Housing and Regeneration Bill

BRIEFING

From the Liberal Democrat Group at the Local Government Association

The full text of the bill can be found here:
http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2007-08/housingandregeneration.html

LGA Lib Dem Group view:

• There are some welcome measures in the bill - but they come far too late for the millions who have missed out on access to affordable housing over the past 10 years of Labour Government. 1.6 million households are now stuck on Council Housing waiting lists - this is a real scandal.

• Liberal Democrats strongly believe that we should have a level playing field for council housing so people have a genuine choice between different housing options, including direct investment, stock transfer, ALMOs, etc. There is still nothing in the Bill to promote the so-called “fourth option” of direct investment in housing stock.

• There is not enough on affordable housing and in particular there is not enough about social housing for rent. Liberal Democrats want to see 25% of all new homes to be social housing for rent.

• Right to buy receipts - Councils can only keep 25% of the receipts at the moment. They should be able to spend all their receipts on new affordable homes.

• It isn’t just about houses – new homes must be built as part of well-planned and well-connected neighbourhoods, with the necessary infrastructure to allow easy, low carbon access to jobs and to public and commercial services. This kind of coherent planning must reflect the ambitions of local people, and councils are best-placed to deliver that.

• There needs to be more about Sustainable Housing in the Bill. At the moment, Germany is leading the way on ensuring existing stock is as environmentally sustainable as possible, and Britain has a lot of catching up to do. New build homes must be sustainable by 2011, not by 2016 as the Government is aiming for.

• Low carbon homes are vital, and eco towns may be a good means of providing these - however the total carbon impact of places, from homes, transport, businesses and public services, must be taken into account.

Key points of the bill include:

Homes and Communities Agency (HCA)
• Establishes the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) in England – the new national housing and regeneration agency.
• The HCA will merge the affordable housing investment and regeneration functions of the Housing Corporation and English Partnerships, and take over some delivery roles from Communities and Local Government.

LGA Lib Dem View

• The HCA must support councils in achieving their ambitions for local communities. It should not impose its own vision.
• It is vitally important that the HCA strikes the right balance between activities that deliver new homes and those that support, maintain and regenerate existing communities. The HCA should not simply be about delivering crude housing numbers

Office for Tenants and Social Landlords - OFTENANT

• Creates the Office for Tenants and Social Landlords (with the interesting title of OFTENANT!) - a new, independent regulator for the social housing sector.
• OFTENANT will take over the regulatory functions of the Housing Corporation for Registered Social Landlords but will place greater emphasis on the quality of services delivered to tenants.
• Over the next two years, an advisory panel is to assess how council landlords can be included in OFTENANTS’ scope.

LGA Lib Dem View
• We are disappointed that the Bill provisions do not cover council landlords. Including them later may risk councils being seen as a bolt-on by a body which sees its primary focus as non-council landlords.
• Regulation should encourage all landlords to promote social inclusion, strong neighbourhoods and wider well-being. A duty on housing associations would help fill a democratic deficit to get them to engage with councils in place shaping would help secure this wider, pro-active engagement.

Sustainable Homes & Eco Towns
• Places a duty on a person selling a newly constructed residential property to give the purchaser information about the sustainability of the new property free of charge before the sale is agreed.
• Allows ‘eco towns’ - with zero or low carbon housing - to be built more quickly by modernising powers on establishing new settlements, and simplifying the ways in which the HCA delivers these projects.

LGA Lib Dem View
• The Government should let local authorities decide for themselves, subject to planning regulations, what is suitable for their own areas. At the moment, Whitehall will only give permission for around 10 of these developments but more authorities have expressed an interest. It is also vital that Eco towns take account of the total carbon impact, including that from transport.
• Significant increases in energy prices mean it is increasingly important for householders to be able to minimise energy demand. This needs to be taken into account when assessing any potential increase in upfront costs from building lower carbon new homes.

• We need a coherent strategy for improving skills and training across the housebuilding professions and sectors if we are to deliver sustainable homes to the challenging zero carbon timetable.

Council Housing Finance
• The bill enables certain authorities and properties to be excluded from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) subsidy system.

LGA Lib Dem View
• The ability to operate outside of the HRA subsidy system is vital if councils are to finance new build council homes and help tackle the current housing crisis.
• However, the LGA has long believed that a fundamental review of the council housing subsidy regime (Housing Revenue Account) is overdue since all councils need greater flexibility to use social housing resources. We therefore eagerly await the Housing Green Paper’s promised review of the HRA system.

Tenant Empowerment
Key Proposals
• Makes it easier for council tenants to set up organisations to manage their homes.
• Ministers are able to require council landlords to enter into agreements with tenant management organisations; new regulations govern council cooperation and information provision; and new time limits for resolving issues, carrying out requirements, and acting in accordance with Secretary of State guidance or directions.

LGA Lib Dem View
• We are disappointed that housing association tenants are not to be afforded the same management rights as local authority tenants. The disparity between tenants goes against the ethos of achieving consistency of outcomes and tenant experience across the board as identified by the Hills and Cave reviews commissioned by Government.
• We believe that outcomes and experience should be consistent regardless of who is managing a property. It is thus essential that Tenant Management Organisations are subject to the same regulation as any other social housing landlord or management arrangement.

Family Intervention Tenancies
Key Proposals
• Allows councils and housing associations to offer a new type of tenancy to tenants who have lost or risk losing, their secure or assured tenancy because of anti-social behaviour. These tenancies will allow behavioural support services to be offered to such tenants.

LGA Lib Dem View
• Local authorities are at the heart of many initiatives to tackle anti-social behaviour and need the right tools to help them make a real difference.
• These tenancies will support the positive work being undertaken by Family Interventions Projects (FIPs) which offer support to tenants displaying anti-social behaviour both prior to and after eviction.

Further information
Contact the LGA Liberal Democrat Group Office on 020 7664 3204 or email libdem@lga.gov.uk. You can also contact the LGA Lib Dem Group members on the Environment Board (which covers Housing): Mayor Dorothy Thornhill - Dorothy.Thornhill@watford.gov.uk Cllr Adam Paynter apaynter@cornwall.gov.uk
The briefing is based on information from both the LGA and the Liberal Democrats.