**Opinion Piece: Building Homes, Not Scapegoats: The Truth About Scotland’s Housing Shortage**

There’s no denying that Scotland is facing a housing crisis, with more than 11,500 council-owned homes lying vacant across the country – the highest level since 2007, according to a recent report by The Times. In our capital city, the lack of available housing is particularly severe, and the problem is worsening. This crisis poses one of the biggest challenges we face as a nation, and it demands urgent action. However, if we’re going to solve it, we must first understand the root causes. Misidentifying the problem won’t lead to effective solutions.

Unfortunately, many politicians and advocacy groups continue to misdiagnose the housing crisis by attributing it largely to the rise of short-term lets, especially in Edinburgh. Whether driven by political convenience or the need to find a simple narrative, these voices claim that short-term lets are exacerbating the housing shortage. But this argument doesn't stand up to scrutiny and diverts attention from the true cause of the crisis.

The suggestion that short-term lets have caused or significantly contributed to the housing crisis is not only incorrect but also harmful. It's akin to a doctor misdiagnosing a serious illness – without proper treatment, the patient’s condition will only deteriorate. In reality, short-term lets make up a tiny fraction of Scotland’s overall housing stock. Blaming short-term lets is a distraction from the real issue: not enough houses are being built to meet the needs of our growing population.

Historically, housing construction in Scotland has been woefully inadequate. Successive governments, from the 1970s through to the 2000s, failed to invest in building enough homes to keep pace with demand. While it’s understandable that governments have competing priorities, the long-term failure to invest in housing has left us with a housing stock that cannot meet the needs of today’s Scotland. The resulting shortage of homes has far more to do with decades of underinvestment and poor planning than with the modest number of short-term lets available.

It’s far easier for politicians to scapegoat the short-term let sector than to admit that housing policy failures over several decades are the real culprits. Pointing fingers at self-catering accommodation is a convenient way to sidestep the difficult conversations and decisions needed to address the housing shortage. It’s a simple narrative that allows policymakers to whip up public anger and turn it into a moral crusade. But the reality is more complex, and the focus on short-term lets distracts from the real solutions.

The traditional Furnished Holiday Let or self-catering sector, generates £9.3m in Gross Added Value (GVA) to the UK economy, supporting 230,000 jobs. In our rural and island communities specifically, it’s a crucial part of the local economy and a key pillar of Scotland’s thriving tourism industry. With just 16,694 self-catering units on the non-domestic rates roll (down 5% since 2019), self-catering units represent a tiny percentage of housing stock. Suggesting that they are a major factor in the housing crisis is simply inaccurate.

At the Association of Scotland’s Self-Caterers (ASSC), we take pride in our sector’s contribution to Scotland’s economy and tourism. We recognise the housing crisis is a real and urgent issue, but the vilification of short-term lets does nothing to solve it. Rather than taking cheap shots at a sector that provides livelihoods for many Scots, policymakers should be focusing on the real solution: building more homes and bringing empty homes back to use.

The 11,500 vacant council homes identified in The Times report represent an opportunity to make a meaningful dent in the housing crisis. Governments must commit to addressing these vacancies, investing in the construction of new homes, and ensuring existing properties are fit for use. These actions would be far more effective in tackling the housing shortage than targeting a sector with negligible impact on housing availability.

In short, the time has come for our leaders to stop blaming short-term rentals for Scotland’s housing crisis and start addressing the decades of underinvestment and poor planning that have led us here. Building more houses is not an easy or quick solution, but it is the only solution that will genuinely address the problem. Scots deserve better, and any politician brave enough to take on the real issue would have the support of the ASSC and all those who work in our sector. Now is the time for bold action on housing – not scapegoating.