Dear James

I am pleased to let the committee know that today we published the ‘Ending Homelessness Together: High Level Action Plan’ setting out the actions we will take across local and national government, with partners, to prevent, tackle and end homelessness and rough sleeping. The Plan is available on the Scottish Government’s website: https://www.gov.scot/publications/ending-homelessness-together-high-level-action-plan/.

The Plan responds both to the themes and recommendations raised by the Committee’s report following your inquiry on homelessness, as well as the recommendations made by the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Action Group (HARSAG).

When I wrote to the Committee earlier this year, I highlighted the significant agreement between the Action Group’s recommendations to date and the Committee’s report on Homelessness as well as my intention to ensure that our responses to you and the Action Group set out a clear overarching strategy to respond to the expert advice contained in both pieces of work.

Following the further two sets of recommendations from the HARSAG in May and June 2018, this Action Plan has been developed under the leadership of the Homelessness Prevention and Strategy Group, which I co-chair with the COSLA spokesperson for Community Wellbeing Cllr Elena Whitham. This group will also oversee the delivery of the Plan, and ensure that the strong emphasis placed on the voice of lived experience which ran through the HARSAG process, as well as the Committee’s own inquiry, continues to be at the heart of this work.

The key themes of the Action Plan are set out below:

- Embedding a person-centred approach across our public services
- Preventing homelessness from happening to people in the first place

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The Actions highlighted in the plan include steps we will take to address the range of issues highlighted by the work of the Committee.

The Plan sets out a significant shift towards Housing First, for those that it is appropriate for, providing ordinary settled housing as a first response for people with multiple needs. Housing First sits within a wider rapid rehousing approach and work here is already well under way, with every local authority expected to submit a rapid rehousing transition plan by the end of 2018.

The Committee felt that more could be done to prevent homelessness. Building on the strengths of the Housing Options approach we have set out a range of measures that will secure even greater efforts to prevent homelessness before it occurs. This includes the development of a wide-reaching prevention duty that will ensure that prevention is embedded as a defining principle that supports the sharing of best practice and leading to change across Scotland.

The Plan clearly sets out that a person centred approach is central to our approach to improve the experience of homeless people. This has been influenced by the Aye We Can report which supported the work of HARSAG. The report prioritised the views of people with lived experience and ensured that the Action Group’s recommendations were based directly on people’s experiences and priorities. The Committee highlighted the importance of accessibility of information for homeless people and the Plan sets out that in 2019 we will work with local authorities to make homelessness assessments more flexible and develop plans to make it as easy as possible for people to access their right to assistance.

The Plan also highlights the importance of joining up planning and resources and as part of our commitment to the development of a prevention duty, we will ensure local authorities, housing providers and public bodies work together to prevent homelessness and rough sleeping at every opportunity. The Plan also set out actions that we will take which will see homelessness embedded as a public health priority and improve the join up between local health, social care housing and homelessness planning.

The Committee were concerned about the numbers of care-experienced people represented in homelessness figures. In addressing these concerns we commit in the Action Plan to develop preventative pathways for groups at the highest risk of rough sleeping and homelessness, including care leavers. Taking this a step further we also commit to ensure there is a clear effective focus on preventing and responding effectively to youth homelessness. The rapid rehousing transition plans are required to respond appropriately to the needs of young people experiencing homelessness, and include the planning and development of pathways and a range of affordable housing options and associated supports for young people. We will also ensure the consistent application of the Staying Put provision for care leavers and the effective implementation of the Scottish Government Missing Person’s Framework.

The Committee rightly highlighted the impact of the UK Government’s Welfare Reform Programme and in the Action Plan we set out that we will work in partnership with local...
government and the wider sector to continue to push the UK Government to reverse the changes to the welfare system they have introduced that put people at risk of homelessness. These include the way in which Local Housing Allowance is calculated, the Benefit Cap and the freeze on benefits. We will continue to call for a halt to the roll out of Universal Credit until it is fixed, as well as continuing to seek support from the UK Government to help us mitigate the bedroom tax and ultimately abolish it at source. All these issues amongst others can all contribute to debt, hardship and risk tenancies and therefore lead to homelessness.

The Action Plan also sets out a suite of measures aimed at transforming temporary accommodation, reducing the need for it in the first place, improving standards and ensuring the right support is in place for those that live there. We will introduce the means to enforce and monitor standards for temporary accommodation in all tenures and we will consult on extending the Unsuitable Accommodation Order next year, restricting time spent in unsuitable accommodation to seven days for all homeless households. We will also develop a new funding framework for temporary accommodation in collaboration with local government, recognising the importance of designing a model that helps to tackle poverty by lowering rents, provides people with the opportunity to access employment, training or education and supports a rapid move on to a safe, settled home that meets their needs.

We will now be focusing on implementation with our partners to ensure that we meet our bold ambitions to tackle and end homelessness and rough sleeping. I am looking forward to the opportunity provided by the Ending Homelessness Together Debate on Thursday for Parliament to be able to scrutinize the contents of the Action Plan and I will continue to keep the Committee updated as our work progresses.

Kind regards

KEVIN STEWART

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