

Julie James MS

Minister for Housing and Local Government

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22 January 2021

Dear Julie

As you know, scrutinising the progress in eradicating rough sleeping has been a priority for our Committee throughout the course of this Senedd term and we have published several reports on this important issue. As we approach the end of this term, we would like to re-visit the recommendations made by ourselves and others to assess the progress which has been made. In particular, in light of measures put in place as a result of the Covid 19 emergency and how these measures can lead to long term improvements. We would therefore be grateful for a written update from you on actions taken by the Welsh Government to reduce the number of people who sleep rough, including the specific issues outlined below.

The Committee was supportive of the actions taken by the Welsh Government and other agencies at the start of the pandemic to place rough sleepers and others in need of a home into temporary accommodation. Please can you outline what progress has been made in getting people into longer term sustainable accommodation? It would be helpful to know how many have secured permanent accommodation and how many remain housed on a temporary basis. Despite the action taken, as you acknowledged in your written statement on 23 November 2020, there has been an increase in the number of rough sleepers as lockdown measures eased. How is the Welsh Government working with local authorities and the housing sector to prevent rough sleepers from returning to the streets? It would also be helpful to know whether the people who are rough sleeping now were doing so before the pandemic or whether they are new to rough sleeping as a result of lockdown measures.

As Wales entered another lockdown period in December 2020, what action has been taken to provide accommodation for rough sleepers during this period? Winter pressures naturally increase the need for accommodation during the



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colder months; what measures have been put in place during winter 2020/21 to ensure provision is available in place of the usual night shelters? How successful are these arrangements proving to be in meeting the need of rough sleepers?

You stressed in your November statement that “no-one, including those who have No Recourse to Public Funds, should be left without appropriate emergency accommodation or support during the pandemic”. How effective have measures been to ensure this? You referred in your statement to local authorities being able to access additional funding to support this approach; please can you outline what longer term arrangements will be put in place to ensure sufficient support, including whether you have held discussions with the UK Government on this?

The Committee welcomes temporary measures that have been put in place to extend notice periods and restrict evictions during the pandemic. However, as lockdowns continue the economic impact of those and the wider coronavirus restrictions means it is likely that increasing numbers of people will see a reduction in their household income or become unemployed. This could lead to increasing rent arrears. How does the Welsh Government plan to ensure that people renting in both the public and private sectors do not lose their homes as a consequence of the pandemic when current measures end? Despite the measures taken to protect tenants, in relation to the private sector in particular, are you aware of cases of tenants being evicted illegally by landlords not adhering to the regulations? What discussions has the Welsh Government held with third sector organisations working in housing, local authorities or the police and crime commissioners to assess the extent of such illegal practices and how those tenants can be supported? Given illegal evictions may lead to homelessness, to what extent might there be a role for Rent Smart Wales in taking enforcement action against landlords who carry out illegal evictions? The National Residential Landlords Association recently raised concerns about low levels of enforcement activity by Rent Smart Wales. How do you respond to this criticism and does Rent Smart Wales have capacity to increase enforcement activity in this area?

Another issue of importance to tenants is the forthcoming change to the notice period for “no fault” evictions when the temporary measures which extend the period to six months end in March. The notice period will then revert back to two months before the provisions in the Renting Homes (Amendment) (Wales) Bill come into force and the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016 is commenced. Have you considered whether there may be a need to extend the temporary extension until the provisions in the Bill come into force?

You will recall that we recommended in our 2018 Life on the Streets report that priority need should be abolished. At the time, this was accepted in principle in advance of the independent review of priority need commissioned by the Welsh Government, which was subsequently published in October 2020. Please can you



outline to us your response to the independent review and actions the Welsh Government will be taking in light of its conclusions.

As the Homelessness Action Group has now published its final report, we would be grateful for an update as to how the Welsh Government will be taking forward all the recommendations made by the group across its three reports. You noted in your November statement that all recommendations in those reports had been accepted in principle, therefore please can you provide an update as to how the recommendations will be implemented and the timescale for doing so. It would also be useful if you could provide a timescale for publication of the Welsh Government's action plan to end homelessness.

In responding to our follow up report on rough sleeping, which focussed on mental health and substance misuse services, you referred to the deep-dive group established to examine the barriers to responding more effectively to co-occurring mental health and substance misuse issues and undertook to provide an update on the work of the group. We would be grateful for an update on this and how any recommendations are being taken into account.

The challenges that have arisen as a result of the global pandemic have demonstrated the importance of a secure home and how quickly improvements can be achieved with dedicated focus and resources. However, such measures were implemented only for a short time, so it will be important not to lose the good progress that has been made. The temporary nature of the measures and funding that have been put in place will be causing uncertainty for their sustainability. Although the Welsh Government's draft budget for 2021-22 includes an additional £4m to the Homelessness Prevention Grant to maintain emergency provision of accommodation, as you acknowledge in your paper on the draft budget, this allocation will be sufficient to meet anticipated need for only a short period during 2021-22. Going forward it will also be important to learn from the measures that have been put in place; how do you intend to ensure that gains made as a result of the pandemic measures are sustained longer term, including the financial resources and infrastructure needed and how lessons learnt can be used to improve provision?

We welcome the introduction of tenancy saver loans and their contribution to preventing homelessness. How many loans have been issued, and how much funding remains available? Will any additional funding be made available to help either tenants or landlords who have suffered financially as a result of the pandemic?

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



John

John Griffiths MS

Chair

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.

