

A YOUNG MAN IN A HURRY

Come the summer, Grant Shapps is probably going to be in charge of housing policy. And he's got an awful lot of policy to get through, from a root-and-branch rethink of planning to a radical overhaul of the HCA. **Joey Gardiner** asked the questions, **Tim Foster** took the photos

Grant Shapps is in a little bit of a flap when we meet. He's running 15 minutes late for the 45 minutes we've scheduled, and hasn't booked a room for the photography. "I'm sorry," he says, "and I'm afraid I really can't stay any later because I've got shadow Cabinet." As we rush outside to grab photos before the light goes – I punt questions as he gamely tries not to shiver in the cold – it quickly becomes clear that his life is a constant flurry of activity. He talks and moves quickly, doling out practised charm with efficiency. Somehow during our brief half hour, he takes three phone calls and checks a dozen emails on his BlackBerry. Not a second, it seems, is idle. Never was the old cliché of minister in a hurry more apt – except for the fact, of course, he isn't a minister. Not yet.

But by June, he probably will be. And while you can't question his energy, many question his policies. Barring disaster, the Tories will

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If elected, the Tories would abolish the regional spatial strategies that set housing numbers and instead allow councils to decide how much housing they need. To incentivise growth, councils would receive a grant equivalent to council tax for six years for each home produced, in addition to allowing the council to keep all of the council tax revenue from the home in the first place.

For affordable homes they would give a multiple of 1.25 times council tax for the same period. Currently councils often suffer financial penalties for allowing development.

next week lay out the final piece in their housing policy puzzle: a planning green paper. At the centre of this will be proposals to sweep away regional housing targets and allow councils to choose how many homes they build.

Many housebuilders think this policy, coming from a man who is waging campaigns against new homes and a planned incinerator in his constituency, doesn't spell a rosy future. But Shapps says he is a passionate advocate for constructing more homes, and that the financial incentives the Tories would introduce (see box, below) would see previously Nimbby councils falling over themselves to build.

Nevertheless the industry's view is pretty much summed up by a remark by one guest overheard after Shapps' speech at the NHBC's annual lunch last autumn: "You can't doubt his sincerity that his plan will work. But he's barking mad, of course." So what exactly are his plans and how does he defend himself from this charge?

Shapps certainly thinks that view is unfair, and comes from a failure to see his policies in the round. There is more to it, he says, than the abolition of housing targets and the introduction of financial incentives. Alongside this, he wants to bring a presumption in favour of development in to the planning system, which would be achieved through secondary legislation. This means that unless a local authority has specific reasons why a planning application shouldn't be approved, such as it sitting in

an area identified in the local plan as not for development, it will have to approve it. He says: "Unless a council has written in its plan 'we won't have any building here', having carried out a proper assessment of the needs, there will be a presumption in favour. It seems to me we've had a situation whereby planning's been difficult to obtain and it's been the locals who are stopping you. We're proposing a situation whereby planning's easier to obtain because we've helped get the locals on side."

This move would also mean councils would have to finalise their plans quickly to avoid a development free-for-all, and wouldn't be able to block development through inaction.

Local plans would be stripped down to make them easier for councils to complete.

Planning is not the only area Shapps wants to focus on. He promises that the final technical details of the Code for Sustainable Homes would be settled in the first few weeks of a Tory administration, giving builders certainty about what standards they have to build to. The government's Lifetime Homes standard would not be compulsory, and Hips would be abolished. Shadow chancellor George Osborne has promised that first-time buyers would be exempt from stamp duty on purchases of up to £250,000.

While describing his plans for the future, Shapps is also quick to point out the failures of the Labour administration, under which the time taken to get planning permission has rocketed to 15 months, according to the Home Builders Federation (HBF), and fewer social homes have been built each year than when Margaret Thatcher was in power – and

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this was even before the recession. Addressing the industry he says: "We recognise that you guys have had a tough time. I can't remember a time when a party in opposition was offering the building world so much, for so little in return."

Unfortunately this is still a statement that makes most housebuilders choke on their cornflakes. Former housing minister Nick Raynsford last month hit out at Shapps' "unaffordable" plans, branding them "completely non-credible" because the Treasury would not be able to afford them. Shapps hits back: "His job is to rubbish our proposals. My challenge to him and to Labour is that how come after 13 years we're in the mess that we're in? They obviously haven't had the answers up until now. Things have gone horribly wrong, and it's a bit rich taking lessons from those people."

One of the HBF's principal concerns is over what will happen in the interim, while the new system is bedding down, as they say shire authorities are already putting planning on hold in anticipation of the