

Written evidence submitted by Kent Housing Group [IOC 230]

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

The Kent Housing Group is a housing forum with a broad church of membership that includes all 12 Kent local authorities, Kent County Council (including Public Health) Medway Council and 14 registered providers, along with representation from SELEP, developers, and planners and the NHF and CIH. KHG is the collective voice of housing in Kent and uses the forum as the platform to work collaboratively across organisations, influence policy and practice at a national and local level, and overall meet the ambition to ensure that all residents of Kent and Medway have access to safe, secure, high quality affordable housing that meets their housing need.

Short Summary –

Across Kent and Medway the impact of COVID-19 has been far reaching and placed a tremendous pressure upon front line and services, which before this time were already under significant pressure. Having said that this situation has in the County of Kent and Medway highlighted how our successful partnership working, joint approaches and sharing of good practice works well under additional pressure as it does when it is business as usual. Overall the support, both in terms of HAST advisors contact and financial support from MHCLG and Government has been well received and has reduced some of concerns about what the immediate impact of this virus would be. It has not been a time without difficulty and challenge and there are many questions and decisions to be made moving forward, all of which are expressed in the KHG response that follows. There is a continued commitment ensure that no one is adversely impacted by this pandemic coupled with a drive to ensure that local authorities and partnership agencies are not left to find

Q. How effective has the support provided by MHCLG and other Government departments in addressing the impact of COVID-19 on those in the private rented sector, rough sleepers, and the homeless?

Kent and Medway have a long standing relationship of working with MHCLG at an operational level, with representation of a HAST Advisor at the majority of countywide operational meetings each year, their support since the pandemic started has been much appreciated, especially due to the fast moving pace of changes facing all services and front line staff. Overall the feedback from colleagues is that the support of MHCLG and other Government departments ranges from adequate to good with effective outcomes and of great benefit to the cohorts to which the interventions, funding and support was targeted. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly demonstrated what can be achieved during a time of national crisis, and with uncertainty about when services and lifestyles will return to 'the normal business as usual' it is important this the enormous progress and commitment across the board is not lost, and to use these positive outcomes as a the platform to continue helping those with complex and multiple needs to secure and sustain suitable accommodation. This will only be possible through a continuation of cross departmental collaboration.

The largely effective support has resulted in the successful accommodation of rough sleepers into temporary accommodation, locally to Kent and Medway this has been achieved through a number of pathways that include working with local hotels (national and locally owned), working with private sector landlords and utilising accommodation that was intended to accommodate other vulnerable groups (Syrian Refugees) or the reopening of local winter shelters. The process to secure temporary accommodation, with short notice from MHCLG was not without a pressure on resources, in the main the time spent on liaison and negotiation with hoteliers to secure accommodation supply and costing. The success of this differed across the county of Kent and Medway, not only due to the

approach of the hoteliers but down to the general lack of supply and access to temporary accommodation. In addition to this the Calders Accommodation Procurement Service whilst sounding good in practice, has not helped in managing the severe shortage and pressures on the provision of temporary accommodation, due to some of unrealistic requirements of the major hotel chains, with inflated nightly room charges and commitment to large numbers of block bookings. At multiagency level, our desire to respond quickly to the housing needs of particular groups, is affected by regional differences in costs, e.g. the lack of affordable accommodation in the South East.

The directive from MHCLG to move rough sleepers off the streets into accommodation has provided a real opportunity to support these individuals into settled accommodation, it has also enabled a number of rough sleepers/individuals at risk of rough sleeping to become known to the services locally in Kent and Medway who previously were not known or did not fully engage. The COVID-19 updates and guidance provided by MHCLG and the RSI advisors has been useful and organisations have been using and disseminating the information internally and with partners. The opportunities provided to share feedback on present issues, for example early prisoner release and hospital discharge, has also been welcomed, especially in the knowledge that this is being fed back centrally to Government colleagues and departments.

Moving forward a significant concern is that the funding provided to cover the initial response is not adequate. The initial contingency funding allocation for rough sleepers funding only covers the cost for approximately the first month of accommodating this cohort, to continue to accommodate this cohort until a successful housing solution is found, which could take many months, will be at a huge cost to local authorities, who themselves will be severely and adversely financially impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. The allocations of funding announced on the 24th of March and the 18th of April are inclusive of work around homelessness and rough sleeping, but are not ring-fenced and include all relevant council services, the concern here is that if overall authority spend exceeds the allocation then this may impact specifically on homelessness and rough sleeping services going forward. Another factor is the impact of the loss in revenue for local authorities (e.g. council tax, business rates, parking fees etc), without a commitment to continue and future funding from Government there is the potential for a lost opportunity and a negative outcome for many rough sleepers who may be forced to return to the streets.

The short term response interventions provided to local authorities has been effective in the short term, along with placements into temporary accommodation tenancy sustainment support or floating support has been provided to these individuals, outreach services have been providing support for the cohort who were found accommodation but then chose to return to the streets, with continued work to secure alternative and appropriate accommodation. Support has been particularly effective for newer rough sleepers who may have lost employment due to COVID-19. A final consideration for those rough sleepers who have been supported through this pandemic is the heightened levels of expectation in the future services and support, coupled with uncertainty about what settled housing solutions will be available and appropriate further down the timeline.

A significantly welcomed policy shift by Government during this pandemic has been the uplift in the Local Housing Allowance rates to the 30th percentile of market rents, this is considered by colleagues as long overdue and will not only benefit many thousands of private renters who have been adversely financially effected by COVID-19, but also the many thousands of more renters to both afford existing homes and to new tenants accessing the private rented sector. It is greatly hoped that this uplift is not a temporary fix during the current climate to help sustain housing markets and

tenancies, but the start of a commitment to ensure Local Housing Allowance rates cover more than just the bottom tier of private rented properties.

In addition to funding and centralising access to temporary accommodation the extension of the notice period to three months and suspension of court possession proceedings has also given renters and homeowners greater protection at this current time, and will almost certainly have alleviated any immediate fears about becoming homeless. However, concerns remain about how landlords will respond during and after the recovery phase of the crisis, for those tenants who have accumulated rent arrears as a direct or indirect result of the crisis, and the pressure that this will place upon housing options and homelessness services should further support may be required at this time to prevent homelessness.

Although MHCLG have remained in regular communication and have shared key messages in a timely manner some of these messages have been mixed or unclear relating to the directives. Colleagues have worked hard to decipher and work towards the positive outcomes but there is now scope and opportunity to review the communication, systems and processes between agencies, and in particular with HMPPS (HM Prisons and Probation) to develop a more coordinated approach to meeting the support needs of prison releases, those subject to community supervision and other vulnerable groups who may be adversely impacted by the COVID-19.

Q. What problems remain a current and immediate concern for these groups?

The uncertainty about a commitment or assurance about a continuation or future funding to enable local authorities to accommodate rough sleepers to which they do not owe a statutory duty is a concern. The adoption of the approach undertaken in Wales, issuing statutory guidance that rough sleepers should be considered in priority need during the COVID-19 crisis will create an additional problem for local authorities, not only as mentioned the continued cost to local authorities of providing accommodation, but also as the COVID-19 crisis has put a huge strain on the limited resource of temporary accommodation. The rough sleeper cohort is regarded traditionally as having been difficult to find a suitable housing solution, not only due to the complex needs (e.g. substance misuse/mental health) of the individuals, but also as often they have fractured relationships with accommodation providers such as registered or support providers due to evictions for ASB or rent arrears. Some accommodation providers, particularly RP's have strict lettings policies in place and will not reconsider individuals again if accommodation has previously been lost due to rent arrears or ASB.

In addition to accessing temporary accommodation is the concern about how regular services for rough sleepers are either running limited services or closed, this impacts upon access to non-emergency health services, access to drug and alcohol services and also access to any funding, grants, food donations for these groups is also limited. The reduced staffing at district councils has meant that housing advice in some but not all areas is also limited.

Across Kent and Medway the severe shortage of temporary accommodation is the source of major concern, especially should there be any major incident requiring a medium to large number of households to be accommodated. Housing supply generally is being 'choked' by a lack of mobilisation across all tenures, with a trickle of actual 'move on' activity presently around the county and bordering regions, which as a consequence is a developing backlog of move on accommodation required.

To support Kent and Medway colleague locally the MHCLG HAST advisors have promised to share some examples where housing associations and some local authorities have started successful

mobilisation and should hopefully provide a better steer on reducing numbers in temporary accommodation. However, there is uncertainty about what behaviours and expectations there will be from the private sector when the courts are brought back for formal evictions as we will have no real indication of activity other than local intelligence, including contact from individuals who are furloughed, state/grant aided or struggling and the COVID-19 refreshed web pages and information locally from estate agents communicating with Accommodation Officers within local authorities. There is a legitimate concern that some tenants may exploit the pandemic to not pay rent during this crisis and the impact of this in terms of numbers and presentations to housing advice services will not be known for some time.

When the decision is taken by Government to resume business as usual for the Courts there will have to be consideration of how this may impact upon the ability to access temporary accommodation for those who are eligible for assistance and how to prevent local authorities entering a competitive and inflated pricing environment to secure temporary accommodation, and the impact on placements outside of a local authorities area, all of which will impact negatively on current positive partnership working arrangement.

Although it was anticipated that the introduction of the three month suspension of possession actions and warrants of eviction would see an associated decrease in footfall for homelessness services, the Government's focus on rough sleepers and its widely published message of "getting everyone inside" has seen a large increase in approaches from those presenting as rough sleepers – even though they have never been previously identified by a rough sleeper or support services as falling within that category. In addition to this are those asked to leave (ATL) by friends or family and claiming to be at risk of rough sleeping. Balancing the implications of landlords who are ignoring Government advice about moving on tenants and not adhering to the social distancing guidance has put an additional pressure upon services.

In addition to the information above, prison releases, including ROTL, represent an extra burden upon frontline housing options services, with currently there being little or disjointed information on the likely numbers for each area across the county. Having limited information will hamper the necessary preparation for reception of this cohort, with the inability to carry out detailed telephone assessments before release, which has been caused by changes in prison procedures, being particularly problematic and meaning delay in interviewing and prevention/relief duty work.

There has also been some initial concerns about an influx of hospital discharges to enable more beds to be utilised by hospitals to treat patients with COVID-19, however to date this not presented as an issue, but should remain on the agenda as a watching brief, should we experience a future wave of virus transmission.

It is critical to ensure that all individuals are able to access the right wrap around support services within their current situation, to enable them to manage and deal with the restrictions and consequences of lockdown and tackle multiple and often entrenched needs or behaviours. To achieve this will involve continuing to work across government departments and provide easy access to the required provision. It will be necessary to balance the landlord's desire for risk information concerning individuals whilst protecting the rights of individuals and those of any agency or organisation responsibility for managing risk on their behalf.

Q. What might be the immediate post-lockdown impacts for these groups, and what action is needed to help with these?

It will be necessary to have a managed incremental 'move on' process that responds to the new landscape and climate that we will find ourselves in, having a clear and transparent approach that will prevent additional financial burden and risk for local authorities and result in the right outcomes for those are being supported currently. The ramifications of COVID-19 will be evident for a significant period of time and it is essential to ensure that the provision of vital front line services and support are not negatively impacted or stripped of funding to help other areas recover from this pandemic.

For the rough sleeping cohort the loss or indeed reduction in supply and access to temporary accommodation and a return to the streets is the key concern. There will have to be a co-ordinated approach across national Government departments and services at a local/regional level to ensure that each individual has an accommodation offer if eligible. The loss of support links with external agencies that have been established during lockdown is also a risk, the multi-agency sharing of information via partnership meetings should mitigate this, and so rough sleepers do not fall off the radar. The main risk is that rough sleepers will go back to rough sleeping and the opportunity to change lives will have been lost. If individuals do return to the streets, following an extended period when they have been in accommodation, they may be at increased risk from substance misuse – e.g. overdose, if through reduced use, their tolerance has lessened. There is an identified a need for more intensive tenancy sustainment service, to work to support service users and landlords to prevent and reduce risk of losing accommodation and risk of service users being deemed as intentionally homeless.

There is the possibility of some real positive post-lockdown impacts for these groups, including rough sleepers being supported in settled accommodation. As mentioned, further funding is required to enable this cohort to be continued to be provided with temporary accommodation until this is found, otherwise there is the risk of them returning to the streets. There also needs to be more pressure on RP's to flex their lettings policies and to accept individuals for allocations, even if the individual has in the past been evicted for rent arrears/ASB, or has a former tenancy debt. Without continuing accommodation offers and support there is a concern that the perceptions of some of the rough sleeping cohort that they only matter during a pandemic, making it much harder to engage them in future.

For those in the private rented sector and to some extent the social rented sector, there is a risk that landlords will not be tolerant or prepared to work with tenants who have accumulated rent arrears and will use section 21 notices as a means to evict these tenants, without exploring options to allow tenants to repay rent owed, which would jeopardise the huge amount of partnership work undertaken to avoid such situations. Over the three month period landlords will already have lost large amounts of valuable rental income and may therefore be less likely to consider prevention work, with this causing a large and immediate increase in evictions and associated homeless applications. In addition even where prevention is an option, it would appear likely that larger amounts of DHP and prevention payments will be need in order to clear higher levels of rent arrears so as to sustain tenancies. To address this, alongside local authority's individual efforts to reach out to landlords and affected tenants, an awareness campaign from government highlighting the assistance that is available from local authorities to prevent evictions and the importance of seeking this early would be most welcome.

Further regulation to prevent the use of section 21 notices to evict a tenant, when the underlying reason for the eviction is rent arrears caused by COVID-19, would be welcomed. The continuation of the regulations extending the notice period for section 21 notices, beyond the current period in the Coronavirus regulations, would have a huge impact on preventing homelessness and would be

welcomed. To date there has been no guidance or information released about likely time scales for the completion of possession orders and serving of bailiff warrants once the suspensions are lifted. This need to be communicated to the Council to enable us to plan effectively for the impact of post lockdown evictions.

The current increase in both Local Housing Allowance and Universal Credit housing cost payments have been welcomed and had a significant positive impact, however there is a valid concern about whether rate and payments will revert back or decrease post April 2021 and this will almost certainly cause affordability issues for individuals, especially those that have secured accommodation at the increased rates. The housing market needs certainty and stability and it is requested that these increased rates be sustained ongoing.

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