

## Safer & Stronger Communities Scrutiny

### Policy Update

**JULY/AUGUST 2012**

#### **1. Grant Shapps welcomes dramatic increase in affordable homes**

- a) Housing Minister Grant Shapps recently welcomed new figures showing a rapid and dramatic increase in the numbers of new affordable homes being built
- b) Figures published recently by the Homes and Communities Agency show that affordable housing starts in the 6 month period to March 2012 were up by nearly 15,000 compared to the first half of the last financial year
- c) At the same time, the numbers of affordable homes for rent and affordable home ownership completed in the 12 months to March stood at over 51,000

#### **2. Grant Shapps: 'Paying to stay' in taxpayer-funded housing**

- a) Tenants on high salaries would in future pay a fair level of rent for the privilege of living in a social home, under plans announced by Housing Minister Grant Shapps recently
- b) The Minister argued that this 'handout to the very rich' must end if social housing is to offer the vital support system to those in need. On average, the economic subsidy provided by this to high earning social tenants in England is worth as much as £3,600 a year – a subsidy Mr Shapps said he considers unfair both to taxpayers and those who have been left languishing on social housing waiting lists
- c) The proposals published for consultation recently would see high-income tenants, e.g. those earning above £60,000 or £100,000, potentially paying up to market rents if they want to continue living in taxpayer-subsidised housing
- d) The move could see tens of thousands of high earning social tenants paying market rents to continue living in their social homes
- e) Mr Shapps said that with millions of people languishing on waiting lists, it was right that those who could afford it 'pay to stay' in homes that should be helping those in the greatest housing need
- f) The recent proposals would give social landlords the extra flexibility they need to increase rents for high-income households, and seeks views on whether this is something landlords should be required to do. The additional income generated could then be used by landlords to increase spending on affordable housing
- g) Ministers believe the changes are necessary to address the problem of precious social housing resources being occupied by tenants who could comfortably afford to live elsewhere
- h) The 'pay to stay' consultation will consider the income threshold for higher rents. The proposals are part of the most radical and fundamental reform of social housing for a generation, making the system fairer and more flexible so councils can better meet the needs of local people

- i) Ministers believe that in times of economic hardship, it is more important than ever that social housing helps the most vulnerable in society
- j) Tenure reforms will allow social landlords far greater freedom to target their resources at those who need a social home, for as long as they need it, by granting fixed term tenancies to new tenants where appropriate
- k) New allocations rules will give greater priority to members of the Armed Forces applying for social housing, and will enable councils to prioritise those with a long-standing connection to the local area
- l) Local authorities will also be given new powers to reject applications for social housing from people who already own a perfectly acceptable home of their own – including those who come to the UK from overseas
- m) A separate consultation is currently considering stronger measures to tackle those who abuse social housing by unlawfully sub-letting their homes. And, a consultation has just ended that will give landlords stronger powers to tackle tenants who make their neighbours' lives a misery through antisocial behaviour

### **3. Grant Shapps: Funding boost for strong homelessness safety net**

- a) Advice and support services for frontline staff helping families facing the real and frightening prospect of homelessness are to receive a cash boost from Government, strengthening one of the world's strongest safety nets against homelessness, Housing Minister Grant Shapps has recently announced
- b) It comes as new figures show that council have already helped over 13,000 vulnerable households secure alternative homes and avoid living on the streets, showing that many people are still suffering from the legacy of a debt-laden economy
- c) Mr Shapps announced £3.4 million to the National Homelessness Advice Service to ensure it continues to deliver the vital support services to equip local agencies to help thousands of families across the country
- d) This funding, to be shared between Shelter and the Citizens Advice Bureau, will help provide:
  - o Vital training for homelessness advisors
  - o A National Information Service to keep advisors up to date on homelessness prevention law
  - o Help with mortgage debt and money advice for those at risk of repossession, and
  - o Legal services for local advice bodies like councils and voluntary organisations
- e) This funding is part of the £400 million Government funding already in place to help those at risk of homelessness until 2015
- f) In addition, £70 million has been made available for homelessness services including:
  - o £20 million Homelessness Transition Fund to help protect vital front line services

- £20 million Preventing Repossessions Fund to enable local authorities intervene earlier and help people stay in their homes
  - £18.5 million Single Homelessness Prevention Fund to help ensure single homeless people get access to good housing advice
  - £5 million boost to the Homelessness Change Programme to deliver improved hostel provision and provide over 1,500 new and improved bed spaces
- g) Published figures show that councils helped over 13,000 vulnerable households secure alternative accommodation when faced with the prospect of homelessness
- h) Councils have a duty to provide help for households facing homelessness through no fault of their own and in priority need, and can provide free advice and information to prevent homelessness
- i) Under the Localism Act, councils will have greater powers to fulfil this duty by housing people at risk of homelessness in stable, secure accommodation in the private rented sector
- j) This will mean shorter waiting lists for homeless households, and will leave councils better equipped to help the 50,000 families currently living in temporary accommodation

#### **4. Police and Crime Commissioners to swear an oath of impartiality**

- a) Police and Crime Commissioners will be required to pledge an oath to represent 'all sections of the public without fear or favour'
- b) The oath is designed to provide a platform for PCCs to set out publicly their commitment to tackling their new role with integrity
- c) It will also echo the commitment police officers make to serve every member of the public impartially, while at the same time recognising the importance of the operational independence of the police service
- d) Police and Crime Commissioners will work to cut crime by setting priorities in line with the needs of local people and holding chief constables to account
- e) They will bring local people closer to the police, building confidence in the system and restoring trust
- f) Elections will take place on 15 November in 41 police force areas across England and Wales
- g) Nick Herbert, Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice, has said
- 'Police and Crime Commissioners will be important public servants and it is right that they make a formal public commitment to the communities they will serve. Although Police and Crime Commissioners may stand for a political party, the public will expect them to represent all the people in their area impartially, without fear or favour. The swearing of an oath will be an important symbol of this impartiality, emphasising both the significance of this new role in local communities and that commissioners are there to serve the people, not a political party or any one section of their electorate. An oath will also underline the particular importance of even-handedness in an office which holds to account the local chief constable and police force who themselves are bound to serve impartially'

- h) The full oath will read as follows:
- 'Full name of Place do solemnly and sincerely promise that I will serve all the people of Police Force Area in the office of Police and Crime Commissioner without fear or favour. I will act with integrity and diligence in my role and, to the best of my ability, will execute the duties of my office to ensure that the police are able to cut crime and protect the public. I will give a voice to the public, especially victims of crime, and work with other services to ensure the safety of the community and effective criminal justice. I will take all steps within my power to ensure transparency of my decisions, so that I may be properly held to account by the public. I will not seek to influence or prevent any lawful and reasonable investigation or arrest, nor encourage any police action save that which is lawful and justified within the bounds of this office'

### **5. Protecting victims of domestic violence**

- a) A year long pilot scheme that provides increased protection for victims of domestic violence is to continue in Greater Manchester, Wiltshire and West Mercia police force areas
- b) The Domestic Violence Protection Order (DVPO) pilot closed on 30 June but all 3 police forces will continue the scheme while the Home Office evaluates the pilot to assess whether or not a change in the law is needed
- c) Under the scheme the police and magistrates can protect a victim when they are at their most vulnerable, in the immediate aftermath of an attack, by preventing the perpetrator from contacting the victim or returning to their home for up to 28 days. This helps victims who may otherwise have to flee their home and gives them the space and time to access the support they need and to consider their options
- d) Around 320 DVPOs have been issued since the scheme began in June 2011. The Home Office has commissioned an evaluation of the pilot to capture lessons learnt and explore the implications of DVPOs for victims, perpetrators and criminal justice agencies. The report is expected in late summer 2013

### **6. 120 councils sign up to keep Right to Buy cash**

- a) Well over 100 councils across England, including Sheffield City Council, have seized the opportunity to use cash proceeds from the reinvigorated Right to Buy to help meet the housing needs of hard working local families, Housing Minister Grant Shapps has announced
- b) The revamped Right to Buy, launched in April, offers England's 2.5 million council tenants discounts of up to £75,000 when buying their home – tripling the discount in many parts of the country, and quadrupling it in London
- c) For the first time ever, every extra council property sold under the scheme will be replaced by a new affordable home for rent
- d) The Housing Minister has revealed that of the 167 councils which retain housing stock, more than two thirds (120) have already signed

- up to a 'one-for-one' deal that allows them to keep the receipts from their additional Right to Buy sales
- e) This agreement will give them the freedom to:
    - o Decide on the type, size and location of the new homes they build according to local needs, and
    - o Work with other organisations such as housing associations to ensure the additional affordable homes are built in their area
  - f) The remaining 47 councils yet to sign an agreement will have to pass their additional receipts into a central pot from which they will be able to bid for funding to invest in affordable homes
  - g) But Mr Shapps has stressed the door would still be open for these councils to sign up to use Right to Buy cash to build new homes in their area. Those who sign up by September will be able to keep receipts from July sales onward
  - h) Additional Right to Buy receipts from the 47 councils that have not signed up to the one-for-one deal will be returned to the Homes and Communities Agency – or the Greater London Authority in London
  - i) To ensure best value for taxpayers' money Right to Buy funds should account for no more than 30% of the total spend on new homes – in line with the highly successful Affordable Homes Programme, which is expected to deliver up to 170,000 new affordable homes by 2015
  - j) The cash raised from Right to Buy sales must be spent on new affordable homes for rent within 3 years of first receiving it. If the money remains unspent after 3 years it will be returned to Whitehall to be invested nationally into more housebuilding

### **7. New powers to tackle alcohol-fuelled crime and disorder**

- a) Communities across England and Wales will benefit from 2 new powers that will help them tackle alcohol-fuelled violence and disorder, the Home Office has announced
- b) The government has published its response to the consultation *Dealing with the Problems of Late Night Drinking*. Draft legislation has been laid in parliament so that later this year local councils will be able to:
  - o Use early morning alcohol restriction orders (EMROs) to restrict the sale of alcohol in all or part of their areas between midnight and 6am
  - o Charge a levy for late-night licences to contribute to the cost of extra policing, and other costs linked to late-night drinking like street cleaning
- c) The Dealing with the Problems of Late Night Drinking consultation ran for 12 weeks. The levy and EMRO measures are contained in the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011

### **8. More than £30 million for communities taking over valued services and assets**

- a) Community groups wanting to bid to run local services or buy their local shop, library or pub will benefit from more than £30 million of new specialist support, Communities Minister Andrew Stunell announced recently

- b) Under the £19 million Community Ownership of Assets programme communities wanting to take control of a much loved local asset will have access to support they need through each stage of the process from forming a group through to preparing and submitting a bid. The programme will also help communities use the Right to Bid when it comes into force this autumn
- c) Under the £11.5 million Community Right to Challenge programme – which became law recently – communities with good ideas for how they can run local public services and want to use the Community Right to Challenge, can access advice and support to develop their skills to be able to bid for and run excellent local services
- d) Around 90% of the funding will go directly to communities in the form of grants allowing them to buy the support they need. In addition to this, funding will support a website and advice service ([www.mycommunityrights.org.uk](http://www.mycommunityrights.org.uk)) and telephone helpline run by 'Locality', with the grants programme provided by the Social Investment Business
- e) The new Community Rights give communities opportunities to take ownership and management of important local assets and to shape and run local public services. The Community Right to Challenge gives communities the right to bid to run local council services where they think they can do it differently and better. The Community Right to Bid will give communities the right to bid to buy and take over the running of local assets that are important to them
- f) These two 3 year funding programmes will run until March 2015. Groups will be able to apply for grants under the Right to Challenge from 16 July 2012

### **9. Community groups to bring 2,000 empty homes back to life with government help**

- a) Community groups across the UK will be supported by government cash to bring almost 2,000 empty homes back into use, Communities Minister Andrew Stunell has announced
- b) Mr Stunell announced the winners sharing £25.1 million of government funding on a visit to one of the successful projects in Newark, Nottinghamshire alongside Independent Empty Homes Adviser and TV presenter George Clarke
- c) Newark and Sherwood Homes Ltd successfully applied for a £50,000 grant to purchase and bring 4 empty properties back into use from the Empty Homes Community Fund. These will be a mix of 2-3 bedroom houses and bungalows that will provide affordable housing for 20 people. Mr Stunell visited Newark and Sherwood Federation of Tenants and Residents Associations to find out first hand how they have been involved in these projects
- d) In addition to the scheme in Newark, other successful projects include:
  - o A homesteading scheme in Stoke to refurbish terraced housing
  - o A scheme in Leeds to work with homeless people and volunteers to bring homes back into use
  - o A scheme led by Southwark, Habitat for Humanity to bring homes back into use across London

- 7 schemes from YMCAs to return properties to use, and
  - Renovated properties to provide accommodation for women at risk of domestic violence
- e) In many areas the expertise for returning empty homes to use lies with community groups or voluntary organisations, and that is why the Government is supporting innovative schemes around the country that will allow groups to make a real difference where in the past they have often struggled to be involved or raise finance. £25.1 million has been allocated so far out of a total of £30 million, with a further 20 organisations bidding for the remainder of the cash

## **10. Prevention is best cure for homeless**

- a) A new report published recently sets out a cross-government approach to ensuring that anyone at risk of homelessness gets help at the earliest possible stage to prevent them from losing their home
- b) The *Making Every Contact Count* report details clear commitments from Government to stop the slide towards homelessness in its tracks and ensure that this country's strong safety net of support for those without a roof over their head remains an absolute last resort
- c) Alongside this, Housing Minister Grant Shapps reaffirmed ongoing efforts to ensure no one has to spend more than one night on the streets, with a further £3.5 million for more homelessness help and to roll out the No Second Night Out initiative across the country
- d) Mr Shapps has said that this report will give councils, charities, health services and the police a blueprint to work together to ensure that families and vulnerable people at risk of homelessness are offered help early, no matter who they turn to first
- e) It sets out the Government's clear commitment to helping them achieve:
- Earlier support for young people, former prisoners, and patients with mental health, drug or alcohol problems
  - Better cross-service work between the voluntary sector, councils, health services and the justice system
  - Financial advice and jobseeking support through the voluntary sector, JobCentre Plus and the work programme
  - New funding mechanisms, including the Government's innovative new payment-by-results scheme, and
  - A new homelessness 'gold standard' that all local services should aim to achieve, setting the benchmark for services across the country
- f) The Minister said that this early intervention approach is backed up by recent statistics which show that 199,000 households were last year given help to stay in their homes or find new places to live. This vital support, such as repossession, tenancy or debt advice and re-housing services, can set many people back on track before they face losing their home
- g) A further £3.5 million to 21 homelessness charities will support help and accommodation schemes for rough sleepers and extend the No Second Night Out initiative to 8 more areas – Manchester, Plymouth,

Great Yarmouth, North Devon, Taunton, Gloucestershire, Chichester and Worcestershire

- h) First introduced in London, the No Second Night Out project works with members of the public to quickly identify people sleeping rough locally and provides them with the support they need to get themselves off the streets Mr Shapps wants to see the initiative rolled out across the country

#### **11. Tenants take back power to choose their own home**

- a) HomeSwap Direct searches set to hit 1.5 million
- b) Social tenants who have been stuck in homes that no longer meet their needs are seizing the opportunity to up sticks through the HomeSwap Direct scheme, boosting their chances of getting a job, living nearer to family or simply improving their quality of life, Housing Minister Grants Shapps has recently announced
- c) The Minister welcomed latest figures showing that there are nearly 6,000 searches a day conducted on HomeSwap Direct – an online scheme that shows social homes available for swaps across the country. The total number of searches since it launched in October 2011 is shortly expected to hit the 1.5 million milestone
- d) For the first time HomeSwap Direct has allowed tenants to easily look outside the service provided by their own landlord and be given a choice about where they live. With the scheme being online, it has made advertised swaps much more accessible for all tenants and the possibility of moving house just a click away
- e) The scheme has transformed the way in which tenants can look for properties and boosted their prospects of moving – whether for work, to be closer to family or for a property better suited to their needs
- f) Previously, tenants wanting to move were restricted to swapping properties through a scheme chosen by their landlord – effectively meaning only a partial swap scheme existed. HomeSwap Direct gives tenants access to a much wider selection of properties than ever before
- g) HomeSwap Direct brings together 4 internet-based providers of mutual exchange services (HomeSwapper, House Exchange, Abritas and Locata) to offer tenants more choice over where they live
- h) A membership agreement which has been developed by Government and joined by these providers is available on the Department for Communities and Local Government website. This sets out the framework under which information will be shared by providers, the technical requirements of the scheme and the processes by which new members can apply to join
- i) A new Tenancy Standard came into force on 1 April 2012 and places a requirement on social landlords in England to subscribe to an internet-based mutual exchange service. The provider of the service must be a signatory to an agreement such as HomeSwap Direct under which tenants can access matches across all internet-based mutual exchange services

#### **12. Report highlights chaos of troubled families' lives**



- a) Louise Casey CB has published a report highlighting the chaotic personal histories of the kinds of families who will be targeted as part of the Government's commitment to turn around the lives of 120,000 troubled families by 2015
- b) The report details stark real-life accounts from families, with experiences often passed from generation to generation, such as domestic and sexual abuse, teenage pregnancies, poor parenting, social care interventions, police call outs and educational failure. It also contains Louise Casey's early conclusions that a whole-family approach is often best for dealing with multiple and inter-linked problems, rather than approaches that deal with single problems or single individuals within a household
- c) Key recurring themes highlighted in the report include:
  - o Dysfunctional and unstable family structures
  - o History repeating itself within families and between generations
  - o Extended family and antisocial networks within communities which reinforce destructive behaviour
  - o The need for one assertive family worker who offers practical help and support but also sanction in dealing with families
- d) Under the Troubled Families programme the Department for Communities and Local Government will pay upper-tier local authorities up to £4,000 per eligible family on a payment-by-results basis if they reduce truancy, youth crime and anti-social behaviour or put parents back into work
- e) The Government's £448m 3 year budget is drawn from across 7 departments in a bid to join up local services dealing with these families on the frontline. All 152 upper-tier authorities in England have committed to engaging in the programme
- f) Reporting to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government Eric Pickles, Louise Casey was tasked by the Prime Minister in November 2011 with leading local authorities to turn around the lives of 120,000 troubled families by 2015
- g) Troubled Families are eligible for this programme if they have children regularly absent or excluded from school; cause high levels of youth crime and/or antisocial behaviour; claim out-of-work benefits; and/or incur high costs for local public services
- h) Turning a family around is defined as:
  - o Achieving more than 85% attendance and fewer than 3 exclusions from school for children
  - o A 60% reduction in antisocial behaviour across the whole family and a 33% reduction in youth offending
  - o Progress towards work for adults such as enrolment in the Work Programme or the European Social Fund provision for troubled families, or
  - o One adult in the family moving off benefits and into work

### **13. Tackling deficit is helping to head off risk of repossession**

- a) Government action to tackle the nation's deficit is giving hard working homeowners vital breathing space to get on top of bills and head off the threat of repossession, Housing Minister Grant Shapps has said

- b) Mr Shapps said that the Government's work to reduce the deficit and help keep interest rates at a record low and mortgages affordable, combined with a raft of support to help struggling homeowners, is helping to ensure that repossession remains the last resort for millions
- c) Latest figures from the Council of Mortgage Lenders show the number of homes taken into possession to have gone down by 11% on the previous quarter to 8,500, 9% less than in the same period in 2011. This is the lowest figure since the final quarter of 2010
- d) These figures come as the latest forecast from leading academic Professor John Muellbauer predict a brighter picture for both repossessions and arrears compared to his 2010 forecast
- e) Just as the Government is providing help for people wanting to get on the property ladder, a range of support is also available to keep them in their homes. This help includes:
  - o A £20 million Preventing Repossession fund giving every council the opportunity to offer small interest-free loans to struggling homeowners and ensure that court desks can offer on-the-day advice for those facing the prospect of repossession
  - o The Mortgage Rescue Scheme, which has been refocused to deliver better value for money, with a reduction in the grant rate paid to housing associations and tighter caps on property prices and repair costs, to ensure as many people as possible can benefit from it. More than £200 million has been invested in the scheme and is now available through councils and housing associations to ensure help is targeted at homeowners most likely to benefit from it

#### **14. £1.3m to hand power back to tenants**

- a) New programme will give social tenants voice to challenge local decisions
- b) The Housing Minister has unveiled a new fund of £1.3m to help give more powers to communities over their social homes. Grant Shapps hopes the scheme will help bring the passion of the Olympic volunteers and last year's broom armies to local communities by giving housing association and council tenants a voice to lead change in their area
- c) Mr Shapps said the Tenant Empowerment Programme would offer a springboard for success to communities across the country who want to see their local needs reflected in the services they receive
- d) This could be by helping tenants learn the skills they need to engage and negotiate confidently with their landlords; forming tenant panels to come together to demand the best value-for-money services; or even to take control of local services themselves if they feel that they could deliver more for less
- e) The Minister also highlighted the benefits to landlords of getting their tenants involved, from community involvement in scrutinising new repairs contracts or tenants working together with local authorities to tackle antisocial behaviour
- f) The Minister invited charities and benevolent societies to submit their ideas for delivering a national programme that will:

- Encourage the creation of more tenant panels – groups of tenants who can challenge landlords, shape services and get involved in local decision-making, and
  - Help individual tenants engage with their landlords on a range of issues and services
- g) A new Community Cashback scheme will also be at the heart of the Tenant Empowerment Programme – allowing groups of tenants who choose to take on the management of services such as maintenance and repairs, to reinvest any savings they make from running these services themselves into other community priorities
- h) Applications are being sought from charities, benevolent societies and philanthropic institutions, as defined by the Charities Act 2006, for grant funding to deliver a tenant empowerment programme to tenants living in social housing
- i) The tenant empowerment programme is designed to inspire tenants to lead change in their communities by having the skills and confidence to scrutinise, influence and control local services through tenant panels and other scrutiny mechanisms
- j) Grant funding of up to £1.32m will be made available from the £8m Tenant Empowerment Programme, announced in February 2011, to deliver 2 separate programmes
- k) This funding is intended to support activities over and above those that landlords should provide as part of their regular responsibilities
- l) The importance of developing local solutions to tackle tenants' problems, including an enhanced role for tenant panels, was identified in the Government's Review of Social Housing Regulation

This page is intentionally left blank