

Dear Minister,

My name is Helen Whitehead, and I am the Shadow Deputy Leader and Shadow portfolio holder for Housing at Thanet District Council, and one of the ward Councillors for Margate Central.

I wrote to your predecessor last year regarding the housing issues we face here, at the beginning of June. As yet, even though I was at that point acting Leader for the Council, I have had no reply from your department, in spite of the seriousness of the situation we were facing and continue to face. I hope very much that a response will be forthcoming, as the problems we are dealing with as a community and as a council are only increasing.

The affordability of rent is an ever growing issue across the country, but especially so for areas such as Margate, Ramsgate and Thanet as a whole. In Thanet 29% of all households are living on a low income, defined as less than £15,988 p.a. If you compare this to the cost of a 3 bedroom home let at the Local Housing Allowance, the cost represents over 60% of income and is neither affordable nor sustainable. The cost of a 3 bed home in the private rental market is now often well over £1,150 per month; which means that a rental at the lowest end of our private market represents just over 86% of monthly income on rent alone.

Without direct central intervention the net result of this is displacement, not regeneration. Our district is in urgent need of a significant supply of affordable homes to rent. We desperately need a properly funded programme of public sector building in line with the levelling up principles for those on low incomes who are unable to access a suitable home. That programme should not be reliant on the development of private market homes as a source of land and subsidy for affordable housing. Many housebuilders take a long term view about their own investment needs and we need funding for genuinely affordable homes now; our needs are not determined by external financial viability, they are ever present, and our residents cannot be forced to rely on the future of the external market to provide what is needed now.

Across the country we are seeing a continual pattern of displacement and a disproportionate effect on affordability in areas of regeneration such as Margate. Regeneration can bring many positives; but without investment in infrastructure such as housing to support regeneration, the purchase of second homes, airbnb's and investment properties can cause significant issues for those who are forced to rely on the private sector to provide their homes, turning regeneration into gentrification and displacement.

As such I write to you with two requests; firstly, that as an area we are given both reassurance of your awareness of the situation, and action to remedy our continuing housing pressures, in terms of us having direct funding to build to address our ever growing list.

Secondly, I write to ask that a C5 Use Class is introduced into primary planning legislation, to enable us, and other Councils, to have the ability to effectively monitor and manage the levels of temporary accommodation, such as airbnb, so that our district is able to provide long term homes for those who need them.

Councils are best placed to know the pressures that local housing stock is under. In many coastal areas, especially those used as specific examples of regeneration and growth, visible success often brings with it displacement due to increasing rents, increasing property prices, the purchase of second homes, investment properties and landbanking, and the purchase of properties to provide short term accommodation. All of these reduce property availability; and in areas with significant deprivation, such as Thanet, we will fail a large proportion of our population if we are not given effective means to address this, and addressing it requires a change to central legislation.

Creating a new Use Class would give Councils the authority and flexibility to choose to monitor and assess the growth and impact of short term accommodation such as airbnb, and the means to directly act on those pressures under Article 4 if interventions are needed. We are by no means the only area affected in this way; but for all Councils affected by these pressures, if we are to be able to help residents, a change in legislation from central government is needed.

These ongoing external pressures are made even more challenging due to the financial limitations we are faced with when trying to build as a Council.

It is ever more difficult for District Councils to build independently and house everyone who is in need of the protections that a Council property provides; when I first wrote to your predecessor, our waiting list stood at 1,476. Unsurprisingly our list has continued to increase due to the financial impact of the pandemic and the pre existing external pressures that we face here. The impossibility of providing for our list without further funding means that reliance on the private sector to care for our residents is unavoidable.

Many landlords provide exemplary care; but in these times, with the financial insecurity that cannot be avoided in terms of the pandemic, stability in terms of accommodation for those outside the Council system can be precarious. If residents are struggling to afford rent, then the system as a whole not only fails to provide care and the necessities for life, but also is unsustainable in the long term.

Residents in Thanet need the protections that Council housing brings, and in these times we have a chance to look again at our systems and how effective they are in providing for those who are most vulnerable; and currently, some of our most vulnerable residents are those who are at the mercy of rent inflation due to demographic pressures. What is affordable rent in London is not affordable rent here; and without central action to look at how we can provide an infrastructure to prevent or safeguard against these fluctuations, vulnerable residents are often faced with no choice but to move from their area, disrupting families and education in many cases, and disadvantaging those on lower incomes.

Our community is inclusive. We are very used to protecting each other, and will continue to do so. We know that community includes everyone, regardless of background or income; we will fight to maintain that community, and do everything possible, as we always do, to build an inclusive and positive society. But to do so effectively requires a coherent central approach not only to building but to regulating the fluctuations that produce this level of instability for residents who need the most protection. Without this protection we will continue to see a rise in the need for temporary accommodation, and this combined with the

pressures of the pandemic creates further difficulties. We have seen significant rises in both domestic violence and family exclusion cases, and that combined with rent inflation and the scarcity of even private rentals is creating a situation that requires acknowledgement and intervention; and I know this situation is not unique to our Council.

Councils need investment to provide services; housing is, in every sense, the foundation for community cohesion, and we have a duty to provide excellent housing, and protect those who are struggling. At the current levels of funding, it is extraordinarily difficult to do that; and so I write to ask what steps will be taken long term to provide funding and housing stability for my area, and all other areas affected by rent inflation, in order to build an infrastructure that can support all our residents.

As an area we need to know that these issues are being addressed.

It is our role as a Council to help provide the building blocks for residents to thrive; but to do so, we require the freedom to develop a localised approach combined with centralised support; and for that to happen, we need not only direct investment in housing, but also specific planning reform, to enable us to monitor and manage the housing needs of our community.

I hope very much to hear from you soon.

Yours Sincerely,

Councillor Helen Whitehead
Shadow Deputy Leader of Thanet District Council
Shadow Housing Portfolio Holder