

13 March 2023

Clive Betts MP
Chair
Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee
House of Commons
Parliament
LONDON, SW1A 0AA

Dear Clive,

It was a pleasure to welcome you and Nadia to Oxford City Council a few weeks ago. Thank you for taking the time to visit us and hear about the work that councils like Oxford are doing to support our residents with disabilities in the housing sector and also the significant challenges that we are encountering.

Our team at Oxford and colleagues from across the District Councils' Network's member councils are extremely grateful to you for taking time out of your busy schedules to meet with residents with lived experience as well as our teams of housing professionals, who support residents and deliver housing adaptations on the ground. I do hope you found the visit informative and helpful for your inquiry.

I would particularly like to extend our thanks to your clerk team for their careful and sensitive consideration of residents' needs in the arrangements of the visit to make sure they felt as comfortable as possible in speaking to your Committee.

From providing accommodation, housing advice and adapting homes to utilising our suite of planning powers to ensure that new developments include fully accessible homes, councils are committed to making the housing sector and our wider communities as inclusive as possible.

I was pleased to be able to show you the work taking place by Oxford City Council and our local partners to help older, disabled and vulnerable residents within Oxford City to live safely and independently in their own home.

As you heard on the visit, the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG) is a helpful tool to adapt more homes to meet the requirement of disabled residents. However, across DCN councils there is a firm view that the overall funding pot needs to be increased to meet growing demand. The means test is also in urgent need of reform and the maximum grant limit of £30,000 is insufficient to the task of adapting most homes, especially with increased cost of materials and labour as well for the growing number of residents with more complex needs and requirements. As council officers emphasised on the visit, it is important that these changes happen together. Just raising the maximum grant limit without increasing the overall pot, would limit the number of individuals as councils we are able to assist.

DCN councils are particularly concerned about tenure inequity for disabled people with private rented sector landlords and housing associations often unwilling to facilitate adaptations. This leaves council housing as one of the only options left for those unable to purchase and adapt a home. As you heard a few weeks ago, while there are examples of excellent practice by housing associations, in Oxford and across DCN member councils there are cases of poor

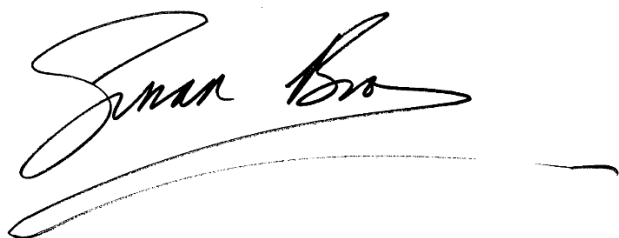
practice. Councils highlighted concerns including delays in responding to requests for adaptations and housing associations refusing to accommodate bathroom adaptations at all. It is my firm view that more should be done to encourage housing associations to permit adaptations.

In some cases, in order to get agreement from registered providers to adapt properties, particularly replacing baths with showers, councils must agree to remove the shower and reinstate a bath should the resident vacate the property. Given the shortage of accessible homes and given the significant costs of adapting a bathroom to then pay twice for both its installation and subsequent removal and replacement is unnecessary and wasteful. Councils are keen to work with housing associations to explore retaining adaptations so that these adapted properties can be allocated to other individuals and families who desperately need accessible homes.

Demand for accessible and adapted homes significantly outstrips supply of suitable accommodation. Alongside adapting existing properties, new homes need to meet accessibility standards. Government should enact its proposals within the 2022 '*Raising accessibility standards in new homes*' consultation and mandate the current M4(2) requirement in Building Regulations as a minimum standard for all new homes. Without this, our councils are concerned that the housing market will continue to fail to deliver accessible homes of the nature and scale required.

Thank you once again for visiting Oxford and meeting with housing professionals from across DCN's member councils. Please do not hesitate to contact me or my team at dcn@local.gov.uk, if we can be of any assistance to your inquiry or if you would like any further information.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Susan Brown', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Councillor Susan Brown, Vice Chair of the District Councils' Network and Leader of Oxford City Council