

Carl Sargeant AC/AM
Ysgrifennydd y Cabinet dros Gymunedau a Phlant
Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Children

Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb, Llywodraeth Leol a Chymunedau
Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee
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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

John Griffiths AM
Chair
Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
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CF99 1NA

13 October 2016

Dear John,

Thank you for your letter of 30 September, following my attendance at the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee on 21 September.

During the session, I agreed to write to you on engagement with the UK Government on support for Syrian refugees and on the UK Government's proposed introduction of a British Bill of Rights.

I have not yet had any direct discussions with the Minister of State for Immigration, Robert Goodwill MP. He has however, written to me regarding unaccompanied asylum seeking and refugee children, where he acknowledged the efforts made by Welsh Local Authorities to support asylum seekers and their families. In addition, the First Minister recently met with the Welsh Local Government Association and has agreed that there should be a joint approach to the Home Office seeking additional support, perhaps also reflecting Scotland's position. I look forward to ongoing dialogue with the UK Government on these issues.

On 7 September, the UK Parliamentary Justice Committee questioned the Secretary of State for Justice, Elizabeth Truss MP, on the UK Government's plans to replace the Human Rights Act 1998 with a Bill of Rights. When pressed by the Committee for more detail on the proposals, such as timings and the impact on the devolved administrations, I understand Ms Truss said they were "still looking at the parameters" and the proposals needed a "thorough consultation". However, Ms Truss did confirm the proposals would not involve a withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights. I will therefore inform the Committee once any concrete information on the proposals is made available. It is vital the Welsh Government and National Assembly for Wales are engaged during any consultation which affects the human rights of the people of Wales, and we expect the UK Government to fulfil its commitment to fully consult on these proposals.

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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.

In your letter, you asked for information on a number of additional issues. You asked whether I am considering any changes to the time period within which private landlords must register and obtain a licence under Part 1 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. I have now had the time to consider further the possibility of changing the time period within which private landlords must register and obtain a licence but I am still not convinced what, if anything, would be gained by this. Landlords have had a year to register and become licensed, and I would like to give credit to the many who have. There is now a danger that those who have left it late may find themselves falling foul of the law. This was always going to be a risk and we did warn landlords to avoid this if possible. My concern with extending the time period further is that the same problem will occur at the new deadline as some will always leave it to the last minute. I feel it is essentially wrong to delay implementing legislation because individuals have not taken their responsibilities seriously. I also believe it would send the wrong message out about how important our law-making is. Landlords and agents need to take action now to register or apply for a licence. For those who have left it too late to attend a training course, I would suggest that they consider doing the training online instead. If their completed application has been submitted by the deadline, this should be sufficient to avoid any action being taken against them and Rent Smart Wales will process their licence application as quickly as they can.

In terms of supporting new landlords to ensure they comply with their statutory obligations under Part 1 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, they will have to ensure that they register and apply for a licence or appoint a licenced agent within the time frame set out in the Act. The Act provides a 28 day period for landlords to register. As online registration only takes approximately 15-20 minutes, this is ample time. Undertaking training can be done at anytime and the online training facility provides even more flexibility and choice. Becoming a new landlord is not something that generally happens overnight or without thought. As with any other profession, any prospective landlords will need to ensure they are compliant with all of their legal obligations. The Rent Smart Wales website provides ample guidance to help new landlords and, from feedback I have received to date, the staff are very supportive and extremely helpful.

You asked for details on the Welsh Government's plans to address any issues that may arise from a decision by the Office for National Statistics to reclassify Welsh Registered Social Landlords as public sector bodies. We are exploring a legislative solution to the issue of reclassification. Housing Associations can be confident it will be resolved. My officials will work closely with stakeholder representatives and the ONS to develop a legislative package which will deliver the required reform but ensure effective regulation of the sector continues. This means they will be able to continue to borrow from the private sector in order to help us achieve our target of 20,000 affordable homes in this Assembly term.

In respect of the sustainability of specialist services in the violence against women and domestic abuse sector, the Domestic Abuse Services Grant (DASG) has been in place for over 10 years and supports projects relating to violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence (VAWDASV). A review of the allocation of, and approach to, DASG was undertaken in 2014 in order to more closely align funding going forward to the aims of the Act and wider policy direction in this area. We are currently considering options to move to a more regionalised approach with Local Authorities to provide the opportunity for future funding bids to be more responsive to local needs. The aim of this review was to encourage and facilitate greater collaboration between Community Safety partnerships and relevant partners in the delivery of VAWDASV projects included, but not limited to, those funded through the DASG, through jointly identifying priorities within their footprint areas.

We are encouraging Local Authorities and their partners to adopt a more collaborative approach to the provision of services. This may involve commissioning and providing services on a regional basis to improve services that address violence against women, domestic abuse and sexual violence as a key outcome. I expect Local Authorities to work with neighbouring Local Authorities and across Local Health Board areas to assess local need and provision, identifying where greater focus on delivery of service will facilitate value for money and flexibility of funded services to meet local need, delivering a better service for victims. This process will be done in consultation with stakeholders, specialist service providers and survivors to help ensure a comprehensive needs assessment and subsequent service provision. My officials have met with the Specialist Sector to discuss the sustainable funding model and these discussions will continue.

During the session, reference was made to a planned review of Building Regulations, Part L (Conservation of fuel and power). As this is an area of responsibility of my colleague the Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs, I have asked her to update the Committee on the issue in due course.

Finally, in terms of engaging with the Assembly, the four cross-cutting strategies outlined in Taking Wales Forward represents a whole-government approach to delivering our priorities and better outcomes for people in Wales. This will require collaboration from all Cabinet members, Ministers and Welsh Government Departments. In developing the strategies, arrangements for close cross-government working will be established.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Carl Sargeant'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.

Carl Sargeant AC/AM

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