

Julie James MS,
Minister for Climate Change,
Welsh Government

21 December 2022

Dear Julie

Follow-up information after homelessness evidence session

Thank you for appearing before our Committee on 7 December. At the meeting we agreed to write to you ahead of publishing our report, due to the risk of additional homelessness cases over the coming winter months.

We recognise the immense effort that staff working for local authorities, support providers, the Welsh Government and other stakeholders have played in implementing the no-one left out policy. As you have noted, this policy has undoubtedly saved lives.

Winter pressures

The Committee took evidence from several local authorities and the Welsh Local Government Association on 16 November. While there was support for the principle of the no-one left out policy, it was evident that there are considerable challenges facing homelessness services in delivering that policy this winter and beyond.

We ask you to ensure local authorities get the support they need over the winter period including, if needed, extra funding and help securing additional temporary accommodation. We hope that the Welsh Government's Relationship Managers you told us about, who work closely with local authorities, will enable you to ensure that the specific needs of individual local authorities are identified and met.

We heard from witnesses about the challenges in preventing homelessness at present. We heard that significant numbers of homelessness cases are as a result of no-fault eviction notices being served by private sector landlords, as well as relationship breakdowns. In addition, there is considerable concern

that cost of living pressures could increase demand for homelessness services. We also heard about the demand for affordable housing impacting on the ability to move people out of temporary accommodation, including the need to help refugees. We are concerned that if the number of people in temporary accommodation keeps increasing, local authorities will face increasing challenges delivering the no-one left out policy.

We recognise that there is a specific issue with affordability in the private rented sector. We have received substantial evidence of the negative impact that the shortfall between Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and market rents is having on homelessness and note that you told us on 7 December that you are putting pressure on the UK Government to reconsider the freeze on LHA rates. We will be writing to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions regarding the impact of LHA levels on homelessness.

Homeless-at-home approach

At the meeting we discussed the “Homeless-at-home” approach suggested by stakeholders, whereby some individuals could make short term arrangements for accommodation, such as staying with family, rather than go into temporary accommodation by default, whilst remaining on the housing list for a settled home. As a Committee we feel that this could make a big difference towards pressures in the short term, giving some much needed flexibility to local authorities. We would ask you to take these discussions forward with Shelter Cymru, local authorities and other stakeholders as a matter of urgency.

Rough sleeping

As voiced in the meeting on 7 December, we are concerned at the increasing number of people sleeping rough across Wales in recent months. We understand that this issue isn't limited solely to housing provision and can be the result of a range of complex factors. We welcome the recent legislative change that means people who are street homeless are now legally a priority need group. However, would you be able to clarify whether any additional measures are being taken this winter to enable people facing rough sleeping to access both accommodation and support?

Standards of temporary accommodation

We asked you about the suitability and quality of temporary accommodation, having heard from stakeholders that some is of very poor standard or simply not suitable for the individual or family placed there. We note there are legal standards for temporary accommodation, as well as statutory guidance that local authorities must follow. You noted that the reality of the current situation is that a range of temporary accommodation is having to be used, including bed and breakfasts and hotels, and suddenly removing access to that type of accommodation would bring risks. The amendments originally proposed by the Welsh Government to the *Homelessness (Suitability of Accommodation) (Wales) Order*, which are now being reconsidered in light of consultation responses, highlighted the complexity of the situation. It would be helpful for the Committee to know what options the Welsh

Government is now considering for amendments to that Order and a timescale for these options. We would also ask that you consider whether any short-term steps can be taken, such as through updated guidance, to ensure temporary accommodation meets the required standard and is also suitable for the individual or family being housed during the current crisis.

Housing supply

Increasing housing supply is central to addressing the current crisis, and the Committee will consider this in our report. However, we recognise that increasing housing supply can take some time and there are a number of challenges, not least addressing the phosphate issue that is delaying some development. We discussed some more immediate options such as flexibility for social landlords to buy existing properties and making use of houses of multiple occupation in some circumstances. These approaches need to be taken forward at pace along with other local solutions that can allow people to leave temporary accommodation and get on with their lives.

We also heard that private rented sector landlords may be leaving the sector for a range of reasons. We note that Leasing Scheme Wales has the potential to improve access to the sector for people facing homelessness if it proves an attractive proposition for landlords. The Committee believes that the Welsh Government should explore options to maximise opportunities from this scheme.

Ending Homelessness Action Plan

We note that on 7 December you told us that you would be updating the Ending Homelessness Action Plan early next year. We welcome this in light of the changing context which has further impacted homelessness since the Action Plan was first published in 2021. We ask for details on what the updated actions will be; whether there will be any new actions and if so, what they are, as well as a clear timescale for updating the plan.

Given that the target date outlined in the Action Plan has now passed, it would also helpful to know when you expect the remaining 16 local authorities to submit their Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans to the Welsh Government.

Legislation

You noted in your oral evidence that you are proposing to “go straight to a White Paper next year” on the reform of homelessness legislation, having previously proposed a Green Paper. We would be grateful if you could clarify whether this will be separate from the White Paper that is proposed on a right to adequate housing and rent controls.

We would be grateful if you could respond to this letter by 26 January 2023, so that it can be considered at the Committee’s meeting on 1 February 2023.

Yours sincerely

John

John Griffiths MS

Chair

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.
We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.