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Opinion

## insidehousing

# Hitting frontline not the best way to secure services

Nobody chooses a career in housing for the money. But you probably wouldn't expect to take a pay cut once you were in post either. Yet that's the prospect facing some housing support staff as cuts to the Supporting People budget begin to bite. Other providers are looking at slashing what they offer new recruits.

It's a terrible position for employee and employer alike. Pay may not be the main motivator for those working in supported housing, but staff doing demanding jobs should be fairly rewarded.

And employers know that lower pay or longer hours are not the best way to build the quality services they are striving for. But many providers fear that unless they look at pay and conditions, they will have to close services.

It's ironic that this dilemma has come to light

in the week that the government's own report on Supporting People suggested that the programme is much more cost-effective than alternative methods of support. Supporting vulnerable groups through SP brings a net benefit of £2.77 billion a year, the report says.

Without Supporting People, more tenancies would fail, more people would be homeless and the cost of health services and crime would be likely to spiral. Yet the government is to go ahead with significant funding cuts over the next few years. As Crisis put it, it's like giving the star pupil a straight As report – and then expelling them.

Providing high quality housing and support for the most vulnerable people is the hallmark of a civilised society. Ministers should be in no doubt that hitting the people who deliver those services in the pocket will not help them achieve that.

## Comment Role of stock retaining authorities goes unnoticed

# Missed opportunities

### John Bibby

Conversations with colleagues in other councils that own and manage housing tell me I am not the only one left somewhat disappointed and confused by the Housing and Regeneration Bill.

The green paper gave us hope of a future in which local authorities might play a stronger, more positive role in responding to the national housing crisis. Government recognition of the chronic shortage of affordable housing is long overdue. But the bill that is currently making its way through Parliament provides neither a practical strategy for responding to that crisis, nor clarification of the role of local authorities in meeting targets for 3 million extra homes.

Those authorities whose tenants have voted for the council to be their landlord provide some 800,000 homes collectively. The Association of Retained Council Housing was set up to enable local authorities of all political colours, that own or manage properties, to come together to campaign for a fair deal for all our residents, and demonstrate the benefits of retained stock in contributing to a broad range of national and local priorities.

ARCH wants to see a fairer, clearer funding system that will allow councils to

provide affordable homes in sustainable communities. It is not at all evident how this will be achieved under the bill as it stands. While this is enabling legislation and much of the meat will be in guidance to follow, clarification is required as a matter of urgency on a number of issues.

Most importantly, the bill does not give us confidence that the housing finance system is being reformed and simplified as promised. Proposals appear limited to an ability to opt out of the housing revenue account rather than the overhaul that is necessary if councils are to build more affordable homes within the HRA.

Stock retained authorities taking part in HRA 'self-financing' pilots will shed light on its implications, but ministers need to recognise that 100-plus councils that own and manage housing are all in very different financial positions. There is concern among ARCH members as to whether it will be possible to use existing stock as an asset to draw in resources to build within the HRA. Without such resources new council housing is unlikely. Local housing companies are being offered as a model to step up the pace of delivery, but they require councils to contribute their land and, again, there are vast variations in their ability to do so.

Given the appropriate framework,

retained stock authorities could play a crucial part in providing housing for many people who are struggling to afford it – and not just the worst off. So long as it works closely with councils and local partners to address local needs, bringing housing and regeneration together under the Homes and Communities Agency makes sense. Councils with retained stock are ideally placed to respond to this holistic agenda, as both strategic 'place-shapers' under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and as providers of housing and other services in local communities.

The bill as it stands is a sadly missed opportunity for local government to maximise its contribution to meeting the desperate need for affordable homes in sustainable, mixed-income communities. We welcome the government's commitment to increasing the supply of housing, but will be pressing for consideration of the potential of stock retained authorities to be properly recognised in achieving this and for the views of their residents to be taken on board.

● **John Bibby is director of housing and community services at Lincoln Council and secretary of the Association of Retained Council Housing**