

# Agenda – Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

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Meeting Venue:

Committee Room 4 – Tŷ Hywel

Meeting date: 5 December 2019

Meeting time: 12.30

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- 1 Introductions, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest**  
(12.30)
- 2 Motion under Standing Order 17.42 (vi) to resolve to exclude the public from items 3 and 6 of today's meeting**  
(12.30)
- 3 Rough sleeping in Wales follow up: consideration of draft report**  
(12.30–13.00) (Pages 1 – 12)
- 4 Fire safety in high-rise buildings follow up – Ministerial scrutiny session**  
(13.00–14.15) (Pages 13 – 34)  
Julie James AM, Minister for Housing and Local Government  
Clare Severn, Head of the Building Safety Programme  
Francois Samuel, Head of Building Regulations Policy  
Steve Bryant, Assistant Fire and Rescue Advisor  
Steve Pomeroy, Head of Fire & Rescue Services Branch
- 5 Papers to note**  
(14.15) (Page 35)
  - 5.1 Welsh Government response to the Committee's report on empty properties**  
(Pages 36 – 41)



**5.2 Correspondence from the Minister for Housing and Local Government regarding rough sleeping in Wales – 29 November 2019**

(Pages 42 – 43)

**6 Fire safety in high-rise buildings follow up – consideration of evidence**

(14.15–14.30)

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**Fire Safety in High-Rise Buildings**  
**Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee**  
**Thursday 21 November 2019**

**Fire Statistics in Wales**

The number of accidental fires in Welsh homes is at an all-time low and in recent years has been falling faster here than elsewhere in Britain.

The number of fires in Wales has seen a downward trend since 2001-02. Latest figures show that accidental dwelling fires in Wales have fallen by over a fifth in the past 8 years. We therefore have a good record on fire safety and a strong foundation on which to build.

These positive results are largely down to our excellent fire and rescue services who undertake the most home fire safety checks in Britain. We know that poor behaviour rather than poor products are the cause of most fires, and the tireless work of our fire and rescue services to inform the public on fire prevention strategies has had a dramatic impact on our fire statistics.

However, there were 1,429 reported accidental fires in dwellings in 2018-19 in Wales. Fires have a devastating effect on the lives of people. These fires resulted in 14 deaths and 106 hospitalised casualties. It has been estimated by the insurance industry that the average cost of a dwelling fire in terms of damage to property is over £40,000, and the cost to society more generally is immeasurable.

The most common cause of accidental fires in dwellings is the misuse of appliances (typically cookers), representing around a third of cases last year. Over 75% of dwelling fires with a known cause can be attributed to unsafe behaviour rather than unsafe appliances, installations or premises. Accidents involving faulty appliances or fuel supplies accounted for just under a quarter of dwelling fires, followed by placing articles too close to heat sources. There are also people at higher risk of suffering a fire and/or coming to harm if a fire occurs and these include: older people, people who have certain disabilities/mental health problems, smokers, people with alcohol and drug problems, and single parents.

Dwelling fires typically account for under 20% of all fires, but around 80% of casualties. So what these data suggest is that where a fire occurs in a domestic premises there is a greater chance of casualty.

**Increasing general fire safety through retro-fitting sprinklers**

We know that sprinklers are an effective intervention in reducing the risk to life and injury. They are widely recognised as being a key contributory factor to preserving life and minimising damage in the event of fire. The ability of sprinkler systems to extinguish fires efficiently and quickly has many benefits. Sprinklers have the advantage of targeting fires at source and reducing the risk of fire spread. Welsh

Government brought forward legislation in 2016 requiring the fitting of sprinklers in new builds and conversions.

Whilst statistically a fire is no more likely to occur in a high-rise residential building, a high-rise building offers greater complexity in terms of the potential for a fire to spread and the means of escape for those who might be in the building. However, the vast majority of high-rise residential buildings were built before these requirements were introduced and therefore have not been fitted with sprinklers as a matter of course.

Retro-fitting sprinklers in existing buildings remains a matter for the responsible person to ensure fire safety in the building as part of a programme of routine building improvements. It is for building owners to seek professional advice and decide whether to fit sprinklers, on the basis of their assessment of the particular risk faced in their building(s).

I have asked officials to explore if a low cost loan can be developed to incentivise the fitting of sprinklers, focusing particularly on high-rise residential buildings. Whilst I am anxious to explore what support we might provide to improve building safety, I do not want to absolve building owners of their responsibility in this area.

I will write again to the Committee on this matter once I have agreed the plans my officials are currently developing.

Although sprinklers significantly improve the fire safety of a building, they are not a solution to existing building safety defects such as those found in a number of high-rise properties in Wales. Where breaches in fire safety have been discovered, remediation plans must be put in place to remedy those defects as quickly as possible. I have been consistent in my message that the taxpayer cannot foot the bill for failures in the design or construction of private sector residential buildings. Building owners and developers should face up to their moral responsibility and put right these faults, or else risk their professional reputation.

My officials are engaging with their counterparts in the UK Government on whether we can enact a section on civil liability under the Building Act 1984. This is one potential solution to the problems caused by certain construction companies failing to deliver on their word.

### **Interim Measures to Improve Building Safety**

This Committee, along with my Building Safety Expert Group in their *Road Map*, have made a number of recommendations for action in the longer term and more immediately.

I will be making amendments to the current Building Regulations in order to ban the use of combustible cladding materials, making it clear what cladding is acceptable on high-rise residential buildings. I would expect these amendments to be laid by Christmas following clearance from the European Technical Committee.

We will shortly be consulting on making the Fire and Rescue Service a statutory consultees at the planning stages of new high-rise developments. This will ensure

fire safety expertise is sought at an earlier stage of design and construction, creating better links between the Fire and Rescue Service and local authorities.

My officials continue to work closely with the UK Government over the testing of fire doors and various different types of external wall cladding. This will lead to improved information and understanding for residents, building owners, managing agents and landlords and pave the way for high quality, safe products to reach the market.

I am exploring ways to ensure managing agents are registered to support best practice and stamp out rogue operators. An initial voluntary accreditation scheme for managing agents will generate evidence to inform the creation of a mandatory system. This was recommended as part of the leaseholder reform work and by this Committee. Under the new building safety system, such a scheme will form the basis of registering or licencing duty holders during the occupation phase of a building's life cycle.

### **Longer Term Measures**

Many of the recommendations in this Committee's report and the *Road Map* called for long-term action. The white paper I will publish will focus on the future system and the legislative changes we require to establish the new regime.

In the current system of building control, responsibility for compliance with the requirements of the building regulations rests with the person carrying out the building work. However as Dame Judith Hackitt points out, the current building control system is complicated, lacking in process and clear responsibility for those undertaking building work.

I propose that the additional requirements of a reformed system should focus on high-rise residential buildings over 18 metres in height, but the system must be flexible enough to ensure that the scope can be easily widened to encompass more buildings should the evidence support this. Where it is appropriate to make improvements to the system for all building types I will do so. I intend to make buildings safer for more than just those living in high-rise apartments where I can.

Domestic buildings should be designed and constructed in such a way that the risk of fire is minimised and, if a fire does occur, there are measures in place to restrict the growth of fire and smoke to enable the occupants to escape safely. However, just as importantly, there should be measures in place to allow fire-fighters to deal with fire safely and effectively. This is even more important in a high-rise building where fighting a fire and the means of escape can be more difficult.

I am considering the role of the duty holder across the life-cycle of residential buildings. I believe we can follow the successful implementation of the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2007 (CDM regulations) when designing the role of duty holders; the CDM regulations support the mitigation of health and safety risks onsite, and in the design and ongoing maintenance of buildings once completed. CDM regulations apply to every building project, regardless of size. This should be the case for building safety too.

The *Road Map* sets out a skeleton for a reformed building control process, with more checks and balances in place for residential buildings over 18 meters in height. A task and finish group, supported by my officials is looking at how this can be fleshed out into a new building control process for the future.

I also want to go further to address issues during the occupation phase. This means a comprehensive reform of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order 2005 ('the Fire Safety Order'). I agree with the Committee that the Fire Safety Order is long overdue a revision, with its original purpose intended for workplaces, not residential buildings.

This will require primary legislation, as the powers to amend the Fire Safety Order by Order have long been repealed and were never devolved to Wales. This will be given a high priority, but delivering such a far-reaching Bill before the next Assembly election may not be achievable.

To reform the Fire Safety Order only for high-rise residential buildings would be a missed opportunity. The issues of defining common areas and tracking down the responsible person apply if the block of flats is for 10 dwellings or 100. That is why I intend to consult on reforms that affect many more than those buildings over 18 meters in height.

The *Road Map* also discussed the need to clarify roles and responsibilities and recommended the Welsh Government introduce new legislation to replace the Fire Safety Order in order to provide clarity and resolve some key issues.

My plans for reforming the Fire Safety Order will place additional expectations with regards to high-rise residential buildings, but will also be clarified and improved to help all those living in homes captured by the Fire Safety Order.

The reforms will focus on clarifying the boundaries of 'common areas' to which the Fire Safety Order applies, and the relationship between the Fire Safety Order and the Housing Health and Safety Rating System under the Housing Act 2004. It will also establish clear and express requirements on responsible persons, residents and others to maintain the compartmentation which is critical to fire safety in a high-rise block. The lack of understanding and coordination between these two legislative systems was one of the Committee's criticisms of the current system, as exemplified by confusion over whether fire doors which act as front doors to flats are considered part of the common area. I will ensure new legislation and its accompanying guidance is clear to those undertaking legal duties, and to those who will be subject to actions, such as landlords, leaseholders and tenants.

The reformed Fire Safety Order will clearly set out the roles and responsibilities for the responsible person during the occupation phase, so that residents can hold them to account, and where necessary enforcement action can be taken forward swiftly. I consider fire risk assessments should be undertaken by a suitably qualified individual and it should be a requirement to take prompt action to mitigate any risks.

I am considering how best to identify responsible persons, for example through registration or licencing, so they can be better held to account. I would like to introduce a mandatory registration system for all responsible persons, possibly similar to how Rent Smart Wales has licenced landlords to encourage best practice.



My intention is to ensure all managing agents are registered for any residential building that falls within the scope of the reformed Fire Safety Order, and licensed for those blocks above 18 metres in height. However, I want to move at pace and will propose an initial voluntary system to allow the time to bed in and to gather evidence before a mandatory system is established in the future.

There are other issues that I will also address. Residents should also be provided with essential fire safety information, with a mechanism of raising concerns about the safety of the building. Community Housing Cymru and Welsh Government have been working to co-create a best practice guide in terms of what information residents should be provided with. This is something that I want to see extended to all sectors. We have some excellent examples in Wales in terms of resident engagement, strong communication and processes for escalating concerns. This should be the norm regardless of tenure of resident.

### **Grenfell Inquiry**

The tragedy at Grenfell tower two years ago shocked the world. The scale of the blaze, the loss of life and the speed in which it occurred is still deeply troubling. If anything positive should come from this terrible event, it must be a real improvement in fire safety and to reform the system that allowed such breaches in building regulations and a disregard for basic fire safety features.

The recently published first report from the inquiry into the events of the night will be examined carefully and any lessons learned will be considered here in Wales, in conjunction with the three Fire and Rescue Services in Wales. For the most part, these are operational lessons which the Fire Service and other responders need to learn and apply, if they have not already done so. We will however work with our partners to ensure they do just that.

These issues and recommendations will feed into the building safety programme and any resulting proposals for legislation will be included in my white paper which I intend to publish next year. It is time to create a new Welsh system, fit for our future.

## **Additional**

### **In response to the letter sent from Committee (25 October 2019);**

*During the statement, you said that the Welsh Government were still considering how to increase capacity to undertake such work (level 4 invasive testing), could you provide us with more detail on how long you expect this to take?*

I understand the desire to mandate level 4 testing in all high-rise residential buildings, particularly in light of the recently found problems in properties in Cardiff Bay and Swansea.

Level 4 tests, known as destructive tests in the Local Government Association's *Guidance on fire safety in purpose built blocks of flats*, allow independent inspectors to investigate beyond what is easily visible and can therefore identify breaches in compartmentation.

I would like to clarify it is not the Fire and Rescue Service or the Local Authority that carry out such inspections. They are normally undertaken by independent fire risk assessors. Whilst resourcing is one issue to overcome here, there is another more fundamental point to make. Because of the destructive nature of level 4 tests, they are often only carried out in vacant flats. The guidance suggests this level of testing is only appropriate in limited circumstances, such as when there are significant gaps in the building owner's knowledge or that serious risks are suspected.

Level 4 tests also risk disturbing asbestos in buildings, so they must be very carefully planned for and only carried out by experts.

As building owners begin to bring together information to form their 'Golden Thread' to support them in managing their properties, I would expect more buildings to undergo detailed surveys which may include more level 4 tests. This will allow owners and managing agents to better understand their buildings and ensure fire safety plans are appropriate and well known to residents.

*Could you provide the Committee with further details of the discussions that you are having with the managing agent and developers in relation to addressing the issues at Celestia?*

Officials have been in discussions with the managing agent (Parkmans) and other organisations regarding the Celestia development. This includes South Wales Fire and Rescue Service, Cardiff Council, the residents' management company for the privately owned flats (Celestia Management Company Limited), Cardiff Community Housing Association and the Association of British Ports.

Celestia development at Cardiff Bay consists of 8 residential blocks of flats. 7 are privately owned and 1 block is owned by Cardiff Community Housing Association.

South Wales Fire and Rescue Service issued a number of enforcement notices to rectify internal compartmental deficiencies and access issues in respect of the privately owned properties during August and October 2019. The managing agent and resident management company have advised officials that plans are in place to address these issues.

During discussions with the managing agent and the resident management company, officials have been made aware of the communication they were having with the developer and contractor. Officials were advised of sensitive, complex discussions involving legal advisers between the parties.

Welsh Government's focus has been and will remain on how we can ensure the safety of residents through appropriate policy direction, legislative reforms and facilitation between enforcement bodies.

In line with other similar cases, the powers and duties that relate to the safety of individual buildings rest with local authorities and fire and rescue services, not with Welsh Government.

Cardiff Council is continuing to engage with the managing agent and South Wales Fire and Rescue Service continue to work with the managing agent and the resident management company.

Officials will continue to monitor developments at Celestia through ongoing general discussions with South Wales Fire and Rescue Services and the Local Authority. Officials will also continue to engage with the managing agent.

# Agenda Item 5

## Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

5 December 2019 – papers to note cover sheet

Paper no.	Issue	From	Action point
ELGC(5)-34-19 Paper 1	Inquiry into empty properties	Hannah Blythyn AM, Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government	To note
ELGC(5)-34-19 Paper 2	Inquiry into rough sleeping in Wales	Julie James AM, Minister for Housing and Local Government	To note

# Agenda Item 5.1

## **Written Response by the Welsh Government to the Report into Empty Properties by the Equalities, Local Government, and Communities Committee.**

Empty properties are a significant concern for Welsh Government and I welcome the outcome of this inquiry and recognise the hard work by the Committee in collating all of this evidence.

This report gives us a real insight into the landscape of Empty Properties. It will allow Welsh Government to tap into the expertise in the market place, to build on our past successes, and also to bring together an even stronger collaborative work ethic to tackle this important issue. This will include working together and making best use of every opportunity presented to us, for example, working with the Valleys Task Force to support the delivery of the Empty Homes grant.

I would like to thank the members of the Equalities, Local Government, and Communities Committee for their report. I am particularly pleased to see the Committee's recommendations are in line with our future plans.

### **Detailed Responses to the report's recommendations are set out below:**

#### **Recommendation 1**

We recommend that the Welsh Government work with local authorities to develop a national action plan for tackling empty properties that sets priorities and targets to be taken forward, taking account of recommendations in this report. This should include specific objectives and targets for implementation. The action plan should be published by October 2020.

Response: **Agree**

I recognise the importance of having an action plan in place. I would suggest that we continue to provide individual action plans for each local authority and Welsh Government will collate this information into a National Action Plan. I would suggest that we include the overall Welsh Government objectives and indicators and include the local objectives and the resulting actions in each area. This will ensure that we are adaptive to the very different circumstances that each Council faces. Given the amount of work needed to create these actions I would suggest a first draft is produced by October 2020 with the finalised National Action Plan produced by the end of December 2020.

Financial Implications: Unknown (subject to further evidence gathering)

#### **Recommendation 2**

We recommend that the Welsh Government, in its work with local authorities and other partners, should emphasise the importance of community based approaches to ensure this aspect is prioritised and plans for dealing with empty properties properly reflect the views of communities.

Response: **Agree**

We will take this approach to dealing with empty properties. My officials in the Enforcement Team will be insistent on open work practices which incorporates the whole community to assist in tackling this issue. We have started this process by ensuring representatives from across the authority are invited to the training event to start these collaborative dialogs.

My team has also started discussions with social landlords and cooperative housing colleagues and will be encouraging them to come to Welsh Government with their solutions to tackling empty properties. This information will form part of our Empty Property Toolkit which will be available by January 2021.

Financial Implications: Unknown (subject to further evidence gathering)

### **Recommendation 3**

We recommend that the Welsh Government works with local authorities to understand the impact that having a specific officer with responsibility for empty properties can make. It should work with them to enable this specific role or function to be available to each authority across Wales. The Welsh Government should consider providing resources to support its implementation if necessary. Consideration should be given to whether a dedicated officer could be shared by more than one authority, if appropriate to the scale of the issue locally.

Response: **Agree**

We are committed to ensuring the local authorities have the support package that is necessary for their needs. We will be producing an action plan with each local authority, and not only will this feed into the National Plan, but it will also provide us with the evidence base for the tools needed to deliver the plan. Not all authorities will need the same level of support. We will provide an update on the resources needed by each local authority by September 2020.

Financial Implications: Unknown (subject to further evidence gathering)

### **Recommendation 4**

We recommend that the Welsh Government works with the WLGA to update Public Accountability Measure/013 to measure the success of bringing back into use properties that have been empty for 12 months rather than the current 6 months.

Response: **Agree**

We are content to take this forward and are also working with Powys County Council to provide a set of baseline indicators that we will be promoting to the WLGA for use in future reporting. We will have access to this information by January 2020 but will start discussions with the WLGA immediately.

Financial Implications:

Potential outlay of £50-60k for baselining data.

### **Recommendation 5**

We recommend that the Welsh Government works with the WLGA and the Valuation Office Agency to develop a method of gathering data on empty properties which is not solely reliant on the council tax valuation list in order to include derelict and non-residential properties in PAM/013.

Response: **Agree**

As above, we are planning to provide this baseline data which will include the empty properties not gathered in council tax data collection.

Financial Implications:

Potential outlay of £50-60k for baselining data.

### **Recommendation 6**

We recommend that the Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association and local authorities explore and identify the most effective way of establishing a regional or national source of legal expertise for empty property teams to access, and include a date for the implementation of this in the action plan on empty properties we have recommended

Response: **Agree**

We are content to start this process and will look for the solutions within our current Regeneration Regional Partnerships. We are happy to include this information in the action plan. We will also be researching the possibility of a procurement framework to allow for quicker and easier procurement in all aspects of empty property management, and will include legal expertise. It is anticipated this information will be included in the Empty Property Toolkit.

Financial Implications: Unknown (subject to further evidence gathering)

### **Recommendation 7**

We recommend that the Welsh Government works with the WLGA to undertake a review of the current statutory enforcement powers available to local authorities to tackle empty properties and assess how these could be used more effectively, consolidated, simplified or extended. The review should include an assessment of the proposal to introduce a Compulsory Sales Order process in Scotland, and whether such an approach would be suitable in Wales. The scope of the review should also include how the Welsh Government can indemnify the costs of enforcement action taken by local authorities.

Response: **Agree in Principle (subject to budget calculations as part of this review)**

We are committed to reviewing the legislative processes we are currently operating and streamlining them for better success. We are content to review the Compulsory Sales Order in consultation with our planning colleagues and ascertain if the implementation in Wales is feasible.

We will explore whether and, if so, how we can indemnify the costs.

Financial Implications: Unknown (subject to further evidence gathering)

### **Recommendation 8**

We recommend that the Welsh Government presses ahead with its proposed training for local authority officers and members on the enforcement options available to assist them in tackling empty properties, and updates the Assembly on progress in delivering the sessions by Easter 2020.

Response: **Agree**

We are in the process of procuring the expertise needed to deliver this training opportunity and plan to start roll out of the training in January 2020. The contract has stated that all training events, and resulting action planning events must be completed by the end of September 2020, however we are content to give you a progress report by Easter 2020.

Financial Implications: Unknown (subject to further evidence gathering)

### **Recommendation 9**

We recommend that the Welsh Government and WLGA regularly reviews the support it provides for schemes that offer financial assistance to owners of empty properties. This should assess the effectiveness of existing schemes, with a view to developing flexible funding solutions that are sensitive to local needs in the future.

Response: **Agree**

We recognise that we may have over simplified the financial requirements around empty properties, and know that we need to provide funding packages that are more adaptable and creative to address the issues in communities. We acknowledge this and will put a review structure in place with adequate opportunity for input from the WLGA before June 2020.

Financial Implications: None

### **Recommendation 10**

We recommend that the Welsh Government works with the housing association sector to better understand the projects it has in place to return empty properties to use as affordable housing. The findings should be shared as examples of good



practice with other social landlords. The Welsh Government should also consider the potential for similar schemes to be rolled out across Wales and, where necessary, allocate resources to enable this to happen.

Response: **Agree**

We are happy to collaborate with housing associations and this must also include the local authorities. We are always interested in best practice and innovative solutions for the renovation of empty properties. We recognise housing associations are a key part of this. We will work with them to understand what resources are needed. We are also keen to ensure the involvement of representatives from housing associations in the creation of the Toolkit and their input will be invaluable.

Financial Implications: Unknown (subject to further evidence gathering)

### **Recommendation 11**

We recommend that the Welsh Government clarifies the legal position around local authorities sharing information relating to empty properties and provide guidance. This should include viable alternatives if local authorities are restricted in what they can share due to the General Data Protection Regulations.

Response: **Agree**

We recognise that protecting people's personal data is very important and we are certain there is a way to share information and not compromise their privacy. We are very keen to work with legal and data protection colleagues to come up with a suitable solution and will provide an update as soon as it is available.

Financial Implications: Unknown (subject to further evidence gathering)

### **Recommendation 12**

We recommend that the Welsh Government explores the possibility of ring-fencing revenue collected by local authorities through the council tax premium on empty homes, to be used specifically for housing purposes. The Welsh Government should report back to the Assembly on its findings.

Response: **Reject**

I share responsibility for this recommendation with the Minister for Finance and Trefnydd. This question was explored in full before the powers to introduce premiums were introduced. It is a key feature of the legislative framework for local government finance that all council tax income, together with the funding provided through the annual local government settlement, forms part of the unhypothecated resources available to authorities. Local authorities are responsible for setting their own revenue budgets, and in turn council tax levels, and for deciding how these resources are used to meet local needs and priorities. They have consistently reinforced their wish to have the maximum flexibility in the use of these resources.

However, authorities have been encouraged to use the additional income they receive from council tax premiums to address local housing supply issues.

Financial Implications: None

### **Recommendation 13**

We recommend that the Welsh Government and WLGA undertake an exercise to assess whether people are taking action to avoid paying the council tax premium, including by changing a property to self-catering accommodation or by claiming that a family member has moved in to an empty property to receive a single person discount. Should the exercise demonstrate a significant increase in such practices, further steps should be taken to prevent the avoidance of council tax premiums.

Response: **Agree in Principle (subject to further evidence gathering)**

Council tax policy falls within the portfolio of the Minister for Finance and Trefnydd. The discretionary powers for local authorities to introduce council tax premiums on long-term empty and/or second homes have been in operation since 1 April 2017. The Welsh Government has been monitoring the implementation of these new powers as set out in our Tax Policy Work Plan. We have been working with the WLGA, local authorities and the Valuation Office Agency to assess the use of the powers, identify any patterns and ensure that good practice is shared between authorities. Given the relatively recent introduction of the powers and the small number of authorities which have introduced a premium, limited information is available as yet. Local authorities have been invited to bring forward any examples or evidence of suspected instances of avoidance for detailed review by the VOA as part of this ongoing work.

Financial Implications: None

**Hannah Blythyn AM**

**Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government**

# Agenda Item 5.2

Y Gweinidog Tai a Llywodraeth Leol  
Minister for Housing and Local Government



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref: MA-P-JJ-3394-19  
Ein cyf/Our ref: MA-P-JJ-3394-19

29 November 2019

Dear John

Thank you for your letter of 4<sup>th</sup> November following my appearance at the Equalities and Local Government Committee. I am pleased the Committee recognises the pace and urgency around our work on homelessness prevention, particularly implementation of the short term recommendations of the Homelessness Action Group.

The Welsh Government's strategic approach to homelessness prevention was published on 8<sup>th</sup> October 2019 and sets out the whole system approach required across public services to tackle homelessness in all its forms; with prevention and rapid re-housing at its core. Whilst the majority of answers to homelessness will be the same for everyone, I recognise the need for different approaches for specific groups of people. Our strategic framework allows for this, with one of the key policy principles being that all services should place the individual at the centre. However, fundamentally, addressing this issue is about getting the system right so that it works for everyone.

As I set out in my evidence to the Committee, we recognise the complex relationship between substance misuse, mental health and housing needs. To support our cross government approach to this we have agreed shared actions in the Substance Misuse Delivery Plan 2019 to 2022 and the Together for Mental Health Delivery Plan 2019 to 2022, both of which have been subject to public consultation during the summer. Both plans identify actions with housing as a priority and the need to support individuals with co-occurring and/or complex needs.

I mentioned during the evidence session specific additional funding for those with complex needs. This is funding, from the health budget, which has been made available across 2019-20 and 2020-21 to support this priority, including supporting the Housing First approach. Following a bidding process, funding has been agreed in the Health Board areas of Betsi Cadwaladr, Powys, Cardiff and the Vale, and Aneurin Bevan, totalling £1.3m. My officials and health officials are also undertaking discussions in the Swansea Bay area, given the high level of drug related deaths reported in official UK statistics.

As you acknowledge in your letter, we are embarking on an ambitious programme of change to implement our strategic approach. I agree that it is vital to evaluate and assess the impact of that change, particularly taking account of the views of those receiving support

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

and services. Another of the key policy principles outlined in our strategic approach is that policy, service delivery and practice should be informed and shaped in a co-productive manner and by those with lived experience. As such, implementation of our approach will involve evaluating the impact on service users through engagement with them. We are already building evaluation into programmes we have commenced, for example we are undertaking independent evaluation of the Housing First programme and of the projects undertaken under the Youth Homelessness Innovation Fund.

I recognise the demand on all our public services, which is why it is vital we invest in the earliest interventions that are recognised to be the most effective and also to be the most cost effective. As I set out in my evidence to Committee, it is important to acknowledge that the Welsh Government has significantly increased funding since the introduction of the 2014 legislation to prevent and relieve homelessness. As well as additional funding through the Revenue Support Grant, we are providing over £20m this financial year alone specifically for homelessness prevention and relief, including rough sleeping.

We are also ensuring wider funding on housing support is used to best effect to prevent and relieve homelessness. The development of the Housing Support Grant has provided an opportunity for greater alignment of Supporting People and Homelessness Prevention Grant and guidance to ensure the most effective use of resources and join-up of services. This work has been developing at pace during the year and in close collaboration with stakeholders, we are currently consulting on revised guidance for the Housing Support Grant.

I thank the Committee once again for your continued interest in this vital area, which requires the collective effort of everyone across Public Services in Wales if we are to achieve our shared goal of ending homelessness.

Yours sincerely



**Julie James AC/AM**

Y Gweinidog Tai a Llywodraeth Leol

Minister for Housing and Local Government