

Interview Angiolina Foster may be Communities Scotland's acting boss but she tells **Rebecca Evans** that no one should doubt her commitment to the agency's housing agenda

Holding the fort



Angiolina Foster looks entirely at home in the chief executive's office at Communities Scotland.

She has held the post – in an acting capacity – since Bob Millar's sudden departure from the housing and regeneration agency at the start of August. But she has certainly made the office her own.

The walls are decorated by pictures of newly-built homes and children enjoying facilities in a community centre in Glasgow, photos which Ms Foster says help her get out of bed in the morning. On another wall is a whiteboard filled from top to bottom with a list of things to do.

The Scottish Executive has not yet advertised for s to fill the post permanently. Ms Foster will not say whether she will be applying – affecting a mock-affronted tone and saying the question is a 'jolly personal' one.

But she doesn't sound like a woman who can't wait to stand down, and she is clear that Communities Scotland is where she wants to be.

'When I came to Communities Scotland from local government [in 2001] it was because I was completely enthused by the role that was being mapped out for the agency at that time and I have not lost any of that enthusiasm,' she says.

It would hardly be surprising if she wanted to stay put for a while. In the last two years she has held more senior posts in Scotland's housing sector than anyone else and

Priority pledges



Communities Scotland's corporate plan 2003 – 2006 promises to:

- place a priority on developing relationships with local authorities;
- support the transfer of 70,000 homes;
- develop 'innovative ways of regenerating local communities' through the Scottish Centre for Regeneration;
- publish an intervention strategy that explains how it expects landlords to put right any performance failures;
- produce an estimate of the cost of the Scottish housing quality standard; and
- sharpen the agency's focus.

this is not the first time she has stepped into the breach when a top dog has stood down.

After Bob Allan resigned as chief executive of Glasgow Housing Association it was Ms Foster who took over the job and saw the mammoth deal through to completion. She describes it as a 'punishing year' in terms of the amount of work and pressure but says too that working with the tenants in Glasgow was 'one of the most rewarding things anybody in housing or regeneration could have asked to do'.

'Even a difficult starting point has a positive outcome if two things are in place. Those two things are a real belief in what you are trying to do and why you are trying to do it – so enough ideology behind it to find a way through the problems. And secondly enough people working with you to add to your own oomph and pull together.'

The combination of – as she puts it – a practical 'roll up your sleeves' approach and an ideological underpinning is probably what makes her so suitable as a senior stand-in. But she's adamant that it's not a pattern she intends to keep following and sounds slightly horrified at the thought.

'You mean, do I see a career of interim chief executiveships? Absolutely not, no!'

Even as interim chief executive, though, Ms Foster has to contend with the criticism that is so often levelled at Communities Scotland about the way it works.

Before the Scottish Parliament elections last May, rumours were circulating that Communities Scotland's role might be changed under the new administration. That hasn't happened – but Ms Foster is prepared to admit certain things did need to change.

The executive agency carried out a critical self-appraisal earlier this year and its corporate plan, published a fortnight ago, promises this review will 'sharpen the agency's focus' (*Inside Housing*, 17 October).

She does not see any link between this review and the resignation of Bob Millar but says things have changed as a result of the review.

'I think it shows an appropriate measure of humility that we do need to take stock and learn from feedback,' she says. 'What has changed since then internally is a better understanding of the things that are going well, of which there are many. But equally it has helped us to focus our attention on the things that either need to move or need to move in a different direction.'

'An example of that would be that it was not as clear as it needs to be to the outside world just what our fit was, either with our colleagues in the core Scottish Executive or with outside agencies.'

She says it is not just 'a nerdy constitutional point' that the transition from Scottish Homes, a non-departmental public body, to an executive agency is the first ever in the

UK. And she vehemently denies that there have been battles with the executive over the degree of the agency's independence.

'I can understand how people portray it like that, because it's the easy way – dare I say it's the lazy way – to analyse it. But it's actually a lot more substantial than that. I think it has been about trying to identify respective roles in a way that gives us an agency that is fit for purpose and a core executive operation that is fit for purpose.'

This feistiness comes through again in her preparedness to be openly accountable for the work that Communities Scotland does.

'I feel it's appropriate for a delivery agency to have more visibility than a more traditional core civil service branch,' she says.

But she never stops following the executive line, saying repeatedly that the agency's role is to deliver on cabinet and ministerial objectives.

'The purpose is coming from the minister,' she says firmly.

When asked about what Communities Scotland is going to do to help the executive meet its ambitious target of achieving the transfer of 70,000 homes by 2006, she couches her answer in very similar terms to those heard frequently from communities minister Margaret Curran.

Ms Foster says: 'The 70,000 is a target but it has to be

seen in the context of overall regeneration outcomes. And I think what you will see happening over the next while in Scotland is authorities reaching conclusions and n on the single dimensional question of to be a landlord or not.'

There are no specific threats from government on forcing councils to transfer, but the executive will shortly announce a Scottish housing quality standard – similar to the English decent homes standard – that local authorities will have to meet by a certain time.

Communities Scotland is working on the Scottish House Condition survey, which when published next month will give an indication of how much investment this quality standard is likely to require.

The community ownership review group is also set to report its findings soon, and this could result in an additional role for Communities Scotland – possibly similar to the role that the Community Housing Task Force has in England.

Whatever her future at the organisation, Ms Foster is already making plans. When it comes to the housing quality standard she shies away from the word 'sanctions' but is clear that Communities Scotland's regulation and inspection division will be checking councils' progress towards the target.

'It's essential for tenants,' she says.