

Briefing to the Homes Policy Development Group on the Homelessness Reduction Bill

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Date: 14 March 2017

Background

The Homelessness Reduction Bill 2016-2017 was introduced to Parliament as a Private Member's Bill by Bob Blackman, MP, on 29 June 2016. It has now completed its progress through the House of Commons and the debate on Second Reading in the House of Lords is scheduled for 24 February 2017.

The Bill is set to change the way that English Councils respond to homelessness issues. It was informed by the work of an independent panel of experts, established by Crisis (a charity which assists single, homeless people). The aim of this panel was to review the current legislation affecting this client group and to identify improvements to the legal framework relating to the prevention of single homelessness in England.

Changes expected

When a person is homeless or threatened with homelessness, the Council is currently obliged to deal with them in accordance with the duties set out in Part VII of the Housing Act 1996, as amended by Homelessness Act 2002. Section 175 of the Act states that a person is threatened with homelessness, if it is likely that they will become homeless within 28 days.

Under the new legislation, the number of days will increase to 56.

In addition, there will be further guidance relating to the action which an authority should take in relation to someone who applies for assistance after they have been served with a valid section 21 notice (of intention to seek possession from an assured shorthold tenancy). The Council will have to take reasonable steps to try and persuade the landlord to delay an order for possession or to agree not to pursue the notice.

The Bill is also seeking to introduce a new duty on local authorities to prevent homelessness for all eligible applicants threatened with homelessness; and a new duty to relieve homelessness for all eligible homeless applicants. These duties will involve helping all eligible people, whether they are single or a family.

Other agencies working in the public sector will also be required to notify the Council if they come into contact with someone that they think may be homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.

Impact

On 17 January 2017, it was announced that £48 million would be made available to help local authorities to meet the additional costs required as a result of the changes to the legislation. Currently, there is no indication as to how this will be allocated to specific regions or to individual authorities.

On 17 January 2017, the Local Government Association released a statement which said that: “Councils have concerns that initial costings will inevitably be based on assumptions which will be difficult to predict. For example, it is impossible to know how many people will come forward to access the new duties, what the impact of the Bill will be on different groups over time, and therefore the funding councils need to deliver duties that reduce homelessness.”

An increase in the numbers of people presenting to the Council for assistance in connection with homelessness or threatened homelessness once the new legislation is adopted is being assumed. The cost of temporary accommodation also needs to be taken into account. The Council already has a duty to secure accommodation for those applicants where they have reason to believe that that person may be homeless, eligible for assistance and has priority for assistance under the legislation, pending a decision on whether or not they are actually homeless. If the numbers of those presenting as homeless at Phoenix House increase, then it can be argued that the budget for temporary accommodation will need to be increased. The Council has a limited supply of temporary accommodation available but there is a heavy demand for this. Therefore bed and breakfast accommodation does occasionally have to be used, which is more expensive. Further, there is only a limited supply of this in the District. This sometimes necessitates clients having to be placed in accommodation outside Mid Devon, away from their support networks, local schools, employment and so on, with the resulting anxieties associated with that, when they are already experiencing difficulties and stress.

In anticipation of the increased workload, new strategies are being devised with the aim of mitigating the risks associated with this.

The Housing Options team already works in partnership with social landlords, which work in the District, and the Housing Options Manager has recently reiterated that members of the team will engage in joint visits and other preventative work at the stage when possession proceedings are being considered. This involvement can deliver positive outcomes because individual team members can have realistic conversations with tenants about what will actually happen once a Possession Order is made. This can prompt the tenant to work with the landlord to find a way forward, in order to avoid the possible disruption and other stress associated with eviction.

The Council belongs to the Devon and Cornwall Housing Options Partnership which comprises all the local housing authorities in Devon and Cornwall. This group works in partnership to deliver strategies to reduce homelessness and to ensure that there is a consistent approach to homelessness across the peninsula. This is useful because it ensures that there is clarity for clients. The partnership approach also delivers savings due to the fact that there is a Co-ordinator who is able to identify good practice, coordinate joint responses to relevant issues, disseminate relevant information and organise training.

Homelessness Reduction bill

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2016-17/homelessnessreduction/documents.html>

Progress so far

<http://services.parliament.uk/bills/2016-17/homelessnessreduction.html>

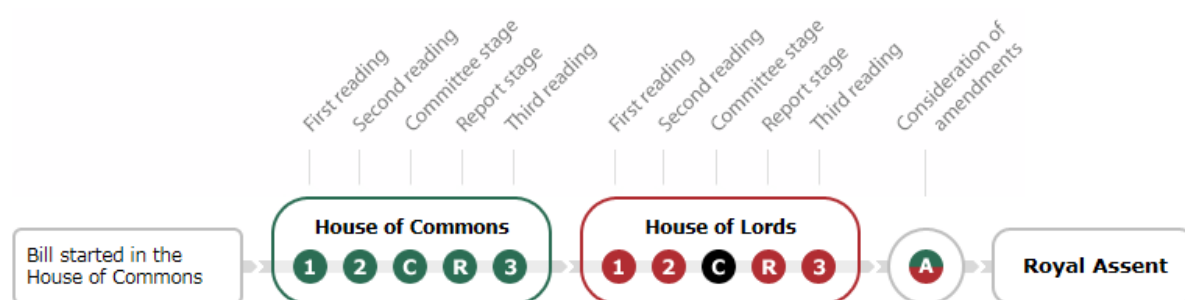
Homelessness Reduction Bill 2016-17

Type of Bill: Private Members' Bill (Ballot Bill)

Sponsors: Bob Blackman

Lord Best

Progress of the Bill



Last events

- 2 2nd reading (Hansard): House of Lords 24 February, 2017 | 24.02.2017
- 2 2nd reading (Minutes of Proceedings): House of Lords 24 February, 2017 | 24.02.2017

Next event

- C Committee stage: House of Lords | Date to be announced

■ Read debates on all stages of the Homelessness Reduction Bill 2016-17