



Communities and Local Government

Delivering Housing and Regeneration: Communities England and the future of social housing regulation

Northgate Information Solutions' response

September 2007

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Introduction

1. Northgate welcomes the opportunity to respond to the government's consultation 'Delivering housing and regeneration: Communities England and the future of social housing regulation.'
2. We wholeheartedly support the government's objective of creating mixed, sustainable and cohesive communities where people want to and can afford to live. The provision of social housing and ensuring that the existing stock is well managed and maintained are crucial to this. As too, is the need to provide a framework in which tenants' needs are met and in which they are empowered to engage and participate in service delivery and housing management.
3. Our response largely focuses on the needs to: ensure local partnerships have the ability to deliver regeneration and growth in collaboration with local communities; continuously promote sustainability and environmental responsibility at both a national and local level; and enhance social housing regulation in the interests of and to meet the practical needs of tenants.

The role of Community England

4. Whilst we welcome the establishment of Community England as a means of providing a more coherent approach to the delivery of housing and regeneration programmes, it is essential that the design of this body and investment decisions are responsive to the diverse needs of tenants and local communities. This will help to generate trust and confidence in the new public agency. As such, appropriate mechanisms need to be put in place to guarantee this.
5. To help strengthen the accountability of the new agency, we recommend that membership of the Board should include both representatives from local authorities and tenants.
6. There is also a need to ensure that there are appropriate forums for guaranteeing effective tenant involvement at a national and strategic level and it is recommended that Communities England be required to involve tenants in the development of its strategic programme.

The Academy for Sustainable Communities

7. It is envisaged that Communities England will take over a number of responsibilities from Communities and Local Government (CLG) including the Academy for Sustainable Communities. As the consultation points out, the Academy was established in response to the Egan Review of Skills for Sustainable Communities.
8. Whilst the Egan Review anticipated that the initial focus would be on developing the skills sets of the professions and bodies delivering more sustainable places, it also highlighted the need to build sustainable skills with associated occupations and with the wider public.

9. Our concern is that if Communities England were to take responsibility for the Academy, its wider public activities may become diluted, with increasing emphasis placed on the core professions and less attention to the need to work with a wider body of stakeholder groups. Significant work such as promoting sustainable communities, through curriculum development in schools, and building skills and capacity in local communities is in danger of being overlooked. For this reason, we believe that the Academy should not be incorporated into Communities England and that it should remain independent.

Social housing regulation

Strengthening social housing provision through collaboration and regulation

10. Social housing is of considerable importance in providing sustainable communities and in enabling low income households to access higher quality housing than they would be able to in the private sector.
11. Registered social landlords as providers of social housing are increasingly playing a wider role in contributing to place-shaping within their local community through, for example, the provision of employment training.
12. We support the strengthening of social housing provision in the interests of community well being. For the sector to thrive in the future it is our view that there needs to be an ambitious change programme involving a partnership between local providers, a new proactive regulator, central government and other relevant stakeholders. This should support a significant cultural shift towards tenant empowerment and involvement and encourages new and innovative forms of working in collaboration between the social housing sector, public sector and private sector to deliver improved and enhanced tenant-based services.
13. Both our own experience in working in partnership with small, medium-sized and larger registered social landlords and extensive research carried out throughout the sector show that social housing tenants continue to have relatively high levels of dissatisfaction with their landlords. At the same time, some social landlords are under extreme financial pressure to provide services within the context of making cashable and non-cashable efficiency gains. But as the Cave review recognises, the use of sub-market rents limits tenant choice gives limited incentives to landlords to provide good management.
14. If social housing is to become the housing of choice for groups of citizens, there needs to be a significant shift, as government recognises, toward tenant involvement and participation. This, in turn, requires new forms of leadership, management and collaboration which encourage inclusion and the engagement of tenants in shaping and delivering services that meet their needs.
15. Effective delivery is based on establishing an open learning environment where people can experiment with new ideas, learn from chance experiences, assess individual needs, share information and reach conclusions from all these experiences to drive through a programme of continuous improvement and create social value within the social housing sector.

16. Social housing regulation is therefore essential not only to protect tenants but to improve standards of housing and to support effective and efficient housing management throughout the sector.
17. The new regulatory regime needs to be comprehensive, consistent, clear, accessible and accountable to citizens and local communities

The independent social housing regulator

18. We welcome the government's decision to establish an independent social housing regulator whose statutory objectives would include promoting empowerment of and exercise of choice by tenants.
19. We agree too that the broader neighbourhood functions described above in paragraph 11 should not be controlled by the regulator and that all providers should have a duty to engage constructively with local authorities in their place-shaping function.
20. For the regulator to operate effectively, providers should be statutorily required to provide information to the regulator. The Cave review highlights the kind of information that should be required including including:
 - level of tenant satisfaction, tenant involvement and choice
 - the standard of housing and service provided
 - financial projections (for housing associations only)
 - average operating costs
 - rents
21. We recommend that government supports the provision of all such information outlined in paragraph 19 above.
22. We also agree with Cave that the new regime should enable tenants to make informed choice. We recommend that all providers should establish formal arrangements to:
 - enable tenants to make periodic assessments of the quality of services provided
 - share benchmarking information about their performance and costs with other providers and publish this information to tenants more widely
 - include an independent element in their performance assessment so that there is effective external challenge
23. We also welcome the fact that complaints will be used as a means to trigger interventions by the regulator.
24. Our view is that for the sector to thrive, there needs to be an ambitious change programme put in place which requires a significant cultural shift towards tenant empowerment and involvement and one which encourages new and innovative forms of working in collaboration not only between the social housing sector, public sector and private sector.

Location

25. Location and the regulation of different providers should comply with the principles outlined in paragraph 17. We agree wholeheartedly with the Cave Review that the regulatory regime should be co-regulatory with providers carrying out many of the necessary duties to comply.

26. We are concerned that location within the Audit Commission may result in a dilution of this requirement so that the emphasis on regulation becomes more concerned with inspection than with promotion of tenant empowerment. For this reason we believe there is a strong case for a new stand alone housing regulator.

Regulation of different providers

27. We are concerned that the current silo approach in which local authority housing is treated separately from that of registered social landlords or for profit providers does not necessarily comply with the needs for tenants to have a simple and comprehensive system with equivalent outcome, irrespective of where their social tenancy lies.

28. In the long term, we believe that there is a strong case for local authority owned housing and ALMO housing falling ultimately within the remit of the new regulator.

About Northgate

Northgate is a technology services company with a difference. It is committed to high quality public services and understands the public sector. That knowledge is core to its business. Northgate's task is to enhance public sector value through the intelligent use of people and information technology systems and to share in the economic and social benefits that this brings.

Northgate assists the public sector to promote community well-being by helping them provide citizens with accessible and responsive one-stop services based on clear and detailed information; by engaging with public sector employees to transfer and enhance skills; and by working with public sector management to enhance performance management. In housing, Northgate works with over ninety clients assisting them in the management of over three million local authority and housing association properties worldwide.

Further information

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