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How Will We Know If More Homes Scotland Is Working?

Lessons from Canada's National Housing Council on housing policy learning

Contents

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Executive Summary

Scotland's housing system faces interconnected challenges relating to affordability, supply, energy efficiency, homelessness, infrastructure, and housing quality. In response, the Scottish Government has proposed the establishment of More Homes Scotland, a new national housing agency intended to support a more strategic and coordinated approach to housing delivery.

As we have set out previously (Chartered Institute of Building, 2026; Fleming, 2026a), CIOB strongly supports these proposals. If designed and implemented well, More Homes Scotland could fulfil a strategic, leadership role in Scotland's housing system, facilitating an integrated programme for delivery, and unlocking, at pace and scale, the new homes Scotland needs.

To date, debate around the agency has largely focused on its remit, powers, and delivery role. Less attention has been paid to how its work will be independently evaluated, monitored, and refined over time.

This paper argues that if More Homes Scotland is to fulfil its remit, its work must be evaluated.

We argue that ensuring oversight involves embedding independent, cross-sector policy learning and evaluation as a function of the More Homes Scotland governance structure from the outset. Herein, we define a 'policy learning and evaluation function' as an institutional mechanism responsible for evaluating housing outcomes, commissioning research, synthesising evidence, incorporating lived experience perspectives and, through a direct link to government officials, supporting ongoing policy adaptation. As outlined below, this paper considers one example of such a function operating within the Canadian context.

Housing systems are highly fragmented yet interconnected. Outcomes are shaped not only by housing supply, but by taxation, planning, infrastructure, land, affordability, health, transport, skills, and social security systems, all of which operate across different levels of government and through different delivery subsystems. In this context, effective housing governance requires more than delivery capacity alone. It also requires institutions capable of coordination, evidence gathering, continuous learning, and adaptation over time.

Drawing on lessons from Canada, this paper explores whether Scotland could benefit from establishing an independent policy learning and evaluation function to operate alongside More Homes Scotland.

In 2019, the Canadian Government established the National Housing Council as part of the National Housing Strategy Act. The Council, made up of independent experts with varying perspectives on housing, was created to support evidence-based housing policymaking through independent analysis, lived experience engagement, and the commissioning of external research and evaluations.

> "We don't have time or money to waste.

The National Housing Council functions not simply as an accountability mechanism, but as an institutional vehicle for evidence gathering, policy learning, and with the aim of supporting Government in the continuous improvement of its housing policy. The National Housing Council's research explicitly aims to inform and support the work of government ministers and staff, in the service of achieving better housing outcomes for all.

As set out below, this paper argues More Homes Scotland should incorporate a formal policy learning and evaluation function from its inception to ensure evidence is systematically gathered and synthesised, housing outcomes are evaluated, and policy adaptation is supported over time.

More Homes Scotland should be empowered to focus on its core purpose: coordinating, enabling, and accelerating housing delivery. However, delivery alone is unlikely to be sufficient within a housing system as complex and fragmented as Scotland's. The Canadian experience suggests there is value in embedding a policy learning and evaluation function alongside delivery bodies. Such a model could strengthen housing governance without creating an additional delivery agency or unnecessary bureaucratic burden.

As the Canadian experience highlights, consideration must be given not only to what housing agencies deliver, but also how their work will be independently assessed, understood, and improved over time.

In the face of Scotland's housing emergency and ongoing budget constraints, we simply don't have time or money to waste.

More Homes Scotland will need to ask, *'What will we do to address Scotland's housing challenges?'* A housing policy learning and evaluation function, modelled in part on the lessons of Canada's National Housing Council, could help answer the equally important question:

'How will we know if it is working?'

Introduction: why policy evaluation matters for housing delivery

As we have seen internationally (Fleming, 2026b), housing policy interventions can struggle to achieve meaningful progress where programmes are fragmented, poorly coordinated, insufficiently aligned with lived realities, or not effectively evaluated over time.

Housing systems are shaped by the interaction of multiple component parts, including land, infrastructure, planning, finance, skills, supply chains, and market conditions. Where these systems are not aligned, inefficiencies, delays, and poor outcomes are inevitable. As CIOB has argued elsewhere (Chartered Institute of Building, 2026; Fleming, 2026b), housing delivery depends not simply on accelerating individual sites, but on the effective coordination of the wider housing system itself.

Within this context, More Homes Scotland (MHS) represents a potentially significant institutional intervention within Scotland's housing system. Debate around the proposed agency has, understandably, focused primarily on its remit, powers, delivery role, and organisational structure. Less attention has been paid to how the organisation's work will be independently evaluated, monitored, and refined over time.

Effective policy learning and evaluation are essential if scarce public resources are to be directed towards interventions that genuinely improve housing outcomes. As MHS develops, consideration should be given not only to what the agency delivers, but also to how policymakers will understand what is working, where challenges remain, and how programmes should evolve over time.

Developing an evidence base from which to refine policy is particularly important in housing, where interventions often operate across long timeframes and interact with a wide range of interconnected systems and actors. As Sanderson (2002, p. 1) argues, greater emphasis should be placed on developing "a sound evidence base for policy through long-term impact evaluations of policies and programmes." Attempts to ground policymaking in more reliable knowledge of "what works" retain both their relevance and importance, particularly in the governance of complex social systems:

"If evaluation is to fulfil its potential for driving policy learning, it must be fully integrated into the ongoing discourse, able to sustain advocacy of the 'evidential voice' and help policy makers to '…think more intelligently about the domain in which they worked'" (Weiss, as quoted in Sanderson, 2002, p. 19).

This evidence cannot simply be limited to measuring housing outputs (the number of homes built within a particular timeframe or the amount of public funding allocated to housing initiatives). While these metrics remain important, good policymaking requires more in-depth and wide-ranging evidence about how housing policies and programmes manifest on the ground, who benefits from them, and where barriers

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(continued)

or unintended consequences emerge. Evidence-based policymaking is therefore imperative if governments are to ensure limited public resources are being deployed effectively and to better understand 'what works, for whom, and in what circumstances' (Pawson and Tilley, 1994).

That said, drawing such conclusions and evaluating housing policy generally is inherently difficult because housing systems themselves are highly complex. The UK Centre for Collaborative Housing Evidence argues that:

"...problems arise because the housing sector is a complex system. Such complexity creates wicked problems that are both difficult to characterise and respond to, complicating mobilization of knowledge and subsequent action. Housing is also interdependent with other major systems such as transport, education, and social security"
(as quoted in Gibb and Marsh, 2019, p. 11).

And further that, in Scotland:

"Post-devolution, [housing] outcomes are also characterised by fragmentation [which] means that there is no one-size-fits-all policy diagnosis or prognosis for our housing problems"
(ibid., p. 11).

These perspectives reinforce the need for housing governance structures capable not only of delivery, but of continuous learning, adaptation, and evidence synthesis over time.

Housing policies often fail to achieve their objectives in the absence of sufficient policy learning and evaluation. Effective policy evaluation in housing is the exception, not the norm.

For example, recent work examining housing governance in England (Nationwide Foundation and Church of England, 2024) has identified the absence of a dedicated, cross-sector mechanism for coordinating evidence, evaluating housing outcomes, and supporting long-term policy learning. While official statistics, parliamentary scrutiny, and programme-level evaluations provide valuable insight, they do not collectively constitute a formal policy learning and evaluation function.

Further, New Zealand's KiwiBuild agency, despite early support from the public, failed to meet its delivery objectives (The Guardian, 2019). A range of critics cited a lack of alignment between the agency's programmes and its intended outcomes and a lack of coordination with the sector as some of its many challenges (Samarasinghe et al., 2020). In the late stages of the agency, which was thousands of homes off its target, senior officials were brought in to oversee programme reforms. However, just three months later, KiwiBuild was cancelled outright (The Guardian, 2019).

While many factors contributed to KiwiBuild's difficulties, its experience highlights a broader challenge: policy learning and evaluation mechanisms are often introduced only after problems become visible. By that stage, opportunities for adaptation may be limited, and public confidence, political support, or programme momentum may already have been lost.

As Marsh et al. (2025, p. 5) have noted, the implementation of long-term national housing policy efforts will "likely give rise" to organisations tasked with providing policy advice and oversight. Indeed, Scotland's Housing to 2040 strategy was accompanied by the development of the Housing to 2040 Strategic Board. Despite this group's charge to provide "strategic oversight of policy development" (Scottish Government, n.d.), its work to date has been relatively limited and, as outlined below, does not extend, as the Canadian model does, to extensive, independent research or evidence synthesis, nor does it adopt the National Housing Council's (NHC) outcomes-driven or lived experience approaches.

This embedded, outcomes-focused performance monitoring and adaptation is critical in an increasingly resource-constrained environment, where governments and delivery partners cannot afford to continue investing in programmes or interventions that do not meaningfully improve housing outcomes. Effective evaluation is not simply a question of accountability, but of ensuring scarce public resources are directed toward policies and programmes capable of delivering meaningful change.

As will be discussed below, the literature, documentary evidence, and interviews conducted for this research suggest that the value of a housing policy learning and evaluation function lies in its ability to support a series of ongoing questions, such as:

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- Are current interventions working, for whom, and in what circumstances?
- What are the collective impacts of current interventions?
- What are our metrics of success? Are these suitable?
- What are we learning from current interventions?
- What are we missing?
- What evidence do policymakers need but not yet possess?
- What emerging pressures are beginning to shape housing outcomes?
- And how should policy adapt in response?

Why Canada? The case for housing policy learning and evaluation

The Canadian experience suggests that institutions such as the NHC can provide a structured mechanism through which these questions are explored and translated into practical policy advice.

Often noted as an exemplar (Lawson et al., 2025), the Canadian model has already been replicated elsewhere. Via the National Housing Supply and Affordability Council Act, Australia has formed its own independent body emulating the NHC (Marsh et al., 2025), which brings together expertise from across housing to deliver policy learning and evaluation functions. Members were appointed in 2024 and have already set to work commissioning and publishing research (Australian Government, 2024). Similarly, recent work exploring such a function for England also noted the NHC, alongside entities like the Climate Change Committee, in its recommendation that Westminster establish a "cross-sectoral Housing Co-ordination Group, led by central government" (Nationwide Foundation and Church of England, 2024).

This paper, therefore, explores whether Scotland could benefit from establishing a policy learning and evaluation function operating alongside MHS. It considers the merits of Canada's NHC as a prospective model for such a function.

However, its central argument is not simply that Scotland should establish a direct equivalent of the NHC nor that MHS merely relies upon the existing Housing to 2040 Strategic Board. Rather, it argues that, as housing challenges become increasingly complex, interconnected and resource-intensive, the need for policy learning and evaluation is increasingly vital.

Therefore, Scotland's next major foray into housing policy, MHS, must avoid becoming merely an additional administrative layer within an already fragmented system. If the new agency is to meet its 'simplicity, scale and speed' directives (Scottish Government, 2026), independent expert analysis and policy learning must be embedded in Scotland's housing governance frameworks from the outset. A formally-recognised, arm's-length advisory body could meaningfully fulfil such a role. Operating alongside MHS, this arrangement could provide a structured mechanism for evidence gathering, evaluation and policy learning, while ensuring engagement across the housing sector is substantive, rather than a mere 'tick box' exercise.

Crucially, it could help ensure Scotland's limited public resources are directed to interventions best placed to deliver housing outcomes where they're needed most. International and domestic evidence is clear: the absence of policy learning and evaluation is expensive and time consuming. Given Scotland's worsening housing emergency, we do not have time or money to waste.

Methods and Approach

This discussion paper draws on a review of housing policy literature, documentary analysis, and semi-structured interviews with Canadian housing experts.

It was developed in response to ongoing discussions regarding the establishment of More Homes Scotland (MHS) and the need to consider how independent evaluation, evidence gathering, and policy learning might be embedded within the agency's design from the outset.

To explore this issue, Canada was selected as a case study due to the similarities between the housing challenges facing both countries and their relatively recent establishment of both a national housing strategy and a national housing delivery agency.

Documentary analysis focused on publicly available material relating to Canada's National Housing Council (NHC) as well as recently published academic works. Particular attention was paid to research commissioned by the NHC examining the effectiveness of Canada's National Housing Strategy and approaches to measuring housing outcomes.

To complement the documentary evidence and existing literature, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with individuals working directly within Canada's housing policy landscape. These discussions were used to explore the role, perceived value, and practical operation of the NHC and to identify potential lessons for Scotland. The interviews were not intended to provide a formal evaluation of the NHC itself. Rather, they offered practitioner perspectives on how the Council functions in practice, the contribution it makes to housing policymaking, and whether elements of the model may have relevance within the Scottish context.

“We’re not so different, you and I”: considering the Canadian case

The Canadian context and forming the National Housing Council

Despite important differences and individual nuances, in many respects, Canada’s housing challenges and policy responses echo those currently facing Scotland. Both countries have implemented long-term national housing strategies intended to guide policy and delivery over an extended period, with Canada’s National Housing Strategy (NHS) sitting broadly alongside Scotland’s Housing to 2040 framework.

Across both jurisdictions, there is growing recognition that substantially more homes are needed, delivered at a greater pace and scale, alongside increasing concern around affordability pressures in both the rental and owner-occupier sectors. Rising rates of homelessness, worsening affordability challenges, infrastructure constraints, and growing pressure on public services have further reinforced the need for system-wide housing reform.

There are also increasing institutional similarities between the two countries. In addition to the NHS, the Canadian Government has recently established Build Canada Homes (Government of Canada, 2026), a new national housing agency intended to support housing delivery and increase supply across the country. In several ways, this agency mirrors the ambitions currently being explored for More Homes Scotland (MHS). Both countries are therefore grappling not only with how to deliver more housing, but with how to ensure that housing systems, strategies, and institutions are functioning effectively over time.

Within this context, Canada offers an important example of how independent evaluation and policy learning can be embedded alongside national housing policy and delivery structures, as well as a cautionary tale about what can go wrong in the absence of such mechanisms.

In 2017, the Canadian Government launched the NHS, framed as a transformative re-entry of the federal government into housing policy after decades of retrenchment and devolution. The Strategy’s top-line ambition was to “meet the housing needs and improve the housing outcomes of the most vulnerable Canadians” (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2022, p. 3). However, despite significant public investment – increasing from an initial $40 billion to $115 billion at the time of writing – and much political attention, housing affordability and homelessness pressures across Canada continued to worsen. A growing body of research raised questions about the effectiveness of several NHS programmes, some signalling towards policy failure (Beer et al., 2022b, 2022a; Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2022; Pomeroy, 2021; Young, 2023).

Crucially, however, in 2019, as part of the National Housing Strategy Act (NHSA), the Canadian Government established the National Housing Council (NHC), an independent advisory body intended to support participatory and evidence-based housing policymaking (Systems Planning Collective, 2022).

“We’re not so different, you and I”: considering the Canadian case (continued)

The NHC is an arm’s-length federal government advisory body and functions as a standing mechanism for housing policy learning. The Council provides advice directly to the Minister of Housing and Infrastructure on urgent housing issues, including the effectiveness of the NHS itself. It brings together lived experience experts, housing practitioners, researchers, human rights specialists, and senior public officials.

Through research commissioning, evidence synthesis, review panels and direct advice to ministers, it seeks to strengthen understanding of how housing policy is performing and identify where adaptation may be required. Importantly, interviewees consistently described the Council less as a traditional advisory body and more as a mechanism for bringing together diverse forms of expertise, identifying evidence gaps, and translating research into practical policy discussions.

This model strikes a balance between independence and influence: the NHC does not operate solely as an external critic of government policy. Rather, it functions as a form of critical friend, providing independent analysis while remaining closely connected to policymakers and delivery partners. This role is enabled and strengthened by the Council’s formalised relationship with ministers and policymakers.

As interviewees underscored, the Council’s proximity to ministers and senior officials has allowed research findings, lived experience evidence, and expert perspectives to be translated into practical policy discussions. The establishment of the NHC has, therefore, been integral to understanding why progress on the NHS has, in many cases, fallen short of expectations and, from there, where policy change is needed.

Importantly, the NHC was designed to bring together a wide range of perspectives within a single institutional structure. Membership includes housing practitioners, human rights experts, individuals with lived experience of homelessness and housing need, and senior government representatives, including officials from the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). In particular, and as highlighted repeatedly by interviewees, the NHC’s make up provides policymakers with perspectives and information not generally integrated into traditional, output-focused evaluation frameworks:

“A lot of times that’s where [the government] can come to the council because we’re doing things that are original and…thinking about things in a slightly different way. And so that becomes a good access point…a good data point for them.”

“You bring together the things that governments don’t have….Like, they…generally don’t bring lived experience into the policymaking process.”

The Council’s value, therefore, lies not only in directing government action, but also in ensuring that decisions are informed by a broader range of evidence and expertise, which crucially incorporates views of those with lived experience, than might otherwise be available.

From outputs to outcomes: the NHC in practice

The NHC’s purpose is not simply to monitor programme delivery, as many in-house government agencies in both Scotland and Canada already do, but instead is to create an ongoing mechanism through which government can better understand the state of Canada’s housing system and how to improve the nation’s housing policy response over time.

> “You bring together the things that governments don’t have… Like, they generally don’t bring lived experience into the policymaking process.

“We’re not so different, you and I”: considering the Canadian case (continued)

One recent report commissioned by the NHC explored this point explicitly, asking a fundamental question: “The federal government has implemented numerous policies to address the housing crisis, through the NHS, Canada’s Housing Plan, and soon through Build Canada Homes… *how will we know if they are working?”* (National Housing Council, 2025, p. 3, emphasis added.)

This and other evaluations commissioned through the NHC have provided important insight into affordability outcomes, programme implementation challenges, and policy misalignment within the NHS. Their research has repeatedly highlighted and problematised the pattern of measuring success within housing programmes through inputs and outputs (money spent and homes delivered) rather than through improvements in outcomes for households themselves. For example, several evaluations (Beer et al., 2022b, 2022a) have questioned whether the homes funded by the NHS were genuinely affordable for those in greatest need, as intended and, therefore, whether programmes aligned with the overarching objectives of the strategy.

One interviewee highlighted the implications of the latent development of the NHC, which meant the NHS operated for considerable periods with no planned evaluation or policy learning and evaluation function:

“I think that is one of the single biggest oversights of any project is everyone goes, no, no, no, we’ll do the evaluation at the end….You have to set that up at the beginning. You have to. This was a major flaw of the National Housing Strategy and CMHC.”

> “You have to set that up at the beginning. You have to.

Importantly, the significance of the NHC’s work is not simply that it has identified gaps or shortcomings in Canada’s housing policy response. Critically, these evaluations have focused on outcomes, which helped to clarify why programmes are underperforming, where policy misalignment persists, and, imperatively, where adaptation or redesign may be required.

From measuring outputs to measuring outcomes

This distinction between measuring outputs and measuring outcomes is crucial and strengthens the case for the council-based model. Governments are generally well equipped to monitor activity: the number of homes delivered, programmes launched, or funding allocated. Understanding whether these activities translate into improved affordability, reduced housing insecurity, or provide

“We’re not so different, you and I”: considering the Canadian case (continued)

better housing outcomes for those in greatest need is considerably more challenging. Both existing literature and expert interviewees repeatedly highlighted that one of the most valuable contributions of the NHC has been its focus on this distinction, helping policymakers move beyond questions of delivery alone towards interventions are achieving their intended purpose.

Interviews undertaken for this paper also suggested that the Council’s contribution extends beyond outcomes-focused programme evaluation alone. Interviewees emphasised the NHC’s role in identifying emerging issues, evidence gaps, and future policy challenges. In this sense, the Council does not simply help government understand what has happened and why, but also identifies the questions it should be asking next. This forward-looking function appears particularly valuable within complex housing systems, where affordability pressures, demographic change, market conditions, and homelessness trends can evolve rapidly and often require policy responses that cut across traditional organisational boundaries.

The Canadian experience, therefore, offers an important example of how evaluative capacity and policy learning can be embedded alongside national housing strategy and delivery mechanisms. While the housing systems, governance structures, and policy context are distinct, as is the case in so many facets of life, Scotland and Canada have much in common.

The next section, therefore, considers whether a similar policy learning and evaluation function could strengthen and enhance the work of MHS and support more adaptive, evidence-informed housing governance over time.

“Well, if it works for Nova Scotia...” : could the National Housing Council model work in Scotland?

While Scotland’s housing system, governance structures, and policy landscape are distinct from those in Canada, the broad challenges facing both countries are similar.

Both are grappling with rising housing costs, increasing pressure on homelessness services, constrained public finances, infrastructure challenges, and the need to deliver substantially more homes at pace and scale. Both are also attempting to navigate these pressures within fragmented and highly complex housing systems, where responsibility for delivery, regulation, planning, infrastructure, and support services is distributed across multiple institutions and levels of government.

Within this context, Canada’s National Housing Council (NHC) may offer a useful institutional model for Scotland to consider as More Homes Scotland (MHS) develops. The NHC demonstrates one way in which independent evaluation, evidence gathering, and policy learning can be embedded alongside large-scale housing delivery and strategy.

The Canadian example then raises an important question for Scotland: if MHS is to become a significant new institutional actor within the housing system, how will policymakers, practitioners, and the wider sector understand whether its work is having the desired effect over time?

A balancing act: influence and independence

As outlined above, one of the strengths of the NHC model is that it provides a mechanism for evidence gathering, evaluation and policy learning alongside housing delivery. Rather than burdening delivery bodies with the responsibility for evaluating their own work, the Council model allows housing agencies and governments to move quickly, experiment, adapt, and deliver. The model also ensures that a formal structure remains through which evidence can be gathered, scrutinised, and fed back into policymaking over time.

However, this model is not without limitations. Despite the benefits of operating as an advisory body, formally recognised in legislation, the NHC lacks direct powers to compel policy change, and its effectiveness ultimately depends on the willingness of governments to engage with and respond to its recommendations.

“Well, if it works for Nova Scotia...” : could the National Housing Council model work in Scotland? (continued)

Commitment to policy learning and adaptation on the part of government is therefore crucial. Nevertheless, interviewees consistently argued that the NHC’s value lies not necessarily in directing policy, but in ensuring that evidence is gathered and synthesised and that lived experience and expert perspectives are consistently included in policy discussions.

This distinction is important. This paper is not proposing an additional delivery agency or regulatory body. Nor is it suggesting that MHS should be constrained by excessive reporting requirements or bureaucratic oversight. Rather, it argues Scotland may benefit from a relatively lean, independent policy learning and evaluation function, modelled on Canada’s NHC, capable of commissioning research, synthesising evidence, facilitating engagement across the sector, and providing ongoing advice and feedback to policymakers and MHS itself.

It is difficult to demonstrate a direct causal relationship between any advisory body’s recommendations and subsequent government decisions. Nevertheless, expert interviewees emphasised that the Council’s influence derives from its formal relationship with ministers and senior officials. Its value lies not only in producing evidence but in creating structured opportunities for evidence, lived experience, and expert perspectives to inform ongoing policy discussions.

Such a function could therefore fulfil several important roles within Scotland’s housing system. Like the NHC, it could commission independent research and analysis examining the effectiveness of housing programmes and public investment over time. It could support the monitoring of affordability outcomes, rather than focusing solely on housing outputs. It could facilitate longitudinal evidence gathering, helping policymakers better understand how interventions manifest over extended periods and across different local housing markets. It could also provide a structured mechanism through which lived experience evidence, sector expertise, and external analysis are brought together to inform policy development and refinement.

Bringing everyone to the table: the benefits of the council model

As introduced above, the NHC explicitly sought to bring together diverse voices to inform policy and encourage participation. Given this aim, the council-based model of policy evaluation and learning may proffer further benefit within the Scottish context.

Beyond evidence gathering alone, interviewees also highlighted the role of the Council in helping policymakers navigate competing priorities and perspectives. Housing policy frequently involves difficult trade-offs between competing objectives, geographies and stakeholder interests. Bringing together diverse expertise within a single forum can help governments better understand these tensions and develop more informed and sustainable policy responses. As one interviewee explained:

“One of the things that when you have really strong industry associations and really strong lobby groups, advocacy groups, one of the things governments are challenged by is who to believe and how to pull things together.”

Given that fragmentation is a key challenge facing Scotland’s housing system, a purposefully cross-sector policy learning and evaluation function may prove effective. While there is a substantial amount of high-quality housing research undertaken across Scotland, this evidence base often remains disparate, issue-specific, and disconnected from formal policymaking structures. Further, many organisations across the sector are focused on advocating for particular tenures, programmes, localities, or policy priorities. While entirely understandable, this siloed focus can make it difficult to sustain the kind of joined-up, system-wide perspective required to address complex housing challenges over time.

“Well, if it works for Nova Scotia...” : could the National Housing Council model work in Scotland? (continued)

Drawing on systems thinking, Gibb and Marsh note that different stakeholders “look at a real-world system from different angles, with different priorities and objectives, and consequently see different things” (2019, p. 3). A recurring theme within the interviews was the value of bringing together these different forms of expertise within a single institutional structure through the NHC:

“[It] forces those factions together or neutralises them. You can bring them together. They may never collaborate, but if you make [a council], you have a different kind of reference point for the government to work with, you can overcome the impact of that infighting because you’ve got a different reference group.”

“You get people around that table, and you force them into, ‘this is not about you or you or you or your issue. This is about the bigger picture.’ Doing that work up front, ‘what is the bigger picture we’re here for?’, reduces substantially the risk that people will begin to pull their side of the blanket.”

> “This is not about you or you or you or your issue. This is about the bigger picture.

Housing practitioners, researchers, people with lived experience, policymakers, and delivery bodies often understand housing challenges differently. Interviewees noted that no single organisation possesses a complete understanding of the housing system. The Council model, as highlighted in the quotes above, provides a mechanism through which these perspectives can be brought together. This helps policymakers navigate complexity and identify areas of consensus or emerging concern, and improve understanding across and amongst different actors and institutions.

To sum up

In Scotland, there is already evidence that the emerging MHS model will need stronger mechanisms around evaluation, accountability and performance monitoring. Research undertaken by the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (Gibb et al., 2026) earlier this year found that many respondents raised concerns around how the agency would account for its performance and how its work would be evaluated over time. The report identified perceived accountability gaps within the current housing system, alongside calls for clearer measures, transparent reporting and stronger performance frameworks *(ibid.)*.

Importantly, as outlined above, housing performance cannot be reduced solely to pounds spent and units built. As has been argued elsewhere (Fleming, 2026b; Gibb, 2015; Gibb et al., 2026; Maclennan, 2024), doing so risks overlooking housing quality, affordability, place-based differences, rural housing pressures, and the real-world outcomes experienced by those facing housing insecurity and homelessness. Given Scotland’s ongoing housing emergency and with finite public resources available, consideration must be given not simply to how many homes are delivered, but whether programmes are genuinely improving housing outcomes for those in greatest need.

There remain important questions for MHS around how progress will be measured, how evidence will be synthesised across the sector, and how policymakers will identify where interventions are succeeding, underperforming, or requiring adaptation over time.

There is no question that Scotland has significant housing expertise and research capacity. The nation already benefits from strong housing research and scrutiny institutions like Audit Scotland, the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE), highly engaged and policy-focused university departments, third sector organisations, and sector bodies, of which CIOB is one, all of whom contribute important evidence.

“Well, if it works for Nova Scotia...” : could the National Housing Council model work in Scotland? (continued)

However, no single institution currently exists with an explicit mandate to evaluate housing policy. Specifically, to synthesise evidence, commission new research where gaps exist, integrate lived experience perspectives, and provide formal, ongoing advice to ministers regarding housing system performance in order to support policy refinement. As such, Scottish Government, through MHS, may continue to allocate significant pools of its limited public resource without understanding the efficacy (or lack thereof) of these programmes nor the returned value on investments.

There is, therefore, a critical financial imperative for embedding policy learning and evaluation into Scotland’s housing governance framework. Public resources are finite, and the scale of Scotland’s housing challenges, in tandem with other pressing concerns across portfolios, will mean difficult choices will inevitably need to be made about where investment is directed.

In this context, the cost of ineffective policy is stark. Not only will it likely result in missed housing targets, but it also diverts scarce resources away from interventions capable of delivering meaningful housing outcomes. As Maclennan and Fleming (2025) have argued, one of the most significant failures within housing systems is not simply a lack of resources, but the failure of systems themselves to function effectively.

Developing stronger mechanisms for evidence gathering, evaluation, and adaptation is therefore essential if limited public resources are to be used effectively. Without a formal means of understanding what is working, what isn’t, and how policy should respond, governments risk continuing to invest in interventions that fail to improve housing outcomes while overlooking opportunities for more effective actions.

To that end, the Canadian experience, specifically the role played by the NHC in policy learning and evaluation, provides a model MHS could emulate in order to strengthen long-term housing governance and accountability and enable effective, outcomes-driven policymaking.

The research and interviews conducted for this paper suggest that the value of a housing policy learning and evaluation function lies not simply in evaluating programmes after the fact, but in helping policymakers answer a series of ongoing questions: What are we learning? What are we missing? What evidence do we need? What emerging pressures are shaping housing outcomes? And how should policy adapt in response?

How will we know if More Homes Scotland is working?

A housing policy learning and evaluation function should help answer fundamental questions:

- Are current interventions working, for whom, and in what circumstances?
- What are our metrics of success? Are these suitable?
- What are we learning?
- What are we missing?
- What evidence do we need?
- What emerging pressures are shaping housing outcomes?
- How should policy adapt?

Conclusions

Scotland's housing system faces significant and interconnected pressures relating to affordability, homelessness, infrastructure, housing quality and the delivery of new homes at pace and scale.

In response, More Homes Scotland has the potential to become an important new institutional actor within the housing system, capable of supporting greater coordination, leadership, and delivery across the sector.

However, as international experience demonstrates, ambitious housing policy requires more than large-scale delivery mechanisms alone. Complex housing systems require institutions capable not only of delivery, but also of continuous learning and adaptation as needed to deliver on their desired outcomes. The Canadian experience, and specifically the role played by the National Housing Council, illustrates the potential value of embedding independent evaluative capacity alongside national housing strategy and delivery structures.

However, the value of such an approach does not lie solely in programme evaluation or performance monitoring. Rather, an independent policy learning and evaluation function could provide Scotland with a standing institutional mechanism capable of bringing together evidence, identifying emerging pressures, integrating diverse and often competing perspectives, and supporting long-term policy learning across the housing system. Importantly, it could do so while allowing More Homes Scotland itself to 'get on with the show,' remaining focused on its central delivery and strategic leadership role.

As discussed throughout this paper, housing outcomes emerge not simply from housing supply interventions in isolation, but through the interaction of planning, infrastructure, affordability, transport, social security, health systems, and wider economic conditions. Housing governance, therefore, requires systems capable of understanding and responding to this complexity. As Gibb and Marsh (2019, p. 17) argue:

"If we take a systems perspective to our diagnosis of empirical, policy and practice questions, then we possess tools and modes of thinking that will encourage better analysis and might help avoid errors that arise from siloed thinking and too much focus on individual elements or nodes rather than the interconnectedness and emergent properties of the system."

As argued elsewhere (Maclennan, 2024), one of the greatest risks facing housing systems is not simply insufficient investment, but that continued 'status quo' approaches to housing policy and governance will continue to prevent these systems from functioning effectively.

Regardless of the level of resources available, housing outcomes are unlikely to improve where governance remains fragmented, evidence is disparately conducted and disseminated, and policymakers lack the institutional mechanisms required to understand whether interventions are working in practice. Effective evaluation is therefore not simply a question of accountability, but of ensuring that scarce public resources are directed toward policies and programmes capable of delivering meaningful, long-term change.
We don't have time or money to spare.

As Scottish Government moves to develop More Homes Scotland, consideration should therefore be given to how policy learning and evaluation functions could be embedded from the outset. The National Housing Council model may offer one practical example.

That said, whether an independent, policy learning and evaluation function ultimately takes the form of a council, advisory body, or alternative institutional arrangement is less important than ensuring that Scotland possesses a formal mechanism capable of supporting evidence synthesis, evaluation, lived experience integration, and policy adaptation over time.

More Homes Scotland will need to grapple with the question '*what will we do to address Scotland's housing challenges?*' A housing policy learning and evaluation function, modelled in part on the lessons of Canada's National Housing Council, could help answer the equally important question: '*How will we know if it is working?*'

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