

# Open Letter

## COVID-19: a letter to Boris Johnson

The Rt. Hon. Boris Johnson MP  
10 Downing Street  
London  
SW1A 2AA

20<sup>th</sup> March 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

We write to you as Chief Executives of charities that provide vital accommodation to people experiencing homelessness. We understand the challenges that the government currently faces in ensuring that the whole of society is protected against COVID-19.

Vulnerable people sleeping rough or living in homelessness accommodation and the frontline staff protecting them in particular face unprecedented challenges, which are on the cusp of overwhelming them if urgent measures are not put in place.

While we welcome the £3.2m emergency funding to help people sleeping rough to self-isolate and the confirmation that charities and workers delivering frontline services are designated key workers, we urge you to take action on the additional measures we have set out in the attached briefing, to ensure that homelessness accommodation and outreach services can continue to keep vulnerable individuals and the wider community safe.

Many of the measures aimed at the general population, such as self-isolation or social distancing, will be difficult to implement in homelessness accommodation or for those sleeping rough. A tailored package of support is therefore needed.

We attach a briefing outlining the measures we urgently need the government to take. The starting point has to be keeping homelessness services running throughout this crisis, in the way care services for the elderly and other vulnerable groups must continue to operate. If accommodation services are not able to maintain minimum staffing levels, then thousands more people will be forced to sleep rough.

There is little doubt we need to avoid adding to the huge strain on the NHS and emergency services. We are certain that our sector can do a great deal to support this effort if the following steps are taken:

- Providing an urgent package of financial support for homelessness accommodation services, for example by mirroring the grants available to businesses
- Making bloc payments of housing benefit to homelessness accommodation providers
- Ensuring all homelessness accommodation service providers have Personal Protection
- Equipment, including thermometers and access to testing facilities
- Ensuring all homelessness service providers can access emergency self-contained accommodation, allowing service users to safely self-isolate where necessary
- The support and resourcing needed to ensure all local authority homelessness services remain open, so that anyone at risk has a gateway into support
- Welfare reform which protects against hardship and increased risk of homelessness.

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We ask for the opportunity for a group of us to meet with you urgently to discuss how we can work together with you, and your colleagues in government, to protect people who rely on homelessness services during this time.

Yours sincerely,

Seyi Obakin OBE, CEO Centrepont

Mike Thiedke, CEO Depaul UK

Howard Sinclair, CEO St Mungo's

Rick Henderson, CEO Homeless Link

Jo Moore, CEO Accommodation Concern

Simon Ree, Youth Project Manager Bardsley Youth Project

Helena Evans, CEO Brighter Futures

George O'Neil, CEO Cardinal Hume Centre

Mike Pattinson, Executive Director Change Grow Live

Sarah Hernandez, Managing Director Derventio Housing Trust

Carol Gallagher, CEO Doorway

Marie Davis, CEO Falcon Support Services

Shaun Doran, CEO FRC Group and End Furniture Poverty

Sian Elen Tomos, CEO GISDA- North Wales

Malcom Mcarevey, Educational Co-ordinator Inspiring The Young - FSDA CIC

Andrew Redfearn, CEO Framework Housing Association

Hannah Brooman, Director InUnity

Paul Morrish, CEO LandAid

Judith Vickers, Operations Manager Lifeshare

Phil Kerry, CEO New Horizon Youth Centre

Carol Scawthon, Director New Roots Housing

Nikki Burley, CEO Newark Emmaus Trust

Jan Larkin, CEO Nightsafe

Jackie Hooper, Operations Manager North Worcestershire Basement Projects

Robin Burgess, CEO Northampton Hope

Peter Dale, Director Open Door Colchester

David Mcauley, CEO Open House

Eddie Bailey, CEO Park Lodge Project

David Smith, CEO Stepping Stone Projects

Jane Hugo, CEO Streetlife

Steve Ellis, CEO St Petrocs

Frances Duncan, CEO The Clock Tower Sanctuary

Fergal McCullough, CEO The Men's Room

John Holmstrom, CEO Turning Tides

Lisa Bennett, Director of People Services, YMCA Milton Keynes & Northamptonshire

Andy Moreman, CEO Young Devon

cc.

*Therese Coffey, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions*

*Luke Hall, Minister for Local Government and Homelessness*

*Robert Jenrick, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government*

*Will Quince, Minister for Welfare Delivery*

## Attached Briefing:

20 March 2020

### **COVID-19: here's what the government must do to protect the homeless**

The COVID-19 pandemic poses unprecedented risks to all, but those experiencing or at risk of homelessness are especially vulnerable. Charities like Centrepoin, Depaul UK and St Mungo's which directly provide accommodation for people who are homeless are determined to do everything it takes to maintain the high level of service we deliver all year round, yet the sector needs vital support from the government to do this.

This briefing sets out the key policy changes we need to see in order to protect people living in supported and other types of homelessness accommodation during the pandemic.

### **Urgent support for charities providing accommodation for homeless people**

Thousands of staff are doing vital work to keep homeless people safe and healthy during this pandemic, but **we are approaching a crisis point**. Support from the government is urgently needed, which goes beyond a focus on rough sleeping, to ensure that vital homelessness services remain open:

- **An emergency fund is needed for homelessness accommodation providers.** Many providers receive limited statutory funding. The sector is highly reliant on voluntary income, which is not sustainable at the present time. Access to funding, particularly to help with additional staffing costs, will help homelessness accommodation providers to continue to deliver services.
- **The Government should make bloc payments of housing benefit to homelessness accommodation providers.** Government could reduce financial risks for homelessness accommodation providers and residents, as well as administration costs, by making a three-month bloc-payment of Housing Benefit in advance, with built-in safeguards to protect against future overpayment deductions.
- **All homelessness accommodation providers should have Personal Protection Equipment urgently delivered, including thermometers and access to testing facilities.** We recognise the sudden dramatic increase in demand for this equipment, but without being able to identify who has contracted COVID-19 it will be impossible to effectively isolate vulnerable residents in shared accommodation facilities and limit further spread of the virus to residents and staff
- **All homelessness service providers should be able to access emergency self-contained accommodation to allow service users testing positive for or displaying symptoms of COVID-19 to safely self-isolate.** Infectious diseases can spread rapidly in hostels and supported accommodation projects and put already vulnerable populations at major risk. All local housing authorities should identify and make available furnished properties such as social housing voids, hotels and bed and breakfasts, and empty private properties where necessary. This requires a commitment from government to go beyond the £3.2m already earmarked to help local authorities source accommodation for people sleeping rough to self-isolate.
- **Comprehensive planning and support measures should be put in place for providers across the country.** While the current focus is on London, the rapid spread of this virus means that support measures must be put in place for providers in the rest of the country, including rural and coastal communities without delay.

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## Access to statutory homelessness and housing services

Local authorities have legal duties to support, and in some cases accommodate, those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. COVID-19 poses additional stresses **which will cause homelessness**, alongside existing factors. Yet local authorities are under strain to keep their service running, so further measures are needed now and over the coming months:

- **Financial support and assistance for local authorities and third sector providers to secure self-contained accommodation** to meet the increased need for both rough sleepers and also residents in supported accommodation for whom self-isolation is not feasible.
- **Local authority housing services are recognised as essential services and receive the support they need to remain operational.** It is vital that local authority housing authorities can continue to play their role and do not leave those who are homeless or at risk without the immediate advice and support they are legally entitled to.

## Support through the welfare system to protect those who face homelessness

The welfare system **must provide a vital safety net** to all during the pandemic. Additional measures are needed which protect those who are currently experiencing homelessness as well as preventing more people losing a home:

- Advance payments for Universal Credit should be available immediately and non-repayable. This would ensure that vulnerable claimants get the urgent financial support they need without waiting for the first payment and without fear of being pushed into debt.
- All conditionality sanctioning and automatic deductions should be paused for the foreseeable future. This would ensure claimants are not subject to impossible work search activity in the current climate and as a result sanctioned for failure to meet the claimant commitment.

### **For more information please contact:**

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N.B. Briefing originally linked to Centrepoint news webpage entitled, '*COVID-19: here's what the government must do to protect the homeless*', 20 March 2020