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© housing targets being abolished. Shapps' plan is to simply make the changes quickly through ministerial directive to minimise any hiatus. He says: "Sadly I think the great hiatus has already happened, with fewer than 100,000 homes being built this year, and maybe this is a good moment to switch systems because you've got a lull to do it. Actually, I think you'll find a very quick

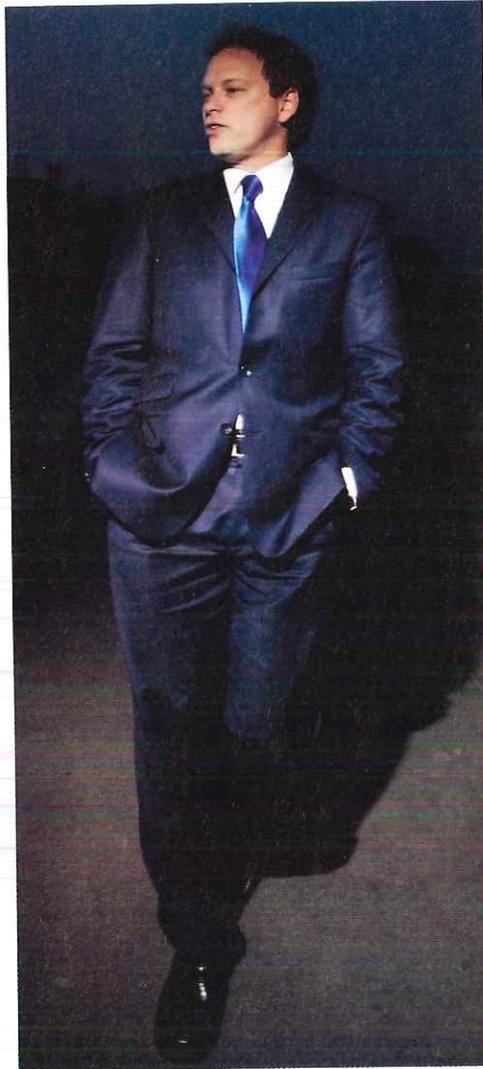
uptake. Much of this doesn't require primary legislation, so we can get this moving and start to affect behaviour straight away."

He rejects the concern that housing opposition won't just evaporate with promises of funding. The shires, he says, will come round once they realise what's in it for them – including his own constituency, Welwyn and Hatfield. He says: "The Home Counties, the shire counties – like mine – with these incentives in place, will probably quite happily go about building thousands of homes. It is the joining up of this policy [incentives with abolition of regional plans] that will make such a difference."

An early Cameron

Grammar school educated in Watford, Shapps is the epitome of the revitalised Conservative party. Young, slick and posh, with a talent for making public speeches without notes, he prompts obvious comparisons with David Cameron – although he looks more like Tony Blair. A private businessman and former long-standing Friends of the Earth member, he describes his politics as economically conservative and socially liberal. "Socially, I was probably on the pinkish side of the party, but the whole party has moved. I was probably Cameron before I knew of Cameron."

This socially liberal side seems to inform his attitude to housing policy, including the commitment to build more homes. "I grew up under Thatcher, so economically I knew what



SHAPPS IN BRIEF

Born Hertfordshire, 1968

Educated Watford Grammar school, then read business and finance at Manchester university

Business Founded printing company PrintHouse in 1990, aged 21

Personal life Married Belinda in 1997, and now has three children

Job MP for Welwyn and Hatfield, promoted to shadow housing minister 2007 after a spell as Conservative vice chairman

Worst moment in politics "The three elections I lost before finally getting elected in 2005"

Best moment in politics "Dealing with serious cases of primary care trusts withholding care from seriously ill constituents, and winning the battles. It's also satisfying when meeting housebuilders with whom the penny has dropped and who really get our plans"

was going on," he says, "but I always thought there was no reason why people should be sleeping on the streets. I've always thought the government should have a role in these problems." He's proud of the fact that in his three years as shadow housing minister he's seen off four government ministers, and he says this is a reflection of the Tories' commitment to the sector.

If Shapps is going out of his way to persuade developers he's on their side, he's not doing the same with the Homes and Communities Agency, despite the fact many feel it has almost single-handedly saved the industry over the past year. Shapps says the organisation will be "scaled down" but refuses to give more details.

For the moment, the clever money is on the agency's powers in London being given wholly to the mayor, and its responsibility to dole out social housing grant being given to local authorities. The remainder – essentially what was English Partnerships – could remain as a separate quango. Shapps, however, will only say the HCA's spending has been very disappointing. "In housing they've spent this year and next year and the year after's housing budget already, and we've had the worst building year ever since the war. It's a really big problem for us."

Whether next week's green paper will be enough to convince the sceptics of his plans remains to be seen, but there is at least a coherence emerging over how it will work. It has clearly been thought through, and there are many who have argued cogently for years that the way local government finance effectively penalised councils for allowing development was a huge brake on construction. Even so, such a dramatic change is a huge gamble in an industry, already on its knees. Whether this gamble pays off remains to be seen.