



John Griffiths AM
Chair ELGC Committee

18 July 2018

Dear John,

ELGC Committee – Request for further information

Thank you for your letter of 21 June 2018 requesting further information in relation to the Welsh Government's response to your Committee's report on rough sleeping. I have outlined a response to each of your additional questions below.

Recommendations 1 and 2

1. When will the updated Code of Guidance for Local Authorities in the Allocation of Accommodation and Homelessness be published?

An updated version of the Code of Guidance for Local Authorities in the Allocation of Accommodation and Homelessness will be issued for consultation by the end of 2018.

2. What are the timelines for developing and publishing best practice user guide for the application of section 68 interim accommodation duties?

The Welsh Government is engaging with local authorities and other key stakeholders during the summer to inform the development of best practice guides, with a view to publishing them in the autumn.

3. What are the timelines for the independent assessment relating to changing the approach to priority need? In particular, when will the Welsh Government be in a position to make a final decision on changes to the current approach?

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

The exact timescales for the independent assessment will be determined by the commissioning process, however I am clear this is a priority piece of work that needs to be undertaken as quickly as possible. It is only once we fully understand all the consequences, both intended and unintended, will we be in a position to make a decision on changes to the current approach.

Recommendation 7

4. *When will the best practice guidance on local connection be available?*

The Welsh Government is engaging with local authorities and other key stakeholders during the summer to inform the development of best practice guides, with a view to publishing them in the autumn.

Recommendation 10

5. *The Welsh Government has rejected this recommendation on the basis that flexible payment options are already available to claimants in Wales. It would appear from the evidence we received during our inquiry that organisations directly involved in the delivery of homelessness services are not necessarily aware of these payment options.*

We would like further details of these options, including details of the full range of options that are available, whether they are available to all claimants in Wales and how they can be accessed. In addition, we would like you to confirm whether you will commit to raise awareness of the availability of flexible payment options with the housing and homelessness sector and with third sector financial advice services as a matter of priority?

The Welsh Government rejected this recommendation on the basis that we do not support the devolution of welfare benefits or their administration to Wales. As a matter of principle we should all be entitled to an equal claim from our welfare state. The needs of citizens within the UK, wherever they live, should be equally met.

As set out in my original response, the Welsh Government does wish to see all Universal Credit claimants being offered an informed choice regarding how their Universal Credit is paid to them through flexible payment options. These options would see more frequent payments, more than just once per month, the housing costs being paid directly to the landlord and split payments for those who wish to see this.

Currently for individuals and couples claiming Universal Credit in Wales, England and Scotland, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has a number of ways to support the most vulnerable claimants through their Alternative Payment Arrangements (APAs) process. These APAs can be:

- Direct Payment of the Housing Costs of Universal Credit to a landlord;
- More frequent payment of Universal Credit than monthly; and
- Split payment arrangements of Universal Credit for couples.

At the start of a claim for Universal Credit everyone has to have an initial face to face interview with their Job Centre Work Coach. It is at this initial meeting when the details for any Universal Credit claim are verified, such as rental information, that there is a mechanism in place for the Work Coach to trigger a discussion with the claimant(s) regarding how Universal Credit will be paid, or if APAs need to be put in

place. For example, a claimant would be asked if their Housing Benefit was previously paid direct to their landlord, or whether the claimant has two months of rent arrears. If the claimant answers 'yes' to either of these questions then the Work Coach will refer them for an APA. This would normally mean that the housing costs in Universal Credit would then be paid direct to the landlord.

There are other times when a conversation between the Work Coach and the claimant can trigger a discussion about APAs, for example, when:

- a claimant requests an advance payment and has requested support with Personal Budgeting Support;
- if the claimant has a change of circumstances where they have secured a tenancy after previously being homeless;
- if the customer has any mental ill health or has difficulty managing a budget (this might be asking for Food Bank Vouchers);
- in certain circumstances the landlord will automatically request a 'managed payment' of housing costs direct to them if they are aware that the claimant has a history of rent arrears OR to prevent any rent arrears occurring.

DWP has explained that this is not prescriptive of the conversation which can trigger a discussion about APAs with the claimant, this can occur at any point during an individual's/couple's claim for Universal Credit.

I have repeatedly written to DWP Ministers asking for greater consideration for proactively offering these 'payment' choices on a more informed basis to claimants in Wales, and has been advised that the APAs process is in place for this purpose. However, there does appear anecdotally to be an inconsistent approach to how APAs are being applied by the DWP across Wales.

Further to my previous response, we have now established a joint Board with the DWP, which is looking at the operational implementation issues for Universal Credit. I can confirm that this Board will look as a priority at what more can be done to ensure that the awareness and communications on the availability of APAs are stepped up and improved, particularly for landlords, advisory services and third sector organisations, which are supporting vulnerable people, including the homelessness and housing sector.

Recommendation 11

6. When will best practice on how vulnerable households are housed and supported to maintain their accommodation be rolled out?

The Welsh Government is engaging with local authorities and other key stakeholders during the summer to inform the development of best practice guides, with a view to publishing them in the autumn.

Recommendation 12

7. What are the timelines for the assessment of how transitional funding allocated to local authorities has been utilised to improve access to the PRS for homeless people?

The assessment will be undertaken in the autumn in order to inform our longer term plans to maximise the impact of the PRS sector within Wales.

Recommendation 14

8. What are the timelines for reviewing current move on arrangements?

The Welsh Government will be engaging with local authorities and other key stakeholders over the summer to review current move-on arrangements, with a view to identifying and promoting best practice.

Recommendation 27

9. Will the findings of the Flexible Funding Pathfinders be available ahead of the next budget round?

We have a comprehensive approach to evaluating the proposed Early Intervention, Prevention and Support Grant. In addition to a formal independent evaluation by Wavehill, a variety of other sources of evidence will be considered, including information from the Society of Welsh Treasurers.

The independent evaluation has been structured in such a way that it will provide ongoing evidence to inform our assessment of implementation. Our action research based approach means we have regular discussions with the evaluators who are expected to submit their first report of findings in September.

I am grateful for the continued interest and work of the Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committee in this vital area of work.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Evans". The script is cursive and fluid.

Rebecca Evans AC/AM

Y Gweinidog Tai ac Adfywio

Minister for Housing and Regeneration