

Environment and Housing Programme Board – report from Cllr David Parsons CBE (Chairman)

Housing finance conference

1. I chaired the LGA's Housing Finance Conference on the 14 December. This was an extremely successful event, where we heard the latest thinking from, and had an opportunity to put our questions and comments to, those involved in shaping the transition to self financing at the highest level. Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander MP provided a key note address and delegates also heard from LGA President Lord Best on the countdown to self financing.

Digital inclusion round table in social housing

2. Councillor Frances Roden attended a ministerial roundtable on behalf of the Environment and Housing Programme Board on the issue of encouraging digital inclusion in social housing. The roundtable which included representatives from the National Housing Federation (NHF), Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) and Race on Line provided a useful opportunity to discuss ways to encourage a greater proportion of social tenants to access on line services and the role landlords play in this. Following this meeting I sent a joint letter with Grant Shapps MP, Martha Lane Fox, CIH and NHF to social housing landlords emphasising the support and information on offer to them.

Meeting with Lord Taylor, National Housing Federation

3. I met with Lord Matthew Taylor, Chair of the National Housing Federation recently to discuss a wide range of issues important to councils, including the National Planning Policy Framework and the role of councils in developing places people want to live, work and visit. This successful meeting will lead to more collaborative working between our two organisations, crucial given the importance of partnership working between housing associations and councils on the ground.

Smith Square debate

4. The final Smith Square debate of the Autumn 2011 series was held recently in Bevin Hall entitled '*Building for the future: How do we solve the housing crisis?*' The lively debate, attended by around 50 delegates included speeches from Genesis Housing, BPF, Cllr Vernon Jackson and Cllr Tony Newman from the Environment and Housing Programme Board. The wide ranging debate covered key topics including the impact of the welfare reforms, section 106 payments and joint work between housing associations and councils.

NPPF Select Committee report

5. The Communities and Local Government Committee published its report on the National Planning Policy Framework, on Wednesday, 21 December 2011. The LGA provided written and oral evidence to this committee. The report endorses many of the arguments put forward by LGA; in particular support for a reasonable transition period, a balance between the three pillars of sustainability to allow local authorities the flexibility to make local trade off's and decisions and the definition of viability. I have written to Greg Clark MP seeking a discussion on the report and in particular to agree reasonable transition arrangements which would allow local authorities to put up to date local plans in place.

Evidence Financing Housing Supply Select Committee Inquiry

6. Cllr Clyde Loakes gave evidence on behalf of the Environment and Housing Board to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee on the subject of financing the new housing supply. Alongside him on the panel were the Home Builders Federation, the British Property Federation, and the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH). Cllr Loakes emphasised the LGA's message on the need to establish a level playing field between local authorities and housing associations in terms of accessing funding, and the constraints placed on councils by the current financial rules which mean that local authority borrowing is considered as government debt.
7. Cllr Loakes highlighted the important work councils undertake to make development viable and the significant steps councils are already making in this respect, working in partnership with developers and offering land to stimulate supply. The inquiry also provided an opportunity to press the LGA's position for the retention of 100 per cent of capital receipts from the right to buy.

All Party Parliamentary Group on Regeneration through Innovation

8. On 13 December I presented to the All Party Parliamentary Group on Regeneration through Innovation on the subject of waste and recycling. I highlighted several key messages:
 - 8.1. Waste management is a real success story for councils: 78 per cent of householders are either very or fairly satisfied with their waste service. Local authorities are rightly proud of our achievements to date with household recycling at 40 per cent nationally - an increase of 32 per cent in 13 years.
 - 8.2. Waste is the most recognised service by householders that local authorities provide – it is the doorstep issue.
 - 8.3. Councils need the freedom to decide what waste and recycling collection model, infrastructure and frequency is best suited to their area and work with the community, producers and the managers of waste to deal with the challenges all stakeholders face.

Mary Portas Review of High Streets

9. Also on 13 December, the Mary Portas Review of High Streets was published. The report puts forward a series of recommendations, ideas and challenges for local and central government on revitalising the high street economy. A number of these relate to planning, including a direct reference to the issue of clustering of betting shops, an issue on which the LGA has been campaigning. The review has generated a lot of press and the LGA position has been picked up in a number of media reports.

LGA Green Deal Conference

10. I also chaired the LGA's conference entitled 'Making the Green Deal a fair deal' on 29 November, which was very successful and fully booked. In the morning the conference received a presentation from the Rt Hon Gregory Barker MP, Minister of State for Energy and The Green Deal. There followed a panel discussion with a number of high-profile representatives of the energy and insulation industries, and in the afternoon a number of well-attended workshops.

Town and Village greens

11. On 16 December the LGA press release on town and village greens was picked up by the Telegraph, the BBC, the MJ and many local papers. Councils are keen to protect genuine village greens and pieces of community land in local areas, to encourage new affordable housing and to stimulate local economies through housing and job creation. The LGA has long lobbied for reform of the village greens system to enable this and has responded to the recent DEFRA consultation on this issue making the case for reform.

Feed in Tariffs - Solar Panels

12. On 21 December, the High Court ruled that the Department for Energy and Climate Change, in setting a 'reference date' for 12 December when their proposed changes to halve the FITs rate would come into force, as a date before the end of their consultation (23 December) was not legal. The reference date is the only element of the consultation judged not to be legal.
13. The changes to the feed-in tariffs were introduced on 12 December. The worst affected are social housing projects, where councils and social housing providers simply will not be able to cover their costs. DECC can still consult on reducing the tariff, the multi-installation additional reduction and the energy efficiency requirement. We await further details on the implications for the consultation. The LGA submitted our response to the consultation on 23 December.

Contact officer: Sandie Dunne
Position: Head of Programmes
Phone no: 020 7664 3070
E-mail: sandie.dunne@local.gov.uk