



# Policy Digest

*Support, influence & representation*

Apr – Jun 2006

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## Introduction

This Policy Digest provides a review of the key recent legislative and policy issues that have an impact on our members.

The Digest is produced four times a year and runs in conjunction with the Fortnightly Policy Digest, which is contained in our Email Newsletter.

## Further information

Visit our website:  
<http://www.northern-consortium.org.uk>

or contact the NHC Policy section for further information on the work of the Consortium featured in the Digest or any other policy areas you would like to highlight:

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# NHC POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

## CONFERENCES

### Supporting People Conference

*5<sup>th</sup> & 6<sup>th</sup> September 2006, Imperial Hotel Blackpool*

Run in conjunction with the DCLG, this important conference is the best place for those people with responsibility for Supporting People to evaluate the recent government policy developments and consider how their organisation and partnerships can develop. Looking back over the last 3 years we will consider what has been achieved and the lessons we have learned. In particular this year there will be feedback from the consultation on the national strategy, Local Area Agreements, the links with health and social care, outcomes measurement, benchmarking and procurement for both large and small providers. These key policy developments coupled with the Comprehensive Spending Review in 2007 mean this is a crucial time for Supporting People. All these issues and more will be discussed to give you the knowledge you will need to deliver the Supporting People regime more effectively.

For more information on these conferences contact Rachel Smith on (0191) 5661019

With contributions from some of the leading experts in the field, this conference will give delegates a range of opportunities to explore different aspects of Supporting People. We have keynote speeches from Jane Everton, Head of Housing Care and Support at the DCLG and Domini Gunn, Supporting People Inspection Co-ordinator at the Audit Commission. Christopher Smith will give an update on the key findings from the Value Improvement Projects (VIP's) and Helen Cash, Lead Inspector from Her Majesties Inspectorate of Probation will be discussing services for offenders and those at risk of offending. There will also be a range of useful practice sessions delivered by providers, commissioners and experts in the field including Women's Aid, Home Group and SITRA. This is an excellent opportunity to hear from practitioners and policy makers at the heart of Supporting People.

### HRA Subsidy Report

The Northern Housing Consortium have announced the publication of their report "Robin Hood or Robbin' the Housing Revenue Account?" which examines the impact of the 2006-07 subsidy settlement on local authorities.

Allan Kelley, Director of Resources highlighted that: "A lot of our member authorities have been saying that the 2006-07 subsidy settlement was creating a severe detrimental financial impact on their Housing Revenue Accounts". NHC commissioned research into the reasons why the HRA resources appeared to be in such scarce supply. The research has shown that the changes from draft stage compounded what was a very harsh settlement for all authorities."

## BRIEFINGS AND REPORTS

The Northern Housing Consortium has produced a number of briefings in recent months covering key social housing developments. These along with all our previous Briefings are available in full at:

<http://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/briefreports.htm>

- **Performance Indicators for 2003 - 2005: Analysis of Registered Social Landlords in the Northern Region**

The Northern Housing Consortium is committed to helping its Members to improve their performance in the housing related services they provide and has produced this report drawing comparisons between Registered Social Landlords operating in the North. The report shows how the performance of RSLs operating in the northern region compares against other RSLs in the same peer group. It will also show how they performed against their own performance in 2003 where possible and how the northern region performed nationally.

- **Stepping out: New ventures for housing organisations**

Housing organisations, whether they are the traditional local authorities, stock transfers, ALMOs or traditional housing associations, rely on income from their residents for their very existence. NHC commissioned a report to offer a snapshot of some of the more innovative ventures emerging in the housing sector. It covers a range of activities by housing organisations to generate new sources of income.

## PAST CONSULTATION RESPONSES

- **Response to the A Respect Standard for Housing Management Consultation**

On 12 April ODPM announced the beginning of a consultation process aimed at implementing a standard that will act as a simple and clear summary of the critical factors that constitute an effective response to Anti-Social Behaviour. NHC has, in collaboration with members produced a response to the consultation, which it hopes will provide the DCLG with information from our members and in particular from the North East Anti-Social Behaviour Working Group that we facilitate.

- **Government review of housing and regeneration**

The Consortium aims in this response to provide the DCLG with information from our members that closely relates to the range of questions that will be considered in the review. The overall consensus is that there will be real benefits in a new agency evolving primarily through the merger of English

Partnerships and the Housing Corporation, although members would like re assurance that this will be carefully structured, planned and paced.

These responses can be found on the NHC website at: <http://www.northern-consortium.org.uk/consultation.htm#responseC>

## NATIONAL POLICY & FORTHCOMING DEVELOPMENTS

### GENERAL

#### ■ **New Inquiry: The Supply of Rented Housing**

The Housing, Planning, Local Government and the Regions Committee has resolved to carry out an inquiry into the supply of private and social rented housing, with particular reference to the following issues:

- The level of public funding required to meet social housing needs
- The relative funding priority being given to social rented housing as opposed to shared ownership
- The geographical distribution of subsidies for affordable housing
- The future role for local authorities as builders and managers of social housing
- The effectiveness of different social housing models including traditional local authority housing, ALMOs, housing co-operatives and housing associations
- The role and effectiveness of private rented housing in meeting housing needs
- The priorities and effectiveness of the Housing Corporation, English Partnerships and the Regional Housing Boards in responding to housing needs
- The role and effectiveness of the planning system, including section 106 agreements in the provision of rented housing
- The effectiveness of housing benefit as a means of providing access to rented housing to those in need.
- The impact of the operation of Council Tax Benefit on the affordability of rented housing

#### **Implications**

The Committee invites written evidence on the points above and other relevant topics by **Monday, 9 October 2006**. Witnesses who wish their evidence to be treated in confidence should contact the Committee clerk in advance. It should also be noted that decisions about who to call for oral evidence are likely to be taken on the basis of evidence received by this date.

## Useful Links

[http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary\\_committees/odpm.cfm](http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/odpm.cfm)

[hooki@parliament.uk](mailto:hooki@parliament.uk)

### ■ **National Older Peoples Housing Strategy**

The Social Exclusion Unit Report – A Sure Start to Later Life: Ending Inequalities for Older People, published in January 2006 examines how to tackle social exclusion in later life. Within the report is a pledge to develop a National Older Peoples Housing Strategy by 2006-07.

## Implications

DCLG will develop the strategy in partnership with the Department of Health (DH), Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) and external partners. The Sure Start to later life approach would use the same methods as the children's model to improve access, bringing together services around older people. It will take a comprehensive view of services that can empower older people and improve quality of life.

## Useful Links

<http://www.socialexclusionunit.gov.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=797>

### ■ **Home Information Pack activity accelerates**

Government has set out the next steps to help homebuyers with the announcement by Housing Minister, Yvette Cooper, of details of a dry-run prior to introducing Home Information Packs (HIPs) on 1 June 2007. HIPs will provide reliable information at the beginning of the homebuying process to help prevent buyers and sellers being misled by incomplete or inaccurate information when they put in or accept an offer. Currently £1million is wasted every day when sales fall through. The Government has said that all aspects of the Packs need to be tried and tested through a dry run before becoming mandatory on 1 June next year.

## Implications

This means sellers and buyers will not have to wait until June 2007 before they can benefit from packs immediately before implementation of the mandatory scheme in June. The approved schemes should begin to operate from October 2006, with qualified, certificated Home Inspectors able to register the Home Condition Report and deliver authorised reports to consumers.

## Useful Links

<http://www.odpm.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1002882&PressNoticeID=2140>

### ■ **Landlords urge action on Law Commission proposals**

Social landlords are urging the government to embrace Law Commission proposals to completely overhaul the relationship between landlords and tenants. The commission's long awaited report and draft bill recommending that the government sweeps away the myriad tenancy agreements and

replaces them with a new single contract for tenants was published in early May.

### **Implications**

The changes would affect almost a third of the population of England and Wales who rent their homes from social or private landlords. Tenants would be known as 'contract holders' under the plan and would be given a written contract. Housing association and council housing tenants would be given identical 'secure contracts' modelled on the local authority secure tenancy.

A second form of contract, based on the assured shorthold tenancy and allowing a length to be set, could be used in specific circumstances such as for key workers.

### **Useful Links**

<http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/article.aspx?articleid=1447575>

#### ■ **New guide to help housing workers tackle anti-social behaviour**

A new practical guide has been published to help housing workers, tenants and councillors work together to address the problems caused by anti-social behaviour. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Chartered Institute of Housing published the updated second edition of Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour Action Frameworks.

### **Implications**

The action frameworks outlined in the guide address the differing needs of policy makers and practitioners and can be used to improve strategic planning, staff development and training, for day-to-day reference and to improve working between staff and residents within an organisation.

### **Useful Links**

<http://www.24dash.com/content/news/viewNews.php?navID=1&newsID=4422>

#### ■ **New era for local authority Tenant Empowerment Programme**

The Housing Corporation has, since April 6<sup>th</sup> been responsible for the day-to-day management of the Tenant Empowerment Programme which allows council housing tenants to have a greater say in how their homes are managed.

### **Implications**

Under the programme (previously known as Section 16) tenants' groups can bid for grant funding. For example, grant is available to enable council tenants to work with an agency to explore issues of concern to tenants and look at how they could become involved in the management of their homes and estates. The programme also gives council tenants direct access to independent advice, training and information. TEP also funds tenant training

and capacity building which is open to both local authority and housing association tenants.

### **Useful Links**

<http://www.housingcorp.gov.uk/server/show/ConWebDoc.7473/changeNav/431>

#### ■ **Gypsies set to gain same status as council tenants**

Gypsies and travellers living on official sites in Durham look set to become the first in the country to be given the same tenancies as people living in council housing.

### **Implications**

The Durham scheme would effectively give gypsies and travellers the same status as council tenants. Existing licences would be dropped in favour of the tenancies. DCLG, which is carrying out a general review of provision, has been considering a similar idea after lobbying from gypsies and travellers. Officials said they would be looking with interest at Durham Council's proposals.

### **Useful Links**

<http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/article.aspx?articleid=1447503>

<http://www.communities.gov.uk/index.asp?id=1153489>

#### ■ **Protective pathfinders aim for city region funding deals**

Market renewal pathfinders are to press the government to create city region funding agreements in a bid to protect their budgets. The idea will be floated to officials at a working group set up to discuss the integration of local authority and pathfinder funding and programmes.

### **Implications**

Pathfinders were told that they would retain control of their funding in guidance on local area agreements issued at the start of April but the reassurance has failed to allay fears that their cash could go the way of the 26 funding streams the government announced would be pooled as part of the agreements.

### **Useful Links**

<http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/article.aspx?articleid=1447544>

#### ■ **Good neighbours to be rewarded in new housing policy**

Good neighbours are set to be rewarded in a northern council's new house allocation policy. City of York Council's new band-based policy has replaced the existing points-based approach to allocating housing.

### **Implications**

The system works by placing applicants in one of five bands of differing levels of priority, ranging from 'very urgent' to 'no priority'. Applications are assessed according to the applicant's circumstances and then placed in the highest band that their circumstances allow. Within each band, applicants are ranked in order of the date that their application was accepted. Housing allocations, as

well as nominations to housing associations, are made to the applicant in the highest band, who has been waiting the longest. Existing tenants who want to transfer to another property can apply to be 'good neighbours', which means that they will be given prior consideration for empty homes so long as they have not breached their tenancy agreement during the last three years

### Useful Links

<http://www.24dash.com/content/news/viewNews.php?navID=1&newsID=5314>

<http://www.york.gov.uk/>

### ■ **Flaws in leaseholder law may mean new legislation**

The government has indicated that new legislation could be introduced to fix flaws in leaseholder law. A panel set up by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister to try to ease relations between leaseholders and social landlords has been told further legislative reform is a possibility.

### Implications

The social sector leaseholder working party will draft a list of recommendations to DCLG ministers by January next year. The primary objective is said to be service charges. Peter Haler, chief executive of the Leasehold Advisory Service: "It is getting worse as the decent homes programme is starting to bite. Charges are absolutely through the roof."

### Useful Links

<http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/article.aspx?articleid=1447570>

### ■ **Council leaders set out bold reforms to devolve, deregulate and decentralise powers from Whitehall**

The boldest report ever published by the Local Government Association has set out a radical new vision for how power should be removed from Whitehall and put into the hands of local people, voluntary organisations and local councils.

### Implications

Key proposals in the report include:

- Slashing 1,000 targets to save taxpayers £2.5billion
- Giving councils extra powers including over transport, infrastructure, planning, economic development and skills
- A return of the local Business Rates with an inflation safeguard so they have freedom in raising revenue and setting their budgets
- The power for local people to hold NHS chief executives, police chiefs and council leaders to account if they consistently perform poorly
- Dedicated budgets for ward councillors to spend on local projects
- Greater 'postcode choice'
- Opposition to any proposals by central government to cut the number of councils or councillors

## Useful Links

<http://www.lga.gov.uk/PressRelease.asp?lSection=0&id=SX8459-A783A828>

### ▪ **Housing Corporation commits to significant de-regulation in housing association sector**

The Housing Corporation will meet all 48 of the recommendations directed to the organisation in the Elton Report within 12 months it has announced.

## Implications

It is anticipated that this will remove at least 10% from the cost of regulation for over 1,500 housing associations across England over the next 12 months alone. Top priorities for the Housing Corporation as a result include:

- Operating more clearly as the principal regulator for the sector
- Reducing the burden of requirement of validation of performance indicators
- Consulting on greater resident involvement and using its regulatory powers to ensure that all associations have an involvement policy in place, expecting 95% compliance by December 2006.
- Reducing the amount of information required in financial returns.

## Useful Links

<http://www.housingcorp.gov.uk/server/show/ConWebDoc.7778>

### ▪ **Welfare Reform Bill published**

On 4<sup>th</sup> July government published the Welfare Reform Bill (see link below). The reform seeks to reduce the number of people on Incapacity Benefit and sets out a framework to reform and improve the design and administration of Housing Benefit. This latter Benefit has obvious links to housing providers.

## Implications

40% of those on Incapacity Benefit have some form of mental health problem, which may cause concern for housing providers (especially supported housing and care providers) as they will need to ever more support people back into work, this will in turn help to maintain sustainable tenancies and communities and assist local economies by getting people back into work.

## Useful Links

<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/aboutus/welfarereform/>

### ▪ **Our health, our care, our community**

The Department of Health has published on 5<sup>th</sup> July Our Health, Our Care, Our Community: Investing in the Future of Community Hospitals and Services. This document expands on the Our Health, our care, our say commitment to develop a new generation of community hospitals and facilities, including the process for gaining access to capital funding and is to be used as both a guide and a resource to help develop a new generation of community hospitals and services that bring a wider range of care closer to people.

## Implications

This is likely to lead to extra funding provided to bring health closer to the community, helping to reach vulnerable groups and maintain sustainable healthy communities. This also points to a big move towards health, social care and housing working closer together.

## Useful Links

<http://www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/13/69/32/04136932.pdf>

# REGULATION & INSPECTION NEWS

## MEMBERS' INSPECTIONS

### ■ **Bolton MBC: Supporting People**

The delivery of the £9.2 million Supporting People programme provided by Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council is 'excellent' and has 'excellent prospects' to improve. More choice is being provided, service user involvement is imaginative, governance arrangements are inclusive and all legacy services have been reviewed ahead of schedule.

#### Link to the Report

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/BVIR.asp?CategoryID=ENGLISH^1628&ProdID=43275E63-7ECB-442c-9A7D-156709949228>

### ■ **Gateshead MBC: Supporting People**

The delivery of the £5.8 million Supporting People programme provided by Gateshead Metropolitan District Council is 'fair' and has 'promising prospects' to improve. Progress is reasonable; a greater range of services are being provided and 70 per cent of legacy services have been reviewed to ensure they meet quality standards.

#### Link to the Report

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/BVIR.asp?CategoryID=ENGLISH^1628&ProdID=6D68E120-F7CB-4f06-8E09-9DBC772B7123>

### ■ **Kingston upon Hull City Council: Repairs and maintenance re-inspection**

The repairs and maintenance service provided by Kingston upon Hull City Council is 'fair' but is 'uncertain' to improve, according to an independent report released today by the Audit Commission.

### **Link to the Report**

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/BVIR.asp?CategoryID=ENGLISH^576^LOCAL-VIEW^AUTHORITIES^104498&ProdID=9210ECDD-09B5-4ee7-BAE7-DA0185CCE0D9>

- **Kingston upon Hull City Council: Planning**

The planning service provided by Kingston upon Hull City Council is 'fair' and has 'promising prospects' for improvement, according to an independent report released today by the Audit Commission.

### **Link to the Report**

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/BVIR.asp?CategoryID=ENGLISH^576^LOCAL-VIEW^AUTHORITIES^104498&ProdID=1AF36231-915B-4dbd-9181-B79F336F0FE2>

- **North Tyneside MBC: Repairs and maintenance**

The repairs and maintenance service run by North Tyneside has been rated as 'fair', with 'uncertain prospects' for improvement. It has addressed some of the weaknesses identified in the 2002 inspection but the pace of change has been slow in many areas.

### **Link to the Report**

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/BVIR.asp?CategoryID=ENGLISH^1628&ProdID=57953C83-D58E-4a87-935B-B54E6E80BAA7>

- **North Tyneside MBC: Environment - planning and regeneration**

The planning and regeneration services provided by North Tyneside Council are 'good' with 'promising' prospects for improvement, according to an independent report released today by the Audit Commission.

### **Link to the Report**

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/BVIR.asp?CategoryID=&ProdID=97F94F55-6C08-4bd9-8856-8F4CB9F6A309&fromREPORTSANDDATA=TA=BVIR>

- **Sheffield City Council: Supporting People**

Sheffield Council's Supporting People programme is 'good' with 'excellent' prospects for improvement. The programme is well embedded in the Council and is focused on customer outcomes. There is a clear focus on the delivery of service improvements including greater choice and flexibility for customers, although user involvement is limited.

### **Link to the Report**

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/BVIR.asp?CategoryID=&ProdID=1AA332BD-C8AF-40ce-97A1-70B5EA01DAE5&fromREPORTSANDDATA=BVIR>

- **Coast and Country Housing Ltd**

The housing management and maintenance service provided by Coast and Country is a 'good', two stars, service. Significant investment has meet tenants' transfer promises and reduced the numbers of non-decent homes. It is developing a strong understanding of its customers and a value for money culture.

#### **Link to the Report**

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/BVIR.asp?CategoryID=ENGLISH^1628^LOCAL-VIEW^AUTHORITIES^4688&ProdID=901096DD-0AFA-43d4-93D6-DEA3944DD498>

#### ■ **Hanover Housing Association**

It is easy for Hanover's tenants to access a wide range of customer-focused services, communal areas on estates are well cared for and the housing stock is in good condition. Performance in income management, gas servicing, reletting empty properties and resident involvement is strong. However, the strategic approach to asset management, value for money and equalities and diversity are underdeveloped and responsive repairs does not represent value for money.

#### **Link to the Report**

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/BVIR.asp?CategoryID=ENGLISH^1628^LOCAL-VIEW^AUTHORITIES^4109&ProdID=718A2457-44D0-4ed6-A80C-A544F470F64A>

#### ■ **The Villages Housing Association Limited**

The housing service provided by Villages Housing is 'fair' and has 'uncertain prospects for improvement'. This is because there are strengths in its approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour cases, but arrangements to manage empty properties and collect rent arrears is weak.

#### **Link to the Report**

<http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/BVIR.asp?CategoryID=ENGLISH^1628&ProdID=B1C24EAD-175B-44b1-A0FA-A20AF275F87A>

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