

Can Prefabs solve housing crisis?

Welsh firm seeks to meet affordable green homes target with high-tech prefabricated houses

By Alex Donohue

Cut-price prefab homes costing just £20,000 each will help Wales meet its tough affordable and environmentally-friendly housing targets.

That's the claim from Powys-based housing firm Eco-Mods, which says it can offer families struggling to find a foot on the property ladder two-bedroom houses that can be assembled from brick, timber and slate in five days – using materials assembled in a factory.

They believe the low cost of Eco-Mods House Pods, which does not include the price of the land and some exterior fittings, could help alleviate the country's huge demands for environmentally sustainable and affordable housing.

The houses are designed to "comply with or exceed" UK housing regulations, and the company says it has taken great care in ensuring they comply with the government's regulations on producing homes that meet housing quality laws.

Nick James, spokesman for Eco-Mods, said its biggest challenge was debunking myths about prefab housing.

"It is not necessarily more expensive to build in an environmentally friendly or energy efficient manner," he said. The building industry had "overly complicated" the issue of what prefab housing is, he argued.

Prefab housing, which first appeared in post-war Britain when the country faced a desperate shortage of habitable properties, went on to be heavily criticised by town planners for helping create ingrained social problems in inner-city communities.

However, Eco-Mods says that the new generation of prefab-style homes it's producing could hold important answers to helping create affordable, environmentally-friendly housing in Wales.

The company says the finished House Pods produce low carbon emission, and are affordable homes that will enable many people in Wales



to own a house for the first time. The houses are manufactured offsite as watertight, fully wired and plumbed homes featuring fully-fitted kitchens and bathrooms.

Eco-Mods says the House Pods' quick construction methods mean no time is lost because of bad weather or problems with building suppliers.

Eco-Mods now plans to ship 29 House Pods to Belfast where it says there is a huge demand for affordable housing that cannot be met by traditional brick-built constructions.

'House Pods and old prefabs are like chalk and cheese. They are designed to minimise waste'

NICK JAMES, Eco-Mods spokesman

The company says the stigma attached to the prefab housing built in the UK after 1945 has now been addressed because of major improvements in building technology over the last 40 years.

Nick James added that today's prefab houses are "probably as far away as chalk and cheese" as the

ones that were built in post-war Britain. He said the new houses were "designed and developed to minimise waste and maximize efficiencies whereas, the '60s prefabs stood out for their poor quality and [because] they looked cheap".

He added: "In the case of the Pods, it's impossible to tell the difference between the finished unit and a house constructed using traditional methods."

Despite the economic downturn in the building industry, a report by Community Housing Cymru (CHC) in November found that investment in affordable housing in Wales had increased 20 per cent annually, despite predictions that the sector would be badly hit.

According to Community Housing Cymru, which is the membership body for Welsh housing associations, Wales is now halfway to meeting its target of building 6,500 affordable homes by the end of next year.

The study, commissioned by CHC and conducted by Cardiff Business School, estimated that the combined total for affordable housing projects in Wales now contributed £1bn to the Welsh economy.

New government regulations set to be introduced in 2010 as part of the government's Decent Homes Standard will mean that many councils across the UK will be forced to raze prefab housing dating back to the late 1940s. ●