

## Written evidence submitted by Citizen Housing [IOC 317]

### Impact of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) on homelessness and the private rented sector

#### Inquiry

The HCLG Committee has launched an inquiry into the Impact of Covid-19 (Coronavirus) on homelessness and the private rented sector. It will consider both the immediate and long-term impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on the homeless, rough sleepers and those in the private rented sector.

The Committee expects to hold an evidence session in early May onwards to hear directly from stakeholders and Government about what is being done and what further support is needed.

Citizen is a registered housing provider operating across the West Midlands and has 30,000 properties concentrated in Coventry, Birmingham, Worcester and Hereford. A number of these properties are specifically designated as supported housing providing accommodation for those who are rough sleeping and homeless either as temporary accommodation in partnership with each local authority or as permanent accommodation. We also provide several Housing First units and have been successful with 3 Next Steps Accommodation Programme bids to support additional accommodation across the West Midlands for those who are homeless.

We are also active members of strategic groups involved in housing provision and sit on the West Midlands Combined Authority Homelessness Task Force.

Our experience during the first lockdown was like most, varied with its impact felt more so in terms of those who were homeless or seeking accommodation generally. We supported Coventry City Council as part of Everyone In and accommodated 44 rough sleepers in a single vacant former housing with care scheme. This worked well because of the wrap around service that was developed very quickly and because of the close working between the partners involved. Where challenges arose were where there were residents who had no recourse to public funds. This involved a direct relationship between us and the City Council rather than through universal credit/housing benefit. This was cumbersome and required daily invoicing which was both timely and inefficient. Addressing the issue of no recourse is therefore essential to avoid those accommodated being forced to return to a life of homelessness when there is an opportunity for the agencies involved to work closely with the Home Office to provide alternative long-term housing solutions rather than crisis after crisis intervention.

The numbers in temporary accommodation generally are significant with the length of stay perhaps the most pressing issue that requires action. This has been compounded by Covid but not a result of. The length of stay in temporary accommodation has been longer than it should be for some

time.

This is not necessarily about the supply and location of suitable accommodation, it requires a re-thinking of how we as a sector allocate accommodation to those in the greatest need. Do we directly match or continue to rely upon choice-based lettings or similar processes of allocation housing those in the greatest need, or do we accept a different notion that does not seek to marginalise applicants who are vulnerable by pushing them into a bidding process but seeks to match an applicant directly with a suitable void or new property?

Across the private rented sector, we have seen the rise of the support exempt landlord. Some of these are professional and deliver a reasonable service but most operate outside of the regulated sector. This needs to be addressed either by regulatory intervention as can be seen in some recent cases or via the enforcement options available to local authorities. In doing this though the impact of intervention must be clearly understood in terms of the individual that is housed and what alternatives there might be available to them. Covid has impacted upon this by pushing more and more to develop this type of provision and pushing the most vulnerable into difficult settings where both the quality of accommodation and service are varied. There is no single standard or code. In Birmingham for example the City Council and Spring Housing have been working on a charter for this area to encourage both self-regulation but also enforcement where this does not happen. This has just been launched and it hoped this will lead to improvements in the provision and see some of the less scrupulous landlords leave the sector.

We would call therefore for:

- A more joined approach to service provision that takes the hard work of Everyone In and seeks to source and provide more permeant accommodation and support for the most vulnerable;
- A clear revenue support process that provides different levels and lengths of support to residents as part of their journey from rough sleeping and homelessness to having a home;
- A process that accepts failure and that for some homelessness is not just about a lack of accommodation but linked to opportunities and employment that must be addressed;
- A flexible person-centered support process that recognises the link between the accommodation and person but accepts that individual decisions are what life is about and sometimes it is about explaining the consequence of a decision rather than saying the decision is wrong in certain settings;
- Health responsibilities being more clearly defined as it has a key part to play in the process;
- Having a single service offer that captures this; and
- Addressing the issue of no recourse to public funds and finding a better way of supporting those with this label by closer working with the Home Office for example.