

Rt. Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government

Rt. Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State for Education

24th March 2019

Dear Secretaries of State,

I am writing to you both about the urgent situation facing homeless families with children during the Covid-19 crisis.

In the past week, the Government has taken unprecedented measures to protect incomes, support businesses and maintain schools as a lifeline service for the most vulnerable. But there is one group who need the same level of attention, and that is homeless families.

As Children's Commissioner, I don't want any family facing this crisis without a safe and secure home - the parents facing this crisis without a space in which they can keep their children safe or the children trying to learn at home, when home doesn't really exist. Unfortunately, there are thousands of such children in England:

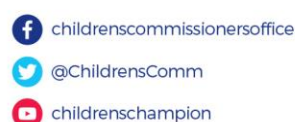
- **125,000 children in England are living in temporary accommodation.** This accommodation is frequently poor quality and simply too small, and that this can have extremely negative impacts on children's health and wellbeing – for example, having little space to play and nowhere quiet to do homework. With children off school and stuck at their accommodation for a prolonged period, the impact on these particular children will be immense, risking putting them further behind academically and damaging their wellbeing and mental health.
- **Around 2,000 children in England are living in BnBs.** Typically, this will mean shared kitchen and bathroom facilities. Aside from the strain of living in this accommodation, the communal facilities will reduce families' limited ability to self-isolate, making it more difficult for them to avoid contracting Covid-19, and more difficult to avoid spreading it to others.
- **Around 2,300 children in England are living in Domestic Abuse refuges.** These families will face similar challenges to those who are living in BnBs when it comes to self-isolating. In addition, if refuges are forced to close due to staff shortages these extremely vulnerable children will find themselves homeless and without support unless contingency plans are put in place. This is happening during a time when evidence suggests that domestic abuse will increase, as it has in other times of emergency.
- **90,000 children in England are living in families who are effectively sofa-surfing** – staying with extended family or friends as they have nowhere else to go. With more and more people leaving work and spending time at home, there is a risk that some of these families will be asked to move on – particularly if anyone contracts the disease and should be self-isolating. Already this week I have been contacted by children who have been asked to move on but have nowhere to go.

The Covid-19 current situation is scary and unpleasant for all of us. But imagine how much worse it is for a family of six facing months of living and learning in a cramped shipping container which has to be home,

Children's Commissioner for England: Anne Longfield OBE

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school and play area? Or the stress placed on a mother trying to protect her children while cramped into a BnB without their own washing, toilet or cooking facilities.

The Government have, in the last week, announced things that no one would have thought necessary or possible six months ago. Now is the time to show the same levels of commitment and determination on behalf of these most marginalised of families. The current economic shutdown will mean more properties are available. Commercial short-term apartment rental blocks and AirBnBs will have almost no custom. Similarly, hotels, some of which offer apartments with cooking facilities. Flats in London and other major cities which people commute into will no longer be required. Properties which were vacant at the beginning of the crisis are unlikely to have other takers. All of these opportunities will be concentrated in London and the major cities – where most of the homeless families are also concentrated.

The Government needs to provide local authorities with the resources to source these homes and combined with a clear expectation that homes need to be sourced quickly. I would like to see this combined with clear messaging to landlords: co-operate or the Government will act. It would be a particular disgrace to have closed down apartments – many run by businesses which will be receiving Government funds in the next few months – while close-by families are homeless. I would urge you to commit that any hotel or property business receiving Government support, or wage subsidies, in the next few months will have to commit to housing families *at cost*. If local authorities are supported by the Government with both resourcing and clear messaging I believe we can get these families a decent home to call their own – at least for the next 4 months.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes,



Anne Longfield OBE
Children's Commissioner for England