

Mrs S Braverman
Secretary of State for the Home Department
House of Commons
SW1A 0AA

7 November 2023

Dear Mrs Braverman

As Exeter's local homelessness charity we have taken this unprecedented step to write to a Secretary of State as we were surprised and disappointed to read reports at the weekend of your proposal to make it an offence for charities such as ours to give tents to rough sleepers reports you have not denied in your subsequent social media posts expressing your views on rough sleeping. Whilst we are pleased this proposal did not make it into the King's Speech today, we nevertheless are deeply concerned by your use of inflammatory language on social media about some of the most vulnerable people in our society, and by the level of misunderstanding displayed by a key Government minister.

St Petrock's mobile rough sleeper team walks up to eight miles a day delivering cooked breakfasts and lunches to rough sleepers and those who are vulnerably housed. We also provide showers, survival gear and clothes, as well as laundry, mobile phone charging and emotional and practical support for the people who need us. We therefore have a very good understanding of the reasons why people sleep rough, and what is needed to reduce rough sleeping.

In Exeter we're experiencing the highest ever level of rough sleeping in the city, following the numbers of people in this position doubling last year despite your Government's pledge to end rough sleeping. Yesterday our team's weekly review identified at least 29 people who would be sleeping rough in the city on Monday night.

Many of those who seek out our services are often desperate, frightened and traumatised from childhood abuse or neglect. A large number of our clients have grown up in the care system without being properly prepared to cope as adults in a complicated world. Others will be suffering mental illness or addictions for which they cannot get appropriate help. All experience abuse and often violence on streets, as well as being exposed to the elements and the very real risk of death from hypothermia as we enter the winter months.

As your learned Conservative colleagues Bob Blackman MP and Richard Bacon MP, Chair and Vice Chair respectively of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Ending Homelessness have made clear, the idea that rough sleeping is some kind of lifestyle choice is woefully inaccurate and misleading. It is also dangerously inflammatory and certainly no basis for introduction of new legislation to outlaw using a tent for shelter or providing tents as shelters for rough sleepers.

Instead, those who find themselves forced to sleep rough in our cities and towns are in desperate need of extra help and support both to address the complex issues that have resulted in them becoming homeless in the first place, and to enable them to find and maintain settled accommodation.

Rather than subjecting people experiencing homelessness to further trauma and abuse by removing what little shelter they have, here are some suggestions for key policies to achieve your stated objective of ending rough sleeping in our cities:

- Increase Housing Benefit to reflect the current rental market. Housing Benefit has not kept pace with the rental market for years due to Government's decision to repeatedly freeze it despite soaring rent levels. As in many other cities, there is therefore no accommodation available in Exeter that is affordable by those reliant on housing benefit
- Reinvest in the support and accommodation services for people at risk of homelessness that have been systematically stripped away over the past 13 years, services which had virtually eliminated rough sleeping
- Abandon the Home Office's proposal to reduce accommodation for those granted leave to remain in the UK, a proposal which will push yet more traumatised people onto the streets
- Massively increase the delivery of social housing to offset the impact of Right to Buy, thereby providing credible housing options for those most in need.

Actions such as these, rather than inflammatory rhetoric and punitive sanctions on those who are victims of multiple policy failures, are the only way to achieve a reduction in rough sleepers and tents seen on the streets of our cities.

Homelessness and rough sleeping is a political choice, not a personal one, as the "Everyone In" campaign at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic proved. As the holder of one of the great Offices of State, you have the influence to bring lasting change by campaigning for the policy changes outlined above.

Yours sincerely

Peter Stephenson
Director