

The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government
2 Marsham Street
London
SW1P 4DF

Via email

19 August 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

We are writing to you on behalf of Greater Manchester Combined Authority with grave concerns regarding the lifting of the temporary evictions ban, planned for the 24th August. We fear that the lifting of the ban will precipitate a huge surge in evictions, which may overwhelm services and lead to a sharp rise in homelessness. A perfect storm of factors is coming together to exacerbate this problem, and urgent attention must be paid to dealing with these issues if we are to avoid a crisis.

We welcome some of the steps that Government has taken thus far, including lifting the freeze on Local Housing Allowance, restoring the link to the 30th percentile of local market rents for Local Housing Allowance, preventing possession claims from proceeding through the courts, and supporting Local Authorities to pursue a policy of 'Everyone In' on rough sleeping. However, we believe if the gains of these policies are to be maintained urgent action will be required to mitigate the impact of the upcoming removal of the eviction ban.

In Greater Manchester, we estimate that up to 7,200 households currently with arrears would be under threat of eviction - from figures provided by Shelter and YouGov surveys of the rental market. The latest unemployment data for Greater Manchester shows our claimant count has increased to 141,000, an increase of 88% since March - with Universal Credit (UC) and Housing Benefit (HB) claimants rising by 27,050 (11%) in the same time. Just in the Private Rented Sector alone, claimant numbers are up 19,129 (25%) to a total of 96,270 in the same period. Further to this, 384,700 people in Greater Manchester have been furloughed, due to end in October 2020. Once furlough ends we anticipate a further spike in unemployment and rent arrears.

Greater Manchester Combined Authority and its districts have battled valiantly throughout the Coronavirus crisis to date, working in lock-step with government policy to provide outcomes for residents. As a legacy of the 'Everyone In' policy we have re-housed 263 individuals into settled accommodation, with a further 198 into other rough sleeper accommodation pathways and a remaining 470 individuals are in ongoing COVID-related temporary accommodation. The challenges of providing people with their own homes, that are both affordable and supported, is being addressed by the Next Steps Accommodation Programme which we welcome.

However, the number of individuals at risk of eviction after the 24th has the potential to dwarf the numbers we are currently dealing with through the pandemic, numbers which are already

GMCA, Broadhurst House, 56 Oxford Street, Manchester, M1 6EU

stretching our services to the bone. Unless rapid and decisive action is taken to avert crisis, and increase the capacity to prevent avoidable impacts, we fear that homelessness could return to the streets of Greater Manchester on a scale not seen since the 1930s.

We urge you to make accommodations for the needs and requirements not only of Greater Manchester, but of districts in a similar position to ourselves - and we ask as a matter of great urgency to consider extending the evictions ban further until provisions have been put in place. Specifically, Greater Manchester requests that government use the welfare system to protect renters by:

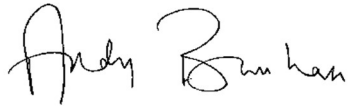
- i. Ensuring the Courts enforce Pre-Action Protocols for Landlords who are looking to evict, and consider all reasonable prevention action including the addition of County Courts as Duty To Refer agencies in respect of tenant possession proceedings,, working in partnership with Local Authorities and other support organisations;
- ii. Finding a route through the welfare system to write-off rent arrears caused by the immediate consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic to help landlords and renters to work together to sustain tenancies;
- iii. Providing emergency prevention monies to Local Authorities (in the form of Housing Options COVID Burdens monies or Discretionary Housing Payment top up) to increase their capacity to advise, mediate, and support people to avoid eviction and rent arrears.;
- iv. Removing or suspending the operation of the benefit cap, which has seen a 93% increase in application in the 3 months to May;
- v. Restoring the link to the 50th percentile of local market rents for Local Housing Allowance, recognising the increasing numbers of households who are, or will soon be as a consequence of COVID-19, reliant on Universal Credit or other benefits to help meet their housing costs, and the limited supply of available affordable accommodation;
- vi. Allowing direct payment to landlords (private and social) as a default for Universal Credit, while giving all claimants to opt out if they wish;
- vii. Improving communication between private landlords and DWP to assist in resolving and preventing arrears arising unnecessarily;

We also request that government commit to communicate clearly and urgently with both landlords and tenants (and other key players such as letting agents) so that all are aware of their obligations, rights and available support and advice. We must recognise that the pandemic's impact will mean that many renters and landlords who have previously not engaged with DWP, local authorities and other support agencies will be dealing with new pressures and anxieties. Clear messaging is a vital tool. For example, many renters are not aware that a Section 21 notice from their landlord does not immediately end their tenancy, and equally many landlords don't know that illegal eviction under the Protection from Eviction Act 1977 is a criminal offence. Government's voice is important and uniquely well placed to help reduce unnecessary stresses, conflicts and uncertainties for all parties over coming months.

The costs of adopting these measures will, we believe, be insignificant compared to the financial and social costs of a substantial increase in rent arrears, consequent evictions and homelessness, with all the risks to public health which follow. On the same basis, the work to prevent and reduce homelessness and rough sleeping must continue if we are to manage the risks of living with COVID-19, ahead of effective treatment or vaccine. This must include effective action to help people with No Recourse to Public Funds to access safe, self-

contained housing. We must do all we can to actively prevent an intensifying housing crisis, and we are ready to work with Government to that end.

Yours sincerely,



Andy Burnham
Mayor of Greater Manchester



Paul Dennett
Salford City Mayor
GMCA Portfolio Lead – Housing,
Homelessness and Infrastructure