



T: 0300 244 4000
E: scottish.ministers@gov.scot

James Dornan MSP
Convener
Local Government and Communities Committee
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

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Dear James

I am writing to advise you about the new commitments on homelessness that have been set out in today's Programme for Government.

We established the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group (HARSAG) to make recommendations to eradicate rough sleeping, transform the use of temporary accommodation and to end homelessness altogether two years ago. HARSAG's recommendations were designed to ensure that temporary accommodation acts as an emergency safety net. Drawing on evidence and the voice of lived experience, they told us that far fewer people should stay in temporary accommodation and their length of stay needed to be much shorter.

To achieve this, they recommended we reduce the need for temporary accommodation in the first place, placing greater emphasis on prevention alongside the transition to a rapid rehousing approach and we accepted their recommendations.

While being clear about the need for the reduction in temporary accommodation, HARSAG recognised that there will always be some requirement for temporary accommodation in emergency situations. Where this is the case, they were clear that support should be in place for homeless households from day one and that the quality and standard of temporary accommodation needs to meet the needs of the homeless household and support their move on to permanent settled accommodation.

In considering how to improve the standard of temporary accommodation, HARSAG recommended that the Unsuitable Accommodation Order (UAO) be extended to all homeless households. When the Scottish Government and COSLA published the Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan in November last year we committed to implement the

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HARSAG recommendation to extend the restriction to all households experiencing homelessness and on the implementation timetable for the extension.

We launched a consultation on improving temporary accommodation standards in May which included consideration of when and how the UAO should be extended. The consultation closed on 14 August and total of 387 responses to the consultation were received. This included 65 direct responses while , including 24 from individual local authorities. Crisis prepared and hosted a shortened version of the full consultation on their website, which generated 322 responses.

We are in the process of commissioning a full independent analysis of the consultation responses, which we expect to be completed by late October, but initial analysis shows there is overwhelming support for the extension of the Order, with 97% of respondents agreeing that the order should be extended, including 80% of organisations (including local authorities).

For those that supported an extension, a wide range of views were expressed about when the extension should come into force, ranging from immediately to 2024 in order to align with the end point of local authority Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans.

We are clear that we do not want people to stay in accommodation such as B&B, other than in emergency situations for very short periods of time. However, we do recognise that a change such as this cannot take place overnight and that local authorities need time to be able to prepare for this change. It is with all this in mind that we have announced in the Programme for Government that we will legislate to extend the Unsuited Accommodation Order this parliamentary year and that it will come into force in this parliamentary term, by May 2021.

The initial analysis of the responses we received to the consultation tells us that for some local authorities this date will present challenges but if we are clear in our desire to improve the standard of accommodation provided for homeless households, the use of bed and breakfast must be restricted to emergency situations. In 2018/19, Scottish Government statistics tell us that 15 of the 32 local authorities did not use bed and breakfast accommodation at all and many more only did so on a handful of occasions.

We do recognise that there are some local authorities who currently rely on the use of bed and breakfast accommodation and we will work with these local authorities as we prepare to draft the legislation, and in the lead up to it coming into force, to help them overcome any barriers they face and ensure they do not breach the Order.

We also recognise that for some local authorities, there may be a need to adjust their Rapid Rehousing Transition Plan in order to work towards this new legislative requirement, and we will continue to provide ongoing support to local authorities to review the plans on a regular basis.

I also want to briefly mention that we have announced two new funds focussed on homelessness which we will introduce from 2020/21. The first of these is a fund for third sector organisations on the frontline to innovate and transform the services they provide in line with the direction set out nationally in our Ending Homelessness Together Action Plan and locally in Rapid Rehousing Transition Plans.

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The second fund is a Homelessness Prevention Fund, providing £1.5m over three years to increase and spread the work of social landlords in supporting low income families in social housing in ways that help to prevent crisis points and avoid homelessness.

We greatly appreciate the efforts and commitment of all local authorities and we believe that through continued partnership working, together we will be able to support the strong, concerted national effort to transform the use of temporary accommodation and focus on the implementation of the Action Plan ambitions.

Kind regards

KEVIN STEWART

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St Andrew's House, Regent Road, Edinburgh EH1 3DG
www.gov.scot

