

HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Transcript of interview with Grant Shapps MP, Shadow Housing Minister for the Conservative Party.

1. What are you going to do to stop homelessness and is your party committed to ending rough sleeping by 2012?

Yes, we're very supportive of the idea of ending rough sleeping by 2012 and people like Boris Johnson, Mayor of London, has made that commitment as well and we're supporting him in that. Of course, a lot of rough sleeping takes places in London so that [Boris' commitment] is very helpful and we're encouraging other civic leaders to back the target, where we run the authorities for example.

If David Cameron is elected to Downing Street he has said that we will have somebody with homelessness as a line responsibility in their ministerial brief in each of the six departments; obviously CLG for housing but, beyond that, health, education, the MoD for returning Armed Forces, and then Justice and the Home Office.

We think this is really important. One thing I've discovered from setting up the Conservative Homelessness Foundation, chaired of course by Jenny [Edwards], is that to solve homelessness you've got to solve lots of different problems and you cannot do it unless Government is working together.

One of the other things I want to do is get an honest street count because the Government says there are 462 rough sleepers in the country but anyone who knows anything about this subject knows that this is not true... I was up in Wellingborough last week with our candidate there, Peter Bone, and he introduced me to a guy called Mark Lees who got involved in his local authority, just volunteering and going along to the homelessness meetings that the officers were holding, in an area where the Government were saying there is zero street homelessness... He got so fed up of the conversation which was really all about the waiting lists, basically, and statutory homelessness, rather than the fact that he knew there was someone sleeping on a park bench, that he actually went away and said, 'right, I'm going to set up a hostel'. Amazingly, with a faith based group in a church, he's actually set up a homeless hostel and, low and behold, there are homeless people that are not counted by the Government's current system. They have four hostel beds and a daytime café and it turns out that, actually, they're doing loads of good work and there is a constant issue there and that whatever the homeless count is – it isn't zero.

If we are the Government we pledge to have an honest street count and we'll work out how to get to a number which is actually accurate or more accurate, as you'll never get completely there, but is more accurate because I think that unless you recognise the actual scale of the problem then you can't truly tackle homelessness.

Question 1 was developed from suggestions by services users from Youth Voice & Oxford Pathways and the following projects – Stonham, Thamesreach, Keyhouse & Housing Link.

2. The Supporting People and Places of Change Programmes have transformed the quality and effectiveness of services for homeless and vulnerable people. In view of the tight financial constraints facing government, how will you make sure that funding to support the most vulnerable and excluded, who do not have a statutory right to services, is protected?

Well I think it is incredibly important because money clearly is going to be tight and yet the problems won't have gone away. In fact, recession means that the problems are likely to stick around for longer, perhaps be more extreme and it may well be, and I am concerned that we may not have seen the worst elements of homelessness as a result of the economic downturn... Not until, for example, mortgage rates start to rise and people get into more debt because of any borrowings they have unsecured, that might then force people into homelessness.

You've got all of those things and then, of course, people who don't statutory fit as homeless, and I meet people all of the time who in any kind of obvious description of the word homeless - you would say are homeless, but because they are a man, because they don't have dependents, because of their personal situation; they're not considered to be statutory homeless.

So yes we think it's really important... things like Supporting People and Places of Change have been very important programmes and we'll do everything we can to make sure that funds are going to the frontlines... We'll do that by cutting bureaucracy behind the scenes and that will be a distinctive part of our approach.

Question 2 was suggested by Thamesreach & Framework. The following organisations also raised concerns about the impact of removal of Supporting People ring-fenced funding, the proposed cuts on meeting the needs of the most socially excluded and safeguarding services and support for homeless people: HACCC, Staff and service users, Petrus, The Wellspring, DASH, St Petrock's, Youth Voice, Keyhouse & Stonham.

3. What are your plans to increase the availability of affordable housing and to make better use of existing accommodation, in particular, bringing more empty homes into use and ensuring the private rented sector is appropriate and secure for vulnerable people?

First of all I believe we need more affordable housing, actually I believe we need more of all types of housing in this country; we've got the lowest house building since 1924 in peacetime and there have been only about half as many affordable homes built on average every year over the last thirteen years than there were under the previous Conservative administrations. So, the affordable housing track record has been very bad and that, of course, is a problem in the homelessness sector because you've got to have places for people to move... Even though the number of hostel places has been available by large, actually where people then move on to - move-on accommodation and affordable housing - has been a real sticking point.

So, it's important that we turn this around and the first thing is that we'll build more of all types of housing and more affordable housing in particular. We've got a whole range of different ways to do this, in fact we want to change the whole planning system in order to get more homes built and ensure that locals benefit when house building takes place and, in doing so, create more housing. So, there's all that type of thing but we also want to do a range of different things to make sure that life is easier for people in the rented sector, the private rented sector... There's a restriction of supply at the moment that I know, talking to lots of

homelessness charities, is causing an issue in placing people. So we'll, for example, make local housing allowance more flexible and ensure that the money can be paid direct to the landlord just by checking a box rather than this business, at the moment, where it has to go through the tenant and then landlords get nervous that they won't be paid; that's restricting supply in the private rented sector. So, that's another change which is in our housing programme.

There are lots and lots of different areas here - the Empty Homes property rescue initiative which I launched with David Cameron, which is our version of taking nearly one million empty homes across the UK and getting them into use... It involves taking a decision and saying look, we think you can relax slightly the space standards, for example, or even the environmental standards for the short-term whilst we have all of these empty properties and try to deal with the 1.8 millions families on the housing waiting lists or at least some of them by being a little bit more flexible, in the short-term, on short-term contracts.

Question 3 was developed from suggestions by Webber Street Day Centre, Oxford Pathways Service users, Stonham, Petrus & DASH.

4. Homelessness is a multi-faceted issue with many homeless people having multiple and complex need, for example mental health and substance misuse problems, involvement in offending, poor physical health, etc. What vision does your party have for the homeless in dealing with their complex multiple needs and what are your plans for ensuring a coordinated approach to addressing these issues across Government departments?

I absolutely agree with the direction of this question, it's what I've most learnt in setting up the Conservative Homelessness Foundation - in writing and authoring seven of eight reports on the subject - that actually it doesn't matter which direction you look in, there is always another area of Government or another personal behaviour involved... I'm yet to meet somebody who's homeless who hasn't had some sort of chaos go on in their life, whether it's a relationship breakdown, financial, health issues and all sorts of other things so I think it's enormously important that we connect this altogether and that is why I've lobbied David Cameron and he has agreed and, this is really exceptional, there is no other area of policy where we've said that we think this is so important that we're going to have this mentioned as a line brief in ministerial responsibilities. By doing so it will help to bring this all together and the housing minister in a future Conservative Government would be able to sit down around a table with ministers from all of these other departments and discuss problems with poor outcomes, physical issues, mental health issues ...etc. And that won't be done as it is at the moment by the civil service, it'll be done with the ministers directing the civil service. So, we really hope that it can make a huge difference and take us to the next level of progress when it comes to homelessness.

Question 4 was developed from suggestions by St Mungo's, Housing Link & The Pillion Trust (service users & staff).

5. Many people end up homeless because they try to work, get confused about the complexities of housing and other benefits then get into rent arrears and are evicted. Also if they do work they may not be able to afford the rent. This is particularly difficult for those who are in and out of temporary work. What can you do to simplify and make the benefit system, including housing benefit, easier for people who want to work?

This is really the crux of the issue, the tax and benefit system now is so complex that it's almost impossible for people to navigate their way around without an expert sitting there... It's changing all of the time so we want to simplify the tax and benefit system.

We want to ensure that when you work, if you are able to work, it always pays to work. I never forget that quite early on as Shadow Housing Minister, I happened to visit Hastings and I went to see a young people's hostel for homeless kids, seventeen and eighteen [years old], and talking to a lad there who was saying that, for him, he was £70 worse off for working but just couldn't stand not to work. It's amazing, a heart-breaking story actually, so we're going to take the whole of the tax and benefit system, simplify it and make sure these cut offs are less rigid because sometimes you only have to work a bit more than a certain amount, 16 hours or whatever it happens to be in your case, and you're dramatically worse off. It should be more of a smoother scale and Iain Duncan Smith with the Centre for Social Justice has done enormous amounts of work on this... He points out that the problem with the tax and benefit system, as it stands at the moment, is that the Treasury only models the bit that it works with directly, which is the tax credits and taxation. It doesn't take into effect the tax effect on somebody or the benefit effect on somebody from all of those other things that don't happen to come through its department. So, for example, housing benefit or local housing allowance isn't modelled into the Treasury's view of somebody's welfare because that actually comes from the Department of Work and Pensions. So, he [Iain] has taken the time and effort to model the whole of Government and we will rely on some of that work, that's come out of these systems, which will mean that things are easier for people, people who work benefit and, most of all, we'll simplify the system.

It shouldn't require, as an MP, when people have come to me about this in the past I've had no choice but to refer people to Job Centre Plus or the C.A.B because it's just too complicated to keep up with it. It should be understandable; you should know that if you work you get this and if you don't you get this and if you're looking for work you get that. It shouldn't be as complex as it is, so, a Conservative Government will aim to simplify this a great deal.

Question 5 was suggested by Self Help Supported Housing but the following organisations also raised issues about benefits and barriers to employment for homeless people: Ferry Project & Hope Social Enterprises, HACC, Thamesreach, Humbercare & St Mungo's.

6. What are your plans to tackle the increasing numbers of destitute people from Central and Eastern Europe on the streets of the UK and what could be done at a European level to address the challenges in relation to internal EU migration?

Well, first of all I think there's a lesson to be learnt from the A8, which was sort of learnt a bit with the A2, and we need to improve this again when other countries join the European Union. Unrestricted travel from day one leaves people to quite literally think that they can come to the UK, often to London, and think that the streets will be paved with gold and, as we know from our work in homelessness, this is so often not the case and people end up in very destitute situations.

Actually, because government funding through homelessness organisations doesn't go to help A10's and the future countries that come in you end up in a double dip, if you like, of the additional problem of no state help as well. Now, I think what we need to do is go to these countries and educate people before they come here and then when people do come here and we do pick them up from destitute sorts of situations, the most important thing from their welfare point of view as well as to send a strong signal to not actually come to the UK to do that, is to return them straight away.

So, this does need active intervention from government. If we become the government we'll work very closely - this tends to be a very London centric issue, though not entirely - with the local authorities and, in particular, with Boris Johnson. I've already had talks about this with Boris and his housing person, Richard Blakeway, and we intend to have a very active stance towards it because I think that if you leave it and try to ignore it, which is what I think is what happened at first where there was no proper response in place, it's got better now but nonetheless I think that if you leave it, the problem escalates. So, when new countries join [the EU] in future we'll have a really active attitude and we will, I think, have to work really hard alongside Homeless Link and all of the other charities and organisations to make sure that we tackle the problem absolutely head on and try to reduce numbers and spend as much time as possible in educating people not to travel in the first place unless they have a job to come to.

Question 6 was suggested by Barka UK & Webber Street Day Centre but the issue was also raised by The Passage.

7. What sort of animal would you be if you had to be homeless and why?

I thought long and hard about this and I've come to the conclusion that it would be an animal that hibernates because I spent just one night sleeping rough on Christmas Eve 2007, in Victoria, and it was cold, it was wet and it was miserable... and I didn't have to pick up my wet sleeping bag and find a way to dry it out in order to sleep in it the next night because, fortunately for me, I was just getting a taster as to what it would be like to sleep rough. I think that if I were an animal and homeless, I'd want to be hibernating through that very long and cold winter.

But, ideally I don't think that people should be compared with animals [chuckles] and I believe that ending homelessness is a sort of mark of how civilised you are as a society and if we are to be a civilised 21st century society we shouldn't have, under any circumstances, people living on the streets... It's just an inappropriate way for people to live and I know that there will always be times when a relationship breaks down and someone walks out and quite literally sleeps on the street but I do pay huge tribute to all of the different organisations involved in homelessness, many of whom I've got to know very well over this past few years, for the work that they do.

There's no doubt that we're getting better at this as a country and that's as a result of the huge number of people who are improving the situation, little by little, day by day. So, I'd rather not be any kind of animal and I'd rather everybody had somewhere decent to call home.

Question 7 was suggested by service users at Oxford Pathways.