

My intervention to the Minister at the Opposition Day debate on Non-commissioned Exempt Accommodation

Rt Hon Sir John Redwood MP (Wokingham) (Con): Has the Minister made sure that all future contracts are properly set up and policed at the beginning, so that the Government know what they are buying?

Eddie Hughes (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Levelling Up, Housing, Communities and Local Government): My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point, but we leave those decisions to councils that are commissioning locally. I guess it is up to us to try to ensure appropriate standards against which such accommodation is measured and then to give them the necessary powers to enforce that. Personally, I think that councils already have a considerable number of powers. I am not disagreeing with Opposition Members about what powers are required; I am just saying that I would like to see the existing powers used to the absolute max before we necessarily go reaching for others. If people feel they do not have the necessary powers, I would consider it not inappropriate for the Government to legislate, but we need to consider that carefully.

We are committed to finding the right approach to this issue, and we invested £5 million in a number of pilots in recent months to support the worst-affected areas, including Birmingham, Blackburn with Darwen, Blackpool, Bristol and Hull. Through the injection of those funds, we have been working with local authorities to test approaches to improving the quality of this type of accommodation. We chose these specific areas partly because of the existing commitment to tackle these issues, and I pay tribute to the local authorities, which have worked collegiately and collaboratively with us during the pilots.

To take Bristol as an example, it has been conducting thorough assessments of new schemes and providers for some time. The council was able to use its funding to complete its work in summer last year. Meanwhile, Hull's supported accommodation review team was implemented in 2019, and the council has already shown a strong commitment to making the changes needed to solve the problems besetting exempt accommodation. Through the pilot, it was able to fund a large part of its programme and to take its approach to that programme one step further. As the House would expect, we know that the need stretches beyond these pilot areas and that local authorities in other parts of the country want to invest in tackling these problems, too.