

# The Thames Gateway



Gordon Brown: the government will confront politicians who slow down progress on the Thames Gateway

## Plea to break silence on Scottish targets

The Scottish Government urgently needs to set a target for affordable housing provision after glossing over the issue in the recent spending review, housing organisations have said.

The government broke with tradition by failing to provide a target for affordable housing. Its recent housing green paper set a target for 35,000 new homes per year by 2015. But its spending review gave no indication of how many of these should be affordable.

The omission prompted Alastair Cameron, chief executive of Scottish Churches Housing Action, to write to communities minister Stewart Maxwell last week, asking him to come clean about how many new affordable homes he wants.

'Without some clarity on the government's view on this issue, it will be difficult to have a sensible debate over the merits or otherwise of the figure of 30,000 over a three-year period, that is advocated by ourselves, Shelter, the Scottish Federation of Housing Associations, the Chartered Institute and the Scottish Council for Single Homeless,' he wrote.

CIH Scotland policy leader Nick Fletcher said the government's silence on the issue could hold back delivery. 'Normally, when they set the budget in the past, they've said how many affordable homes should be part of the programme,' he said. 'We need some kind of benchmark figure to give us an indication of what the government expects with the level of funding that we've got.'

A Scottish Government spokesperson said the reforms set out in its recent green paper would deliver more affordable homes than those planned under the last spending round.

## Prime minister backs maligned Thames Gateway

The prime minister threw his weight behind the much-criticised Thames Gateway programme as he launched the long-awaited delivery plan for the growth area.

Gordon Brown said that economic growth and a corresponding increase in job opportunities would inevitably 'create demand for more homes'.

The performance of the programme so far has been criticised in reports by the National Audit Office and the Committee of Public Accounts.

But in a speech to the Thames Gateway forum, Mr Brown said he supported the

Communities and Local Government department's plans to build 160,000 new homes for the Gateway by 2016.

And the government would confront any politicians who attempted to slow down progress, he said.

'I can tell you today that we are prepared to take on those politicians who say "yes, more homes, but nowhere near me",' he said.

'What is happening in the Thames Gateway is only part of a wider story on housing where the government is determined to do more to meet the rising aspirations of the British people for better

and more affordable homes.'

A total of 80 per cent of the planned homes would be built on brownfield sites and up to one quarter of these are expected to be affordable.

Mr Brown pledged a legacy of 1,200 affordable homes from the Olympic athletes' village in east London.

This legacy will include shared equity packages for first-time buyers and key workers.

An Institute for Sustainability would be set up to lead efforts to apply new green standards to housing design, he added.

New social rented housing could be thing of the past as products become 'interchangeable'

## Mayor fights blurred boundaries

Martin Hilditch

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New socially rented housing could become a thing of the past because of a controversial clause in the Housing and Regeneration Bill, the government has been warned.

London mayor Ken Livingstone is lobbying the Communities and Local Government department because he is worried a clause in the bill will allow low-cost homeownership housing to count as social rented.

Local authorities would be given a licence to cut social housing from new developments in favour of shared ownership or discounted market rent.

Alan Benson, the mayor's head of housing and homelessness, said clarification was needed to stop rogue

councils or developers abusing the system.

He told members of the All-Party Urban Development Group this week that he was concerned that the government was 'merging together the intermediate products and social rented products as if they are interchangeable'.

The mayor's office was concerned that councils were already attempting to blur the boundaries between homeownership and social rented homes, he added.

The new clause would make it 'easy' for local authorities to 'encourage much more shared ownership and not social rented' housing, he said.

'Boroughs can turn round and say "it is all social housing",' he told *Inside Housing* after the meeting.

'It is primary legislation that statutorily defines social housing. I would be stunned if some developer or local authority

doesn't do it. It would be an unfortunate consequence.'

Mr Benson said there was also concern that the bill did not include a requirement for the Homes and Communities Agency to pay heed to the mayor's housing strategy.

'The Housing Corporation must deliver a programme and have regard to the mayor's housing strategy,' he said. 'That is not written in as yet to the bill for the new Homes and Communities Agency. We would like to see the agency committed to delivering those targets in the London Plan and the mayor's housing strategy.'

The agency should also take responsibility for delivery in the Thames Gateway so that there would be a 'single agency in London', he added. The call comes just weeks after the Committee of Public Accounts called for the CLG to hand

over operational management of the programme.

Eamonn Boylan, deputy chief executive of Manchester Council, said he had concerns about whether the new local housing companies, proposed in the housing green paper, were strictly necessary.

'The creation of a new institution in itself could be a time-consuming business,' he said. 'There is a need for us to be very, very clear about the outcomes we are seeking to deliver.'

Steve Douglas, acting chief executive of the corporation, told the group that it was seeking to create a more level playing field between housing associations, arm's-length management organisations and councils. This would include a requirement for housing associations to gain two stars in their inspections before they could bid for social housing grant.