

POLICY UPDATE NATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL March 2017

This update has been prepared by Homeless Link's Policy Team. Please contact Paula Reid (paula.reid@homelesslink.org.uk) or Chris Brill (chris.brill@homelesslink.org.uk) for more detail on any item contained within the briefing.

KEY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Government launch Housing White Paper, 'Fixing Our Broken Housing Market'

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/590463/Fixing_our_broken_housing_market_-_accessible_version.pdf

The paper includes a set of measures to increase the overall supply of housing and tackle some of the impacts of the current housing shortage. It recognises that high and increasing costs in the private rented sector put households at risk of becoming homeless, and that losing a private sector tenancy is now the main cause of homelessness.

Although the paper commits the Government to doing more to prevent homelessness, most of the explicit actions around homelessness have been previously announced. For example, the paper references supporting the Homelessness Reduction Bill and doubling the size of the Rough Sleeping Fund and reforming data on homelessness. The paper does commit to establishing a network of expert advisors to work closely with all local authorities, exploring whether **social investment** may have a role in helping to secure homes for those who are vulnerable or at risk of homelessness, and whether **social lettings agencies** can be an effective tool for securing more housing for households who would otherwise struggle.

The White Paper outlines a series of measures that relate to increasing the availability of 'affordable' housing, and improving the quality and security of tenure in the private rented sector. These include:

- Consulting on introducing a standardised approach to assessing local housing requirements which take account of the needs of different groups, for example older people
- Diversifying the market to increase house building and address affordability issues
- Amending policy expectation so that housing sites now deliver a minimum of 10% affordable home ownership units, reducing the focus on Starter Homes
- Investing in the Affordable Homes Programme, which will now include Rent to Buy homes alongside shared ownership
- Consulting on changing the definition of affordable housing, including the introduction of a definition of affordable private renting housing and measures to promote Built to Rent
- Implement measures in the Housing and Planning Act 2016 to remove rogue landlords or agents from operating
- Encourage longer-term tenancies in private rental homes delivered by housing associations and institutional investors.

The White Paper does not indicate any move away from the current Government definition of affordability of up to 80% of local market rate, which remains unaffordable for those on low-incomes and benefits, or any discussion of the role of LHA caps and affordability.

Supported Housing Future Funding Consultation

The consultation closed on 13th February 2017 and you can find our response at <http://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Homeless%20Link%20submission%20-%20supported%20housing%20consultation.pdf>

Our key recommendation is for Government not to introduce the proposals given the risk they pose to the sector and we are also calling for an extended exemption from the 1% rent reduction. If the proposals are introduced, we have made recommendations around the timeframe, the importance of piloting, safeguards for existing tenants and the design of the new system, including the shortcomings of Universal Credit and the LHA rate. We are expecting a Green Paper later in the Spring with more detailed models for consultation.

We also sit on two of the four Task and Finish Groups convened by DCLG to explore specific aspects of the proposals. The two groups – Fair Access to Funding and Short-Term Accommodation – are overseen by independent Chairs. Both groups have met three times and will now be drafting a report to submit to the consultation process by the end of March. There are key recommendations emerging from both groups around the timeframe for the proposals and the challenges posed by using Universal Credit as the basis for the new system.

Rough Sleeping Figures

The latest rough sleeping statistics, based on street counts across England, were published on 25 January 2017. There were 4,134 rough sleepers on any one night in 2016, compared to 2,744 in 2014. The year on year rise was 16%, with a 51% rise over the last two years. Our press release can be found at

<http://www.homeless.org.uk/connect/news/2017/jan/25/government-urged-to-take-strategic-action-as-rough-sleeping-numbers>

We have also updated the rough sleeping data pages on our website at

<http://www.homeless.org.uk/facts/homelessness-in-numbers/rough-sleeping/rough-sleeping-explore-data>

Support For Single Homeless People in England: Annual Review 2016

We have finally published last year's Annual Review and it is available on our website at

<http://www.homeless.org.uk/facts/our-research/annual-review-of-single-homelessness-support-in-england>

POLICY UPDATES

Homelessness and housing

Homelessness Reduction Bill

The Homelessness Reduction Bill has passed the relevant stages in the House of Commons and passed its Second Reading in the House of Lords on 23rd February 2017. We signed up to a joint briefing for the Second Reading debate, led by Crisis. The debate in the Lords was overwhelmingly positive and supportive of the Bill, with Lord Best calling the Bill a *“ground-breaking Private Member’s Bill”* because of the *“fundamental change it brings to the way homelessness is tackled in this country”* and the cross-party and cross-sector support that the Bill has. The Bill now moves to Committee Stage in the Lords.

There have been a number of changes to the Bill since it was originally introduced, including:

- Removal of the requirement for local authorities to provide 56 days emergency accommodation for homeless people and rough sleepers with no safe place to stay. Homeless Link is disappointed about this and would have welcomed resources committed to deliver this requirement.
- Clarification that a local authority's duty to prevent homelessness begins on receipt of a valid Section 21 notice. This duty will continue until the council accepts a homelessness relief duty to the household, or their situation is resolved.
- A limitation on the circumstances in which households can be found to be non-cooperative. Only instances where households refuse to carry out a step agreed in their personalised plan can be considered as a failure to cooperate.

Local Government Minister Marcus Jones also announced that English councils are to receive £61 million in funding to help them meet the costs of the legislation (rising from £48 million announced previously). The intention is that the distribution model for this funding will reflect the differing need across local authorities. Additional money may be made available for those in high pressure areas to manage the transition as the new duties take effect. He also announced that there will be a review of the implementation of the Bill, including the resourcing of it and how it is working in practice, after two years.

Housing in England – National Audit Office Report

The NAO have published a report on Housing, which gives an overview of the housing market in England, the DCLG's housing strategy and the overall housing policy landscape. As well as identifying that the need for housing far outstrips the supply, it also makes reference to the rise in homelessness over the past five years

<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/housing-in-england-overview/>

Welfare

Work, Health and Disability Green Paper consultation closes

The consultation sought views on the type of support offered to people, the assessment process, the role of employers and improving access to health services to ensure people have the right support to return to, or remain in, employment. The Green Paper can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/work-health-and-disability-improving-lives>

Homeless Link's response focussed on how to identify the most effective support based on a person's circumstances, the capabilities required in Jobcentre Plus to deliver these interventions, and how best to encourage innovation to improve health and work outcomes. We made a series of recommendations including:

- Homelessness should be incorporated into an official assessment framework, used by Jobcentre Plus and incorporated into guidance for any employment support providers that deliver their own assessment. This must identify an individual's support needs in relation to housing, as well as their employability and capability to work. As well as identifying whether someone is homeless or at risk of homelessness, support provided should be tailored and take account of someone's housing situation.
- The activities and support that homeless people are required to do should be meaningful and tailored to their individual circumstances. Any mandated activity should take into account the impact of someone's housing situation, and any other complex needs, on their ability to effectively seek or prepare for work; only conditions that an individual can meet should be imposed.
- Work Coaches should undertake specific training in order to develop the skills needed to identify housing support requirements. Work Coaches should engage with homelessness agencies in their locality to develop stronger joint working, as well as skills around sensitive communication with homeless people. 'Easement' rules, allowing some newly homeless people to have their work conditionality requirements lifted while they take steps to find housing, should be better publicised and understood by Work Coaches.
- Local areas should be made accountable for delivering effective, joined-up services for people with multiple and complex needs, including the development of multiple needs strategies in each local area. The voluntary sector should be fully involved in planning and implementation.

Our response can be found at <http://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Homeless%20Link%20submission%20-%20improving%20lives%20consultation.pdf>

Dame Carol Black Review published

In December 2016, Dame Carol Black published her review into the effects on employment outcomes of drug or alcohol addiction and obesity. One of the key questions in the review was whether benefit claimants with a drug or alcohol addiction should be mandated to attend treatment to keep their entitlement to benefits. While the review made a number of recommendations about ensuring that access to support around addiction and obesity were better integrated with employment support services, the report did not recommend mandating treatment. Concerns were raised that it might lead to people hiding their support needs, that it might not be cost-effective and that there were potential legal and ethical implications if treatment was mandated. The review report can be found at https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/573891/employment-outcomes-of-drug-or-alcohol-addiction-and-obesity.pdf

Public Account Committee report on benefit sanctions inquiry

The Public Accounts Committee has published a report on the increased use of benefit sanctions. A copy of the report can be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/public-accounts-committee/news-parliament-2015/benefit-sanctions-report-published-16-17/>

The report concludes that unexplained variations in the use of benefit sanctions are 'unacceptable and must be addressed'. The report relays many of the messages that Homeless Link have argued for previously. Of particular note, the report highlighted as one of its 5 key conclusions:

'5. The impacts of sanctions can be worse for people with housing-related barriers to employment. For some people, their main barrier to moving into employment is the struggle to find, or keep, a permanent roof over their head. The charity Crisis raised concerns about sanctions exacerbating these housing-related barriers to employment, and even causing homelessness in some cases. A third of people surveyed by Crisis who were claiming Housing Benefit had this stopped because of a sanction. The Department confirmed that Housing Benefit should not be stopped due to sanctions and told us that it found no evidence of the problem when it examined the issue in one area.

Recommendation: The Department should work to better understand the relationship between sanctions and the housing-related barriers to employment that some people face. It should set out what more it will do to assure itself that Housing Benefit is not being stopped in error due to sanctions.'

The Government is yet to respond to the report.

Work and Pensions inquiry into Universal Credit re-launched

Following evidence of the problems in the rollout of Universal Credit, the Work and Pensions Committee has re-launched its inquiry. More information can be found at <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/work-and-pensions-committee/inquiries/parliament-2015/universal-credit-progress-16-17/>

The Committee is inviting written submissions addressing one or more of the following points:

- How long are people waiting for their Universal Credit claim to be processed, and what impact is this having on them?
- How are claimants managing with being paid Universal Credit monthly in arrears?
- Has Universal Credit improved the accuracy of payments?
- Have claimants reported making a new claim for Universal Credit, and then found that the system has not registered their claim correctly?
- What impact is Universal Credit having on rent arrears, what effect is this having on landlords and claimants, and how could the situation be improved?
- Would certain groups benefit from greater payment process flexibility and, if so, what might the Government do to facilitate it?

- Does Universal Credit provide people in emergency temporary accommodation with the support they need, and how could this be improved?
- What impact is Universal Credit having on the income and costs of local authorities, housing associations, charities and other local organisations?
- How well is Universal Support working, and how could it be improved?
- What impact has the introduction of full Universal Credit service had in areas where it has replaced the live service?

The deadline for written submissions is Monday 20 March 2017. Homeless Link will be responding to the inquiry and would welcome member's views on any of the questions by Monday 13 March 2017. We will also seek members' views during the NAC meeting.

Benefit cap inquiry launched

The Work and Pensions Committee have also launched an inquiry into the benefit cap. The Committee invites written submissions addressing the following points:

- The cap is intended to incentivise behavioural change amongst claimants and secure savings for the Exchequer. To what extent is it achieving that?
- To what extent has claimant behaviour responded to the cap, through moving into work, moving house etc.? What effect does the lower cap have on incentives, what are the barriers to behavioural change and how can they be overcome?
- Does the cap address high underlying rates of housing benefit and child maintenance in a fair way?
- What are the consequential costs of the cap for other public spending, such as that by local authorities?
- What are the consequences for Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) and what impact does use of DHPs have on behavioural change?
- Are there unintended consequences (either positive or negative) of the cap?

The deadline for written submissions is Friday 7 April 2017. Homeless Link will be responding and would welcome member's views on any of the questions by Friday 31 March 2017.

Government respond to the Future of Jobcentre Plus inquiry

In April 2016, Homeless Link submitted evidence to the Work and Pension Select Committee's inquiry into the Future of Jobcentre Plus. Amongst other recommendations, we highlighted the need for:

- A test-and-learn system be applied throughout the Universal Credit full rollout process.
- Lessons of the Digital Trial to be made public.
- Official statistics such as those around UC sanctions and numbers of claims with housing components to be published to help inform public debate.
- JCP staff to be trained and informed of the particular rules around paying Housing Benefit in Specified Accommodation.
- Claimants to be given the choice to have direct payments to landlords and receive fortnightly payments of Standard Allowance.

In their response the Government raised the following points of interest:

- The Government are 'further improving the range of learning and development tools for all Work Coaches to help identify the claimant's needs, and delivering a personalised service to best meet the needs'
- They have introduced a Caseload Strategy, which includes advice on, for example...identifying claimant needs, complex needs and difficult personal circumstances; and identifying the right level of support.'
- The Department is preparing guidance for Work Coaches on mandation to the new Work and Health Programme. Details will be available later next year. This will include details of how and when mandation will apply to participants.

- The Department will also draft guidance for Work Coaches on making referral decisions, mandation and eligibility... Guidance for Work Coaches already includes examples of circumstances in which conditionality should be eased for claimants.”
- The Government have previously announced plans to make training in digital skills free for adults lacking relevant qualifications.

A full copy of the Government's response can be found at

<https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmworpen/965/965.pdf>

Criminal justice

Support for ex-offenders inquiry

The Work and Pensions Select committee published their inquiry into support for ex-offenders in December 2016. Although there were no specific recommendations related to accommodation for ex-offenders, there was a lot of recognition in the document about the importance of accommodation in reducing reoffending and some of the current failings in the system. A copy of the report can be found at

<https://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmworpen/58/58.pdf>

Launch of new prison and probation service to reform offenders

The Secretary of State for Justice, Liz Truss has announced that the National Offender Management Service will be replaced by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS). For more details go to <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/justice-secretary-launches-new-prison-and-probation-service-to-reform-offenders>

The new body for the operational management of offenders in custody and the community, including strengthening security in prisons, tackling extremism and building intelligence about criminal gangs, The Ministry of Justice will take charge of commissioning services, future policy development and be accountable for setting standards and scrutinising prison and probation performance. A blog summarising the announcement and providing more detail on the changed can be found at <http://www.russellwebster.com/introducing-her-majestys-prison-and-probation-service/>

Policing and Crime Act

This Act received Royal Assent on 31st January 2017 and aims to build capability, improve efficiency, increase public confidence and further enhance local accountability. The Act prevents the detention in police cells of children who are experiencing a mental health crisis (and restricts circumstances where adults can be taken to police stations) by reforming police powers under sections 135 and 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983. It also places a duty on police, fire and ambulance services to work together and enables police and crime commissioners to take on responsibility for fire and rescue services where a local case is made. For more information go to <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/policing-and-crime-bill>.

Prison and Courts Bill

This was published on 23rd January 2017 and the date of its Second Reading is yet to be determined. The Bill introduces a new framework for prison performance and a clear system of accountability for prisons. There is a strong focus on rehabilitation and reform, which will be written in to legislation as a key purpose of prison alongside punishment for crime and also features in the performance framework. The measures in the Bill also highlight a commitment to victims and the most vulnerable, as well as attempts to modernise the system through digitisation and improved IT systems.

You can find documents related to the Bill on the Parliament website:

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2016-17/prisonsandcourts/documents.html>

Mental Health

Preventing Suicide in England – Strategy Update

The Department of Health have published a report providing an update on the progress of the

2012 National Suicide Prevention Strategy, which aimed to reduce the national suicide rate by 10 per cent by 2020/21 The report updates progress in 5 main areas:

- expanding the strategy to include self-harm prevention in its own right
- every local area to produce a multi-agency suicide prevention plan
- improving suicide bereavement support in order to develop support services
- better targeting of suicide prevention and help seeking in high risk groups
- improve data at both the national and local levels

The report can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/suicide-prevention-third-annual-report>

Modern Slavery and Homelessness Report

The Passage have published a report on *Understanding and Responding to Modern Slavery within the Homelessness Sector*, which highlights how rough sleepers have been targeted by traffickers and are at risk of being exposed to labour exploitation and abuse. Homeless Link has published a blog on the research with a link to the full report at <http://www.homeless.org.uk/protecting-victims-of-modern-slavery>