

Is self-build set to take off in the UK?

Helen Crane reports on a new Welsh government-backed self-build scheme that could inspire more people to take the DIY approach to home ownership

Don't let the popularity of *Grand Designs* fool you: the UK is lagging far behind the rest of Europe when it comes to people self-building or custom-building their homes.

Only around a tenth of homes are commissioned directly by the future occupant in the UK, compared with an average of 50% across Europe as a whole. In Austria, that figure rises to around 80%, and the Netherlands has a whole garden city, Almere, composed of self-build homes.

But in March, a new loan scheme was introduced in Wales that could help self-build finally start to gather momentum in the UK. Self Build Wales is a £210m scheme financed by the Welsh government and managed by the Development Bank of Wales that will provide loans to those wanting to build or commission their own homes.

So what does the Welsh government hope to achieve with this scheme, and will it really inspire more people to take the DIY approach to home ownership?

Under the new scheme, people will be able to borrow enough money to cover the full cost of the build, as well as 75% of the cost of the land, and will not need to pay anything back until the project is complete.

Sites will be provided by local authorities, which will sell them 'oven ready' with

planning permission in place.

The Welsh government claims that this is the first government-backed self-build scheme in the world to offer funding as well as sites that can be developed straight away.

"We've had self-build schemes in England and Scotland, but never as complete," says Andrew Baddeley-Chappell, chief executive of the National Custom and Self-Build Association (NaCSBA).

One aim of the scheme is to open up self-build to a wider audience. When Self Build Wales launched, Welsh deputy housing minister Hannah Blythyn said self-build should not be the preserve of the most privileged households.

"As we work to increase the amount of housing available, this scheme will help people who wouldn't normally think of self-build to consider it seriously," she said.

It aims to do this by breaking down some of the common barriers faced by self-builders, including difficulties finding land, accessing finance and securing planning permission.

"Bringing planning, design, construction and funding

together will open the doors to self- and custom-build for people who would not otherwise have considered it a realistic option," says Cenydd Rowlands, property director at the Development Bank of Wales.

For many people, the first thing that comes to mind when they think of self-build is the grand, multi-million-pound modernist masterpieces that crop up on the likes of *Grand Designs* - but that is not what Self Build Wales is about.

Because local authorities will sell sites complete with planning permission outlining what can be built, buyers will not be able to go completely off-piste with their designs - so it is reasonable to assume that many of these will be ordinary family homes.

"It's definitely appealing to the general public," argues Ifan Glyn, Wales director at the Federation of Master Builders.

"Among people who are looking to buy homes, the self-build concept is a popular one."

The homes could be relatively affordable, too. The government says its scheme will offer a "route into home ownership for people who want to stay in their local area but haven't previously been

able to afford to buy there", citing figures that suggest a self-built home costs 70% to 75% of the price of a traditional new-build, because there are no developer profits to factor in.

But as welcome as this funding is, self-build projects will barely make a dent in housing targets - so what is in it for the Welsh government?

Branding exercise

Baddeley-Chappell says it is partly a branding exercise. "People who are attracted to self-build tend to have a particular get-up-and-go ethos, and the government will want to show that there are opportunities that exist there, especially with the Welsh countryside, that are not as easily available in other regions of the UK," he says.

The government also sees this as an opportunity to provide a boost for small and medium-sized builders in Wales, as these firms are most suited to taking on self- and custom-build projects.

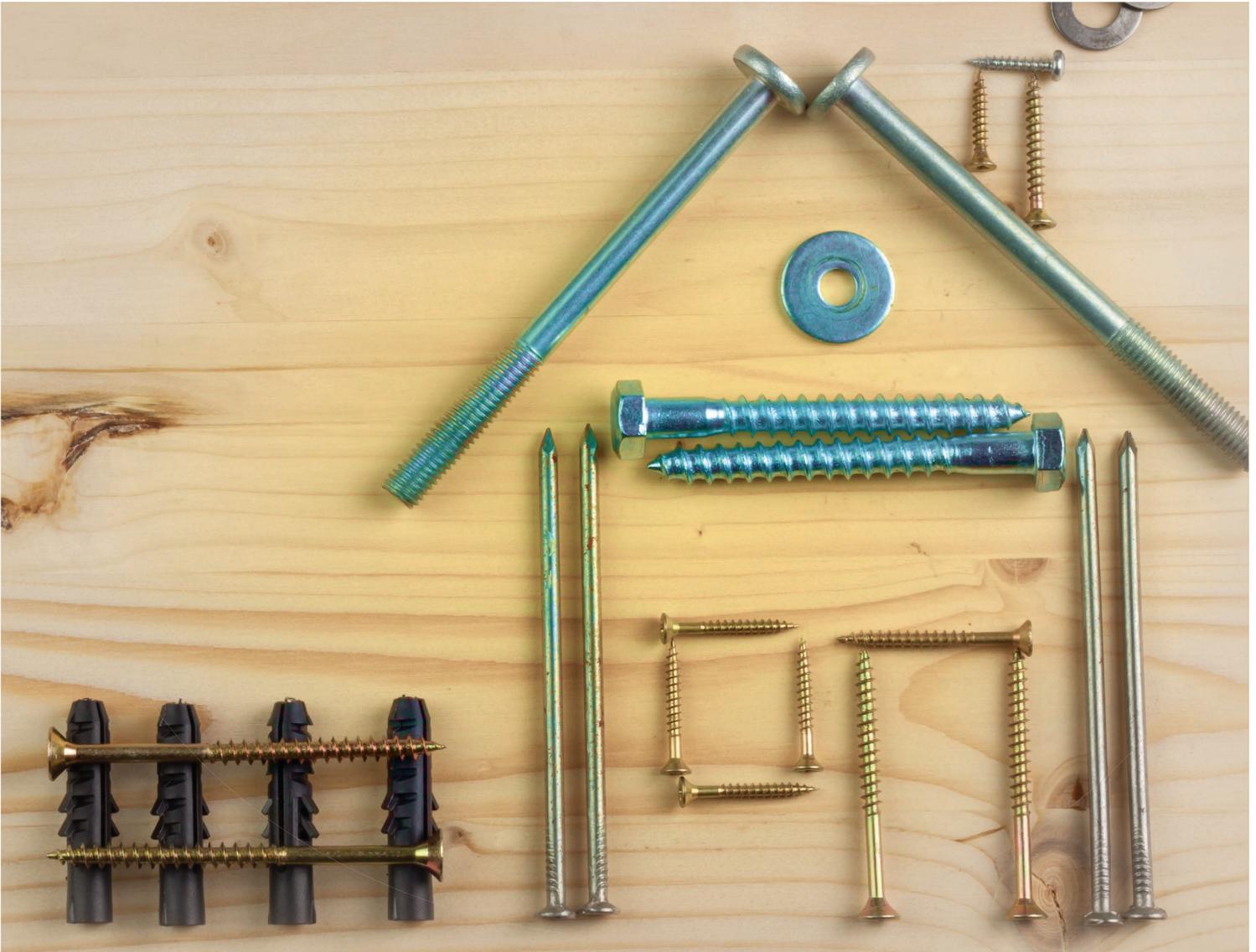
"At the moment, more than 80% of homes in Wales are built by five plc companies," says Glyn. "They are likely to build in more affluent areas around the M4 corridor, and are not particularly interested in the Valleys and more rural areas."

Glyn also believes the self-build scheme could lead to better housing and more choice in those under-served areas - but he adds



Andrew Baddeley-Chappell
NaCSBA

“The aim is to make fundamental changes - but it will take time



that buy-in from local authorities will be crucial to the success of the scheme, particularly as the land put forward will be owned by them.

"They need to offer land where people want to be," he says. "What you don't want is for local authorities to see this as a way of getting rid of land that has been sitting in their local development plans for decades."

Glyn is also concerned that under-resourced local councils may not be able to cope with the additional workload that running Self Build Wales might

incur, suggesting that some parts of the process may need to be outsourced.

"If [councils] are being asked to provide land and go through the planning process themselves, they haven't got the resource to do that, and they're not actually obliged to do it," he explains.

'Potential limitation'

Baddeley-Chappell says the fact that only local authority land will be offered is a "potential limitation" of Self Build Wales, adding that there is "nothing to prevent it being expanded to

allow other landowners to bring forward sites".

As it stands, 24 sites are currently being advertised on the Self Build Wales website. Three are listed as being in the planning process - none are yet open for applications.

"Given how much the UK has to learn about self-build, this is a scheme that will start small, and it will take time for the homes to start coming out of the ground," says Baddeley-Chappell.

"In the long term, the aim is for it to make fundamental changes - but it will take time to accelerate."

Launched at the start of March, and with the housing market effectively shut down for the foreseeable future due to Covid-19, the Self Build Wales scheme still needs to prove itself - but the general consensus is that it is a positive first step for potential self-builders.

"I often criticise the Welsh government for not governing with any imagination, and you can't say that about this," says Glyn.

The UK is still a way off from having its own self-built garden city, but this scheme is as good a starting point as any. ■