



BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL
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Our Ref: ST/NJW

13th October 2020

The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Dear Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP

Exempt Accommodation in Birmingham

We are writing to relay our concerns about the huge increase in numbers and the associated problems with supported Exempt accommodation in the city. We have also set out a number of key 'asks' to you and would appreciate a response on each of these setting how we can collectively seek to stop the growth and tackle the problems caused partly by the regulatory gaps that exist for such housing provision.

Up until about 18 months ago the growth of the 'exempt' sector remained static in Birmingham at around 14000 units, this has increased drastically since then and we are now at around 19000 and continuing to grow at pace. This equates to approximately £200m of Benefit funding a year.

The highest majority of exempt accommodation claimants are living in Registered Provider (RP) accommodation who are continuing to build up large portfolios of leased and owned accommodation utilising managing agents and private landlords. In discussion with some providers it is evident that there is little control of individual landlords' day to day management of properties, care and support. Alongside the increase of new providers coming into the city we are also seeing a rise in 'support providers' working across a number of RPs and again oversight of quality is lacking or non-existent, leading to high increases in complaints with negative impacts on neighbourhoods and individuals. We are specifically seeing an increase in anti-social behaviour and community safety issues.

Similarly, we are seeing specific areas of the city becoming saturated with this type of provision with obvious consequences and there is little regulation to enable us to curb this growth, outside of the Housing Benefit regulations which do not necessarily allow us to refuse on grounds of there being too many in any given area.

Alongside additional supported housing provision growth in Birmingham from outside of the city, there will likely be further pressures placed on the local health and social care system in terms of health-related treatment and assessments associated with accommodating out of city placements who have support needs, without a local connection to the city. These include impacts placed on already pressurised services encompassing mental health, community health, public health (drug and alcohol treatment) secondary care.

Meeting local housing needs presents significant challenges for Birmingham with the rates of households residing in temporary accommodation rising to over double the regional average, high rates of residential overcrowding and growing affordability gaps arising from incomes not keeping pace with housing costs and gaps between Local Housing Allowance rates and rental values.

Whilst our city is no different to accommodation and support service provision to other parts of the country, largely configured of hostels, refuges and housing featuring communal or shared facilities, a large and growing private rental sub-sector has made it both a regional and national destination for other local authorities care leaver and housing options services, and public bodies including hospitals, prisons, probation involved in the housing of a range of vulnerable communities requiring short-term accommodation with care support and supervision needs.

This sector is funded outside of Universal Credit under separate housing benefit regulations that provide only limited enforcement and oversight potential which has been well evidenced and documented by Birmingham Safeguarding Adults Board, University of Birmingham and communicated to the Social Housing Regulator and MHCLG. The loose required definition of 'more than minimal support' to obtain the Exempt status and resulting Housing Benefit urgently needs reviewing and strengthening.

This non-LA commissioned sector presents a growing and significant challenge in terms of local governance and oversight arrangements being in place to ensure these communities and individuals with care, support and supervision needs are adequately safeguarded, especially at this current time of required restrictions between households and management of any self-isolation.

Existing Homelessness Reduction Act partners, 'Duty to Refer' partners, Birmingham's Adult Safeguarding Board and our Birmingham Homelessness Partnership Board have all cited increased concerns about the associated risks and safety for those referred into Birmingham without adequate governance and oversight between referral agencies and accommodation providers. We have recently met and made representations to your Head of Supported Housing division and continue to meet with the Regulator of Housing concerning the management of risk, safety, safeguarding and wellbeing issues across significant parts of this loosely

regulated sector that forms part of a growing share of housing within the overall private rented sector.

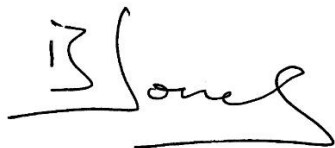
The key challenges and strategic aims of our current work where we would be keen to understand how you can support us are:

- How to reduce/stop the growth rate whilst the much-needed oversight work can be delivered and embedded, this is difficult in the current regulatory framework.
- Where are we currently with the Regulatory reform and current inadequacy of existing regulation especially the Housing Benefit regulations relating to support provision and the ability for us to refuse applications in areas of high density.
- Strengthening the Regulator of Social Housing's role in monitoring consumer standards.
- Improve quality of provision, providers and specifically support provision through the introduction of improved quality standards in regulations.
- The provision of funding/resources to enable us as a City Council to have greater on the ground oversight and inspection.
- Strengthened protocols and regulation in place to minimise 'out of city' placements by statutory referring agencies.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Sharon Thompson
Cabinet Member – Homes & Neighbourhoods



Councillor Brigid Jones, Deputy Leader



Shabana Mahmood MP - Member of Parliament for Birmingham Ladywood

Cc Fiona MacGregor, Chief Executive for the Regulator of Social Housing