

## My housing career: Peter Marsh

The deputy principal of Fareham College in Hampshire and former chief executive of the Tenant Services Authority (TSA) looks back on an action-packed career in housing. Just don't mention the name Grant Shapps.



### Good times...

#### 1 Helping to secure, along with CLG and many others (from Shelter to the CIH), one of the best ever affordable housing settlements in the 2008 CSR.

The government was funding, through the Housing Corporation, 50,000 affordable homes a year. They were really affordable homes at that. The economics of building affordable homes – in jobs created, housing benefit saved and lives enriched – stacks up under any analysis.

2 Working with tenants, landlords, trade bodies and lenders to create a set of standards that we could all buy into. I'm proud that we took some risks at the TSA in how we held that National Conversation and I was humbled by the passion and gusto that so many people put into the debate.

Suitcases full of questionnaires were sent to us from tenants in some housing associations. Building consensus takes time, patience and tenacity. Whether all the consumer standards were right and could have helped to raise the standard of service for tenants we'll now never know – but we gave it our very best shot.

3 In 2003 I ran the square mile run for Crisis and was gobsmacked to win a trip to New York for raising

the most money that year. I very nearly missed the plane because I left my passport at home.

After that trip I planned a massive adventure and in 2010 and 2011, I completed a staged sail around Great Britain; raising £13,000 for Crisis, Homeless International and the RNLI.

4 As part of my role at City & Islington College (2000-05) and now at Fareham College, I've developed ambitious property strategies that have delivered 50,000 sq. metres of new and refurbished buildings.

To fund these schemes I've helped secure planning permission for 470 homes that otherwise would not have been built. The sense of reward from such tangible delivery is hard to beat.

5 I'm now chair of the development committee at Richmond Housing Partnership. This is an organisation that believes and strives to deliver some of the best customer service in the UK. Forget other housing providers – we have our sights on John Lewis. We demonstrate that great service saves money as we are a lower quartile operating cost provider with high levels of very satisfied customers. In terms of development, from a standing start, we will build 500 new homes in our part of London in five years.

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## Bad times...

**1** At the depths of the credit crunch it suddenly became clear that all the fancy hedging devices entered into to insulate HAs from sudden shifts in interest rates could be called in if rates plummeted.

I can probably say now that there was a couple of large associations that were as close to insolvency at that time as it's possible to be. As the regulator we put in a huge effort to establish the scale of the risk and sort the problem – through quiet diplomacy and the occasional 'strong arming' – so that not a single tenant's home was left at risk.

**2** Learning that the National Tenant Voice had been closed down almost instantly in June 2010 with no acknowledgement of the huge amounts of effort that had gone into creating an organisation with parity of recognition with the professional and trade bodies.

The local tenant panels that were meant to replace the NTV have been patchy to non-existent, and we've reverted to a world where those that care do listen to their tenants, and those that don't care simply don't.

**3** Sitting in the audience at a conference in 2010 in Birmingham listening to the then shadow housing minister say that if he became housing minister the TSA would be "toast".

When I met Grant Shapps a few weeks earlier he didn't really want to listen to what we had to say and was far more interested in filling in a form detailing



The TSA's National Conversation



Grant Shapps 'toasts' the TSA

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the numbers of staff, offices and 'fat cat' salaries like some crazed teenager who was set on winning the then shadow cabinet's game of quango Top Trumps.

**4** Seeing firsthand how the affordable housing viability test for new development has been used as a charter to kill off or reduce the number of affordable homes built on private development sites.

The game goes like this: secure planning for 40% affordable in 2009; appoint Deloitte or similar to do a scheme appraisal in 2014; and then show how despite a rising market the scheme is simply not viable with any affordable housing at all.

Many in the sector consider these appraisals something of a joke. Nationally, they are costing us over £1 billion in lost supply. Locally in Winchester we've just lost 100 homes this way in a city scheme which was granted planning consent on 11 December. Best of all: CLG lets the council get away with keeping the valuation private and confidential – arm chair auditors? We'd like even half a chance, Mr Pickles.

Strong authorities are holding their nerve and developers are choosing to comply at 40% rather than walk away.

**5** Back in 1992, living in an upper Tyneside flat and watching my neighbour's windows blow out with a fire bomb. Our boiler was stolen the following week so we decided it was time to move out. ■