

All Party Parliamentary Group on Ending Homelessness



How can the Government make the exempt accommodation sector work for everyone?

Meeting Minutes

21st October 2021, 4-5pm, Zoom

Attendees:

Bob Blackman MP, APPG Co-Chair
Sally-Ann Hart MP, APPG Vice-Chair
Jason McCartney MP, APPG Vice-Chair
Lord Best of Godmanstone, APPG Vice-Chair
Karen Buck MP
Lord Carrington

Parliamentary staff:

Jen Teare, Office of Ian Byrne MP
Cameron Brady-Turner, Office of Preet Kaur Gill MP

Secretariat:

Jasmine Basran, Secretariat to APPG

Other:

Owen Ingram, Prospect
Sam Lister, Chartered Institute of Housing
Ashley Horsey, Commonweal
Sue Ramsden, National Housing Federation
Suzannah Young, National Housing Federation
Lucie Heath, Inside Housing
Sophie Boobis, Homeless Link
Ed Tytherleight, Centrepoint
Billy Harding, Centrepoint
Liz McCulloch, St Mungos
Paul Prosser, Noah Enterprise
Hilary Bartle, Stonepillow
Jean Templeton, St Basils
Siobhan McHale
Steven McIntyre, Stonewall Housing
Freya Routledge, Standing Together
Lucy Robson, Oak Housing & Homelessness Programme
Christa Maciver, Justlife
Joe Wheeler, Bristol City Council
Harry Williams, Commonweal Housing
Barry Toon, Birmingham HMO Action Group
Jon Stevens, Birmingham University
Emily Whiteside, DLUHC
Deborah Halling, GLA
Natasha Valladares, GLA
Alison Lett, Aspire
Sarah Davis, CIH

Panellists:

Matt Downie, Director of Policy and External Affairs, Crisis
Vicky McDermott, CEO, Prospect Housing
Cllr Sharon Thompson, Cabinet member for Vulnerable Children and Families, Birmingham City Council
Guy Chaundy, Senior Manager, Housing Strategy, Birmingham City Council
Cathy Page, Deputy Director, Housing with Care & Support, Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities representing the Minister for Rough Sleeping and Housing

John Glenton, Riverside
Sarah Walters, Crisis
Kendra Schneller,
Susan McDonald, Social Finance
Rebecca Slack, NHF
Dean McGlynn, NHF
Hannah Keilloh, CIH
Charli Fuge, Local Government Association
Daniel Allman, Greater Manchester Housing First
Chris Clarke
Darrel Smith
David Fletcher
David Shallcross
Leah Bowen, Supported Living Gateway
Marsha Blake
Natasha Wong, Standing Together
Rebecca Lees
Richard James, YMCA
Riya Bhatia, DWP
Sarah Carpenter, DLUHC
Tim Thomas
Yasmin Turner
Sam Cranstoun
Ruth Jacob, Crisis
Saskia Neibig, Crisis
Sarah Rowe, Crisis

Welcome and apologies	
Introductions	
Jasmine Basran	<p>JB opened the meeting on behalf of Bob Blackman MP who had been delayed. She noted that the meeting would be recorded and mentioned that journalists present may also record the proceedings. JB presented the panellists attendees would be hearing from today.</p> <p>JB then introduced the first panellist, Matt Downie Director of Policy and External Affairs, Crisis and handed over the chair to MD.</p>
Matt Downie	<p>MD outlined what exempt housing is and the problems being caused where unscrupulous agencies exploit gaps in the regulatory regime. His comments covered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The variability of standards in the sector, noting that while there are many good providers delivering decent homes and services, where providers deliberately manipulate the system, the safeguards to stop this happening are not in place - The fact that people who depend on the sector are amongst the most marginalised including people experiencing homelessness and fleeing domestic abuse, people with mental health needs, learning and physical disabilities – and the impact of poor referral and safeguarding practice, poor housing conditions and lack of support on their wellbeing - The need for urgent Government action to safeguard people who depend on the non-commissioned exempt sector and to stop abuse of the system - The case for reviewing reforms to social housing regulation to close loopholes that seem to allow registered providers of non-social housing to evade consumer regulation - The case for a Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee inquiry on the issue.
Vicky McDermott	<p>MD introduced Vicky McDermott, the CEO of Prospect Housing.</p> <p>VM shared learning that Prospect Housing have identified during the process of reviewing the organisation’s viability and the eventual decision to close the organisation down. Her comments covered:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the problems that had been identified including poor property standards, problems with contractual relationships with managing agents and evidence of significant over claiming of Housing Benefit. - the needs of people supported by Prospect. While 10% of residents had no identified support need, most had very significant needs - the fact that the model is a target for criminality and sharp practice - the case for urgent action address problems with the sector. <p>VM endorsed the call for a Select Committee Inquiry and called for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - improving the availability of data to get a measure of the problem - ensuring exempt registered providers are held to account, that Boards have effective control of their organisation and that conflicts of interest are called out - local authorities to be better supported to stop the problem ‘at the front door’, and to be enabled to collect better data and apply more scrutiny

<p>Cllr Sharon Thompson and Guy Chaundy</p>	<p>MD introduced Cllr Sharon Thompson, Cabinet member for Vulnerable Children and Families and Guy Chaundy, Senior Manager, Housing Strategy from Birmingham City Council.</p> <p>ST outlined the rise of problems with the exempt sector in Birmingham in recent years, the impact of a lack of effective support on both residents and wider communities, and the knock-on effects on ambulance and police services as they are called in to manage these problems.</p> <p>GC noted that the City Council had initially worked with Thea Raisbeck, Honorary Research Associate at the University of Birmingham to map out the nature of the problem and then worked with a wide range of partners to identify and implement solutions and conduct a needs assessment. His comments covered the work the Council is doing through the DLUHC funded pilot to tackle the problem, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - a programme of inspections involving environmental health, community safety and social work staff - reviewing the quality of support, property standards and property management - improving data collection so there is now greater clarity about numbers - launching an accreditation scheme, quality standards and a Tenants Charter – though these are voluntary. <p>ST outlined the Council’s key asks of Government which included reviewing the funding model for the provision of support, providing councils with more tools and powers to control the growth of the sector, extending HMO licencing and enforcement powers, clarifying the definition of ‘care, support and supervision’ in the Housing Benefit Regulations, closing gaps that allow not-for-profit agencies to contract with for profit agencies, enabling the Regulator of Social Housing to monitor providers’ compliance and enabling the council to deal with the impact of out of city referrals.</p>
	<p>MD introduced Cathy Page, Deputy Director, Housing with Care & Support, Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities</p> <p>CP emphasised that the issue is a matter of concern to the Minister and that the five pilots have provided the Department with the opportunity to examine the issues and consider what further change is needed. She noted that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - there is an understanding that the Government may need to go further than the interventions implemented through the pilots so far - the Department is looking at what further measures may be needed - some councils have had conversations with DWP about updating the supported exempt Housing Benefit guidance to provide greater clarity. <p>CP confirmed that there is a commitment to look at the issues being raised.</p>
<p>Questions to panellists</p>	<p>MD thanked the panellists for their contributions and asked CP if she could give any timescale for when the Department would be ready to consult on proposals for reform.</p>

	<p>CP advised that it was not currently possible to give any indication on timescales.</p> <p>Questions were opened to others in attendance.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ashley Horsey from Commonweal Housing asked panellists which other agencies needed to be in the room to deliver the change needed. <p>VP commented that in the most extreme cases there is a need to bring in agencies to address the links to criminal activity.</p> <p>CP noted that better data is needed to profile problems in the sector.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2. Jon Stevens from University of Birmingham asked that with six of the seven largest providers in Birmingham found to be non-compliant by the Regulator of Social Housing while housing almost 15,000 people, how is the Council managing the associated risks? <p>ST responded that they have introduced a range of measures to manage the risk but ultimately they believe the most effective way to address the problem lies in legislative reform. GC noted that the Council is developing protocols to manage the impact when providers are found to be non-compliant.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Ed Tytherleight from Centrepoint congratulated ST on the impact of the City Council's work in Birmingham. He said that he would like to see Centrepoint getting involved in exempt provision but was worried about reputational risk. He mentioned the Department of Education's work to improve housing for care leavers, and the national standards for accommodation put in place by Ofsted and asked could we grow more effective regulation into the exempt accommodation space? <p>CP responded that the Department is looking at examples from across Government and is examining the case for standards around support provision.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Karen Buck MP commented on the critical need for cross departmental work to stop the problem of who pays being shifted between departments. KB asked DLUHC to work with DWP to provide a coherent statistical overview of the sector and public service impacts of poor provision.
<p>Bob Blackman MP</p>	<p>BB gave apologies for the delay in being able to join the meeting. Based on the evidence he had heard he said there seems to be a strong case for a Select Committee inquiry. He noted the pressures on Select Committee time however and said the Committee will need to reach a view on whether and when this might happen, having also considered the likely scale of any such Inquiry. But there is a clear case to continue to highlight the issue.</p> <p>BB noted that another issue considered by the APPG – the case for abolition of the Vagrancy Act – he had been able to raise the issue at Prime Minister's Questions – and had received a positive response, with the Prime Minister agreeing that the time has come to reconsider the Vagrancy Act.</p>

	BB thanked panellists, attendees, Secretariat and closed the event.
Actions and deadlines	Secretariat to send around minutes to attendees and both Chairs.