

[From Socialism to Fascism - History of Vienna \(wien.gv.at\)](#)

[Home - Socialhousing](#)

[Municipal housing in Vienna - Socialhousing](#)

[Research \(iba-wien.at\)](#)

[Vienna's Karl Marx Hof: architecture as politics and ideology - a history of cities in 50 buildings, day 24 | Cities | The Guardian](#)

[What could Vienna's low-cost housing policy teach the UK? | Housing | The Guardian](#)