

**Oral Evidence Session to Communities and Local Government Select Committee
(Secretary of State Rt Hon Eric Pickles, MP, Minister for Housing Rt Hon Grant Shapps, MP &
Minister for Decentralisation Rt Hon Greg Clark, MP.)**

**13th September 2010
4.45pm
Grimond Room, Portcullis House**

Summary

In a 2 hour session of the Communities and Local Government Select Committee last night Secretary of State, Rt Hon Erick Pickles, MP and Ministers Rt Hon Grant Shapps, MP and Rt Hon Greg Clark, MP were questioned over the activities of DCLG to date.

Eric Pickles re-affirmed his commitment to localism and his belief that decentralisation will be cross-departmental stating that DCLG is "central to the coalitions aims for localism" and will be acting as the "advocates for change."

Housing

Grant Shapps faced hostile questions over reforms to the housing benefit system but was adamant that the reforms were needed in order to cut the excessive budget spent on social housing.

He stated that under the Labour Government fewer homes had been built than under Thatcher or Major. He reiterated that Local Authorities would have responsibility for ensuring sufficient housing provision, with the New Homes Bonus intended to incentivise residential development.

DCLG believe that the Homes Bonus will show communities that there are benefits for them to agreeing to new development and Shapps feels the financial incentives will be "irresistible to Local Authorities." The new system is aiming to remove the conflict from the planning process and encourage a collaborative approach rather than automatically pitting developers against the local community. Greg Clark added that he no longer wanted the built environment to be seen as something hostile. DCLG's purpose is to give local people the freedom to shape their own communities and share in the benefits.

Shapps faced criticism over having no central way to gauge the progress of house building in the UK and impact of the new proposals. In response he said the provision of new homes was the responsibility of Local Government and that the RSSs had been a "crazy system" that was far too centralised.

When asked if the Comprehensive Spending Review would include more money for housing Shapps refused to be drawn replying that the review was on 20th October.

The Planning System

When questioned over the issue of a five year housing land supply and its use by developers to justify planning permission, Clark responded that he has been clear with the Planning Inspectorate that RSSs have been abolished and that it was down to local authorities to undertake a rigorous review of their LDFs and housing figures.

The Committee expressed concern that recent statements had created a false hope among communities and in reality it would be years before they were involved in planning decisions.

Clark responded that this was not the case and that Local Authorities have been told to review their housing figures. He believes there is an element of the Stockholm syndrome with regards to developers and Local Authorities need to have the confidence to stand up and to take on their role in the planning system.

Pickles stated that he feels there is no planning anymore, that it is all development control predicated on conflict. He is keen to remove this conflict and say to communities take this development and you will be better off. Then communities will decide to grow themselves not have expansion imposed upon them.

When asked what success will look like in terms of housebuilding, Shapps replied that building more homes will be seen as success. Pickles added this included more houses that people wanted to live in, hence the removal of the minimum density requirement.

Pickles stated his belief that under this localism approach, accountability sits with the people, who have the chance to make their voice heard by voting with their feet in local elections.

Planning Policy

Clark confirmed that there will shortly be an announcement on the new national planning framework. He said this will be a simpler system distilled to an essential set of principles and take a collaborative approach. He stated that all national planning policy statements will be voted on in both Houses, with the Commons having the final say should they disagree.

The new Major Infrastructure Planning Unit will also be accountable to Parliament as decisions will be made by the Secretary of State at DCLG.

- Ends -