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Housing & Communities

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Dear Diana,

Thank you for your letter of 20 April about the housing difficulties faced by deaf domestic abuse survivors and for your support for our consultation on local connection requirements for social housing for victims of domestic abuse. Please accept my apologies for the delay in responding.

This Government is committed to tackling Domestic Abuse, as we know it is a devastating crime which seriously impacts the lives of the victim, their family, and society as a whole. We believe it is vital that domestic abuse victims are able to resettle in a different location to that of their abuser in order to be safe from harm, should they wish to do so.

The consultation on local connection considered regulations to prevent Local Authorities (LAs) applying a local connection test for victims of domestic abuse who apply for social housing. During the consultation period we engaged with the domestic abuse sector and local authorities to ensure that their interests are considered and that the consultation response achieves the desired aim of improving the protections for victims of domestic abuse. We are reviewing the responses to the consultation and will publish our response in due course.

In your letter you raised that the Committee heard from several victims about their difficulties accessing suitable, safe accommodation away from their abuser. I should explain that the allocation of social housing is a matter for the local council concerned and neither Ministers nor their officials are able to intervene in individual cases. However, I can offer some general information which you may find helpful.

Local councils are responsible for drawing up and operating their own social housing allocation scheme within the framework of legislation. By law, certain people must be given 'reasonable preference' (priority) under an allocation scheme, including people who are homeless, in overcrowded housing or who need to move for medical or welfare reasons. The Government is clear that we expect social homes to go to people who genuinely need them, including those who need to escape domestic abuse. To this end statutory guidance issued by the department advises local authorities to consider giving additional preference (high priority) to those who are homeless and require urgent re-housing as a result of violence or threats of violence including domestic violence.

The guidance also makes clear that local authorities are expected not to apply residency tests for those victims who have fled to another district and sets out how they can give

appropriate priority to victims under the 'medical and welfare' and 'homelessness' reasonable preference categories.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 also provides further protections to people who experience domestic abuse and transforms the support we give to victims ensuring they have the protection they deserve. Under their new duties within the Domestic Abuse Act, LAs are required to assess the needs for support within safe accommodation for all victims of domestic abuse, including deaf survivors, and commission the appropriate services as identified by the needs assessment. In assessing the needs in their local areas, local authorities will be able to address the barriers faced by victims including deaf survivors in accessing the support needed. The Domestic Abuse Act further provides that all eligible homeless victims of domestic abuse automatically have 'priority need' for homelessness assistance and ensures that when local authorities rehouse victims of domestic abuse, they do not lose a secure lifetime or assured tenancy.

In your letter you highlight how the Committee also heard evidence from victims wishing to stay in their home but face further barriers and a lack of support. Statutory guidance encourages local authorities to use their existing powers to support victims to remain safely in their homes if they choose to do so. The Committee may also be interested to know that alongside our consultation on local connection requirements, we ran a separate consultation to gather evidence on whether victims who are in joint tenancies with their abuser want to remain in their own homes rather than fleeing, and how to support them to do so if they feel it is safe to do so. We are currently reviewing the responses to this and will publish our response in due course.

Turning to support for deaf victims of domestic abuse, I was sorry to read about the difficulties experienced by deaf victims in accessing appropriate support. In your letter you included details of the submission by SignHealth on domestic abuse and the deaf community. The Government has provided Sign Health with £125,000 last financial year (2021/22) to increase the accessibility of domestic abuse information, advice and support for deaf users. The Home Office also funds Victim Support and provided £125,000 of funding in 2021/22, to help build the capacity of Independent Domestic Violence Advocates to support disabled victims and survivors and create a network of Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) disability champions. This has allowed them to support 2,776 disabled domestic abuse victims between April 2021 and March 2022. They have also made 555 referrals to MARAC for disabled victims of domestic abuse, compared to only 492 for the previous year, which is an increase of 12.8%.

The Government understands the importance of specialist and 'by and for' services in providing the tailored support that victims and survivors of domestic abuse need. The Home Office Tackling Domestic Abuse Plan invests 140 million to support victims, including over £47 million in ringfenced funding for victims' services and £81 million for 700 extra independent domestic violence and sexual violence advocate roles. The Government has also committed an additional £1.5 million funding this year for 'by and for' service provision and to further increase funding for valuable specialist services for victims of violence against women and girls. The VAWG National Statement of Expectations, and Commissioning Toolkit, which we published alongside the Plan, will also provide support to commissioners to help them increase provision of 'by and for' and specialist services.

You asked me to set out policy regarding accessible public consultations and policy documents and how my department will promote the use of BSL in our communications following the passage of the British Sign Language Act 2022. When developing a

consultation, the department will consider how to tailor a consultation to the needs and preferences of particular groups including people with disabilities that may not respond to traditional consultation methods.

The British Sign Language Act 2022 gained Royal Assent on 28 April 2022 and was brought forward to help promote and facilitate the use of BSL by providing legal recognition of British Sign Language (BSL) in England, Wales and Scotland whilst preserving the architecture of the Equality Act 2010.

The Act provides a specific duty on the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to prepare and publish guidance on the use of BSL and a "British Sign Language report". This report will describe what each ministerial department has done to promote and facilitate the use of BSL in their public communications. The Act details that these public communications include: any public announcement which a government department makes about policy or about changes to the law; the publication of any plan, strategy, consultation document or consultation response, or any explanatory or supporting materials; and its use of press conferences, social media or a government website to publicise any of its activities or policies.

As such, Cabinet Office suggest any public consultations should be accessible in BSL in order to comply with the Act. They also suggest it would be good practice for consultees to be able to submit responses using BSL, rather than written English which is a second language for many Deaf BSL signers.

The implementation of the BSL Act will be guided by a BSL Advisory Board which will be composed predominantly of Deaf BSL signers. They will advise on the production of guidance for ministerial departments but also wider issues which impact on the lives of BSL signers such as the provision of and quality of interpreters and how to increase the numbers of available interpreters.

I trust this information is helpful and I thank you for writing on this important matter.

Yours ever,



EDDIE HUGHES MP