

MAYOR OF LONDON

Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP

Secretary of State for Housing, Communities
and Local Government
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
London SW1P 4DF

Date: 25 March 2020

Dear Robert,

Housing impacts of COVID-19

I welcome the measures announced by the Government last week to protect UK tenants and homeowners from the economic impact of COVID-19, including the three-month mortgage holiday for homeowners and increases to Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates to support rental payments.

However, these measures do not adequately protect the housing needs of all Londoners against the impacts of COVID-19. While increases to LHA rates are very welcome, support available through the benefits system still falls well short of what is required to cover the full costs of rent among those who currently have little or no income due to COVID-19. This support is also still unavailable to a number of people. That is why I am urging the Government to immediately increase amounts available through the benefits system and remove restrictions in accessing this, including through immediate suspension of no recourse to public funds conditions.

In addition, while I initially welcomed the announcement of new measures to prevent landlords from evicting tenants for three months, the current draft legislation simply extends notice periods and will not stop renters from losing their homes. Furthermore, while the three-month mortgage holiday for landlords may help some tenants who cannot pay their rent, leaving landlords and tenants to work out an 'affordable payment plan' at the end of this period, means that tenants impacted by COVID-19 could face the prospects of high rental debts simply as a result of doing the right thing and following Government advice.

To address these matters, and to ensure individuals are fully protected from the impact of COVID-19, I urge you to immediately implement the full range of measures I have set out in the attached in order to:

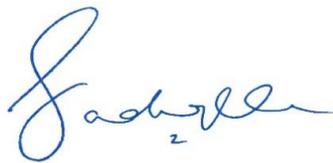
- ensure that nobody falls into debt or becomes homeless as a result of the impacts of COVID-19.
- reduce the number of households who are living in accommodation that may exacerbate the transmission of the virus, and
- support local authority services with a responsibility to assist people facing or experiencing homelessness.

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If the Government does not implement these changes, there is a risk the UK Government's economic response to COVID-19 falls out of step with other countries. I support the new measures announced by the Prime Minister on Monday, but these further restrictions make it only more urgent that tenants and homeowners are provided with necessary protection to see them through this crisis.

In addition to the above, my team is in conversation with housing associations, private developers and local authorities to understand the likely impacts of COVID-19 on housing delivery in London. At this stage, I would request that you consider introducing temporary measures to grant maximum flexibility to the Greater London Authority to utilise funding provided by MHCLG via the Affordable Homes Programme and Land Assembly, Small Sites and Accelerated Construction Funds. My team will be in contact with your officials in due course to discuss this in more detail.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Sadiq Khan', with a small number '2' written below the name.

Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London

Appx.

Cc: Paul Scully MP, Minister for London
Sir Edward Lister, 10 Downing Street

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Appendix

Actions to mitigate against the housing impacts of COVID-19

Private renters

I urge the Government to:

- Ensure that landlords offer flexibility to tenants whose ability to pay their rent is affected by COVID-19 and ensure that the benefits system will adequately cover their housing costs. While the increase to Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates to cover 30 per cent of market rents is welcome, this does not go far enough. The welfare benefits system must cover, in full, the rents of private tenants unable to pay them due to COVID-19.
- Properly protect renters from losing their homes by preventing landlords from serving eviction notices to any tenants affected by coronavirus. The current draft legislation simply extends notice periods and will not stop renters being evicted.
- Where private landlords are letting their properties to tenants, require landlords in receipt of mortgage holidays to notify their tenants of this and enable tenants to be exempt of rental payments for the duration of the holiday.

Homeowners

In addition to implementing a mortgage repayment holiday, to protect homeowners I urge the Government to:

- Relax the eligibility criteria for Support for Mortgage Interest (SMI), so that borrowers do not need to be claiming a qualifying benefit in order to receive it.

Welfare

To reduce the number of renters falling into rent arrears, and maintain these arrears at the lowest level possible, I urge the Government to immediately:

- Further increase the amounts available to private tenants through Housing Benefit and the housing support element of Universal Credit, realigning rates with median market rents for all claimants and covering in full the rents of those unable to pay them due to COVID-19.
- Widely publicise Universal Credit, including its housing support element, so that those who become unable to work or experience a reduction in income are aware of the help available to them.
- Allocate additional funding to local authorities for Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP), along with the resources to administer these.
- Suspend the Bedroom Tax. This will assist social sector tenants who may be less able to cover any shortfalls between their rent and their Housing Benefit (or the housing support element of Universal Credit).
- Suspend no recourse to public funds conditions to allow everyone to access benefits or support with housing if they need it.
- Offer all new claimants to Universal Credit a non-repayable advanced payment from day one (effectively removing the five-week waiting period for Universal Credit awards).
- Remove the Benefit Cap to ensure that households affected by it are able to cover their rents and can benefit from the increases in benefits subject to the cap.
- Suspend all sanctions, conditionality and health assessments.

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- Provide additional resources to job and call centres to ensure the system can cope with a significant increase in claims and support those with complex needs.
- Halt the Universal Credit managed migration process.
- Ensure that disabled claimants awaiting appeal have their benefit income protected.
- Fund free internet access for self-isolating claimants to ensure they can maintain their claim online.
- Scrap single household payments under Universal Credit to support those at increased risk of financial abuse due to household isolation.

Support for rough sleepers

I very much welcome our partnership with the Government on the pan-London emergency response to rough sleeping and the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular the operation to ensure that rough sleepers are moved into and supported in safe accommodation (primarily hotels). To support this group properly, I urge the Government to ensure that:

- Sufficient funding is made available for accommodation and support to enable rough sleepers to self-isolate, with funding allocated to the Greater London Authority (GLA) to enable a strategic and coherent response across the capital.
- Rough sleepers have immediate access to testing for COVID-19 once available, alongside other vulnerable groups.
- NHS Sustainability and Transformation Partnerships make sufficient clinical support available to triage people moving into the hotels and work with them once they are there and provide access to prescription drugs and all the equipment, including personal protective equipment, needed to enable care to be safely provided.
- Public Health England supports the provision of specialist drug and alcohol support to people living in the hotels.
- Official documentation is urgently issued to staff that have been designated as 'key workers', including those working with rough sleepers, confirming their status as such – to enable them to undertake their duties effectively. Rough sleepers are treated as a 'vulnerable group' in terms of the Government's COVID-19 planning and public health guidance.

Support for local authority homelessness services

As a direct implication of COVID-19, there will be increased demand on local authority services due to:

- The financial impacts of COVID-19.
- Arrangements whereby individuals or households living with friends or family become harder to sustain.
- The strain that social distancing and self-isolation may place on relationships.
- The need to avoid placing households in shared or crowded accommodation that may exacerbate the transmission of COVID-19, and to therefore procure additional accommodation.

I therefore urge the Government to:

- Provide additional, emergency funding for these local authority homelessness services to meet this increased demand.

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- Provide additional powers for local authorities and the GLA to acquire and repurpose appropriate accommodation, including unsold new build homes, for homeless households.

Building safety

Many buildings with ACM and other types of unsafe cladding are currently safe to occupy on the basis that a 24-hour waking watch patrols the building. These interim measures are now likely to be required for longer as remediation timescales are delayed by COVID-19. I therefore urge the Government to:

- Urgently take steps to engage building owners and coordinate a response which mitigates the risk that waking watches cannot continue.
- Provide funding to cover interim safety measures. I have long-called for this, but it is now more important than ever that leaseholders are protected from these costs.

Households not normally entitled to homelessness assistance and refugees

I urge the Government to ensure that:

- Those facing or experiencing homelessness who would not be entitled to accommodation under the homelessness legislation – including those who have no recourse to public funds, as well as those who are “intentionally homeless”, not in priority need, or without a local connection – are able to access accommodation. This is essential to ensure the success of social distancing and self-isolation measures
- Households granted refugee status should be able to remain in asylum seeker accommodation for longer than 28 days to relieve demands on local authority homelessness services and to make it easier for these households to practise social distancing or, if necessary, self-isolation. By default, Section 95 support should not cease when an asylum seeker receives refugee status.

Support for asylum seekers

I urge the Government to ensure that all asylum seekers can access food and other basic essentials during this time. They are currently entitled to subsistence payments of just £37.75 a week. This leaves them especially vulnerable in the event of shortages and stockpiling of food and other essentials that occur as a result of COVID-19.

I also urge the Government to extend the support provided to asylum seekers who have exhausted their appeal rights under Section 4 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999:

- Beyond the current 21 days, and
- To those who do not have dependent children.

In the current context, it will be impossible for many of them to return to their country of origin, leaving them at risk of homelessness if support is not continued.