# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE**  | **COVID-19 Response – Homelessness and Rough Sleepers** |
| **DATE**  | **20 March 2020** |
| **BY**  | **Julie James Minister for Housing and Local Government** |

This statement was originally intended to provide an update on the work of the expert Homelessness Action Group. The group submitted its second and most comprehensive report just over a week ago setting out the framework of policies, approaches and plans needed to achieve our goal of ending homelessness in Wales.

However, the fast moving COVID-19 situation rightly demands our undivided attention and an immediate response. The need to focus on long term policies and prevention remains our ambition but, as I am sure Members will agree, at this point in time we must take immediate and direct action to protect our most vulnerable citizens in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Whilst I am very happy to accept in principle all of the action group’s recommendations I do not believe it would be right to focus on the detail of how we might respond to them at this time. Rather we must focus our attention and resource on the actions needed to support those who are currently homeless or sleeping rough in the face of the COVID-19 threat.

Against a backdrop of a rapidly changing situation we are working at pace across government and the wider public sector to put emergency measures in place. It is right that these measures focus first and foremost on those who are most vulnerable. Ensuring that people who are, or are at risk of, sleeping rough, and those who are in inadequate temporary accommodation have the support, resources and policies needed to protect themselves. These individuals and families may not have access to the facilities that enable them to adhere to public health guidance on hygiene or isolation. My first priority is on supporting these individuals and those who work with them and to this end can update Members on a range of matters intended to support this vulnerable group.

Firstly, we published guidance to assist those working in the emergency shelter, hostel and substance misuse sector on Thursday 19 March. This guidance has been developed in collaboration with the sector and professionals in health and Public Health Wales to whom I owe a debt of gratitude.

Importantly I am also able to announce I am making additional funding available to support local authorities. The funding will enable them to secure the accommodation needed to ensure that those without a home can be protected, supported, and isolated if necessary.

The financial support, of up to £10m over the coming months, will enable local authorities to go far beyond simply renting a basic room. This funding will form part of a wider support package for local authorities. I will announce further details on this in the coming days.

Individuals need support, access to medical and other services. Best practice dictates that offering options to ensure that those who are symptomatic can be separated from those who are not and that individuals are not forced to relocate or to leave the premises during the day. This might mean the block purchase of B&B or hotel rooms, empty student accommodation and other premises to operate alongside existing provision. Importantly I would expect this provision to be managed and supported by the professionals working in this sector to ensure high quality support, hygiene standards and appropriate monitoring for symptoms and illness.

This level of funding reflects the intensive support needed in the sector and the vulnerability of this group.

I know that local authorities are already focused on this work, they have not waited for us to offer funding but have rightly put the safety of vulnerable individuals first. I want to place on record my thanks to them and recognise their efforts to support this vulnerable group. Similarly I wish to thank stakeholders across the sector who are working so hard to ensure that essential services are protected and prioritised to help protect our most vulnerable. I will be looking to everyone to work together in a coordinated way to deliver the best possible services, support and outcomes for this group and I know that I will not be disappointed.

The coming weeks and months will be extremely difficult for us all but for those who do not have the security of a place to call home and for those who work tirelessly to support them this will be a particularly testing time.

I have long shared the concerns expressed to by stakeholders about the plight of those who have no recourse to public funds. The law prevents us from offering these individuals certain types of support, including housing support. Ensuring access to good sanitation and providing facilities to allow people to self-isolate is a public health matter and will not be prevented in the same way. I have therefore advised local authorities to utilise alternative powers and funding to assist those who require shelter and other forms of support due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I know that stakeholders will welcome this and whilst it may not provide the long term answer we all desire I am pleased that we can fulfil our moral obligation and help them to stay safe and well during this pandemic.

Finally we will ensure that existing funding can be used flexibly and effectively to support important work at a local level to meet the COVID-19 challenge. Officials will be writing today to local authorities setting out how they can maximise the Housing Support Grant and Children and Communities Grants to best meet local needs. I will do everything in my power to ensure that artificial barriers to doing the right thing are removed so that collectively we can respond swiftly and flexibly to this unprecedented situation.

We will not lose sight of our ambition to end homelessness in Wales.

The Homelessness Action Group, chaired by Jon Sparkes, Chief Executive of Crisis, is coming towards the end of its work. This second report, it looks in depth at the framework of policies, approaches and plans needed to achieve our goal of ending homelessness in Wales in the longer term.

As a Government we remain committed to matching the pace and energy shown by the group in our response, but appreciate that our original time scale to respond is unrealistic given the change in circumstances. We recognise, as the group does in their report, the need to look carefully at the recommendations and work across Government and with a range of external partners to develop a comprehensive action plan in response to it as and when time allows us to do so.

I must urge patience with regard to timescales for that to happen – our focus must be on rising to the challenges of COVID-19 first and foremost.

Finally, I wish to thank the group, not only for their tireless work and commitment in producing such a comprehensive report in a very short space of time, but for the work they and their organisations do day to day to support those without a home.

I also want to note my particular thanks to those with lived experience and those who work in the sector for their input which is absolutely invaluable to the report and to this work.