

Statement on behalf of Shelter  
Witness: Polly Neate  
First Statement  
Dated: 12 April 2023

## **UK COVID-19 INQUIRY**

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### **STATEMENT OF POLLY NEATE**

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I, Polly Neate of 88 Old Street, London, EC1V 9HU, will say as follows:

1. I am the Chief Executive of Shelter, the National Campaign for Homeless People Limited. I took up this post in August 2017. Prior to this, I was Chief Executive of the charity Women's Aid. Unless otherwise stated, this statement is based on information held by Shelter.
2. I make this statement to assist the Inquiry following their request for evidence dated 3 January 2023 in respect of Module 1 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry. As Shelter has been asked to provide evidence in respect of Module 1 this statement will focus on the government's emergency preparedness, resilience and pandemic planning. As I understand it Module 1 is not examining the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the government response to it so I will not be covering that in this statement.
3. In compiling this statement, I have consulted with Shelter's employees, particularly in the Legal, Research, Public Affairs and Policy departments.

### **Shelter's background and purpose**

4. Shelter is a limited company (company number 01038133) and registered charity (charity number 263710 (England) and 01038133 (Scotland)). Shelter's work covers both England and Scotland (via Shelter Scotland). Shelter Cymru, who cover Wales, and Housing Rights, who cover Northern Ireland, are separate organisations.
5. Shelter exists to defend the right to a safe home and is a national campaigning charity. Shelter was set up in 1966 to;
  - 5.1. Relieve hardship and distress among homeless people and those in need, including those living in adverse housing conditions;
  - 5.2. Make funds available to other bodies (whether corporate or not), whose charitable aims are to relieve hardship and distress;
  - 5.3. Relieve poverty and distress; and
  - 5.4. Educate the public about the nature, causes and effects of homelessness, human suffering, poverty, and distress; and to carry out research on these issues to make useful results available to all.
6. Shelter continues to seek to influence national and local government policies and legislation to tackle the root causes of homelessness and poor housing and carries out training, research, policy scrutiny and campaigning. Shelter's strategic plan for the 2019 – 2022 period had four goals namely;
  - 6.1. Campaigning for increasing rights for renters and an end to discrimination;
  - 6.2. Supporting people who are struggling via Shelter's local hubs, helpline and digital advice;
  - 6.3. Campaigning for the building of more social housing; and
  - 6.4. Empowering communities and building a movement to stop the national housing emergency.

7. Shelter also provides legal and practical advice, support and services to people struggling with inadequate housing and homelessness. Shelter provides advice on a range of housing and homelessness issues, across our;
  - 7.1. face-to-face services in our community hubs. Shelter has community hubs in locations across England in Birmingham, Bristol, Plymouth, Bournemouth, Blackburn, London, Manchester, Liverpool, Norwich, Newcastle and Liverpool. In Scotland Shelter has regional hubs in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow. In our hubs we provide advice through our Housing Rights Advisers as well as legal advice via our legal advisors and Solicitors. The legal work and representation Shelter provides in hubs is mainly funded by the Legal Aid Agency;
  - 7.2. Housing Possession Court Duty Schemes. Shelter has court duty contracts for possession lists in County Courts across England. This enables Shelter solicitors to represent people who are at the door of court facing the prospect of losing their home where they otherwise would not have had access to legal advice or representation; and
  - 7.3. National Telephone and Online advice services. This service is available for anyone in England in need of homelessness and housing advice regardless of where someone is based or whether or not they are eligible for legal aid. By way of an example, during the 2021/22 period Shelter's helpline in England answered 43,103 contacts (calls and chats).
8. Via its services therefore during the Covid-19 Pandemic Shelter assisted, without being exhaustive;
  - 8.1. People sleeping rough trying to get access to emergency accommodation while the requirement to self-isolate was in place;
  - 8.2. People living in overcrowded and damp conditions; and

- 8.3. Renters struggling with arrears built up during the pandemic and facing possession proceedings.

**Shelter's work on planning and preparedness for pandemics**

9. Members of Shelter's Policy and Public Affairs teams have a regular dialogue with officials in central government departments, including the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities ('DLUHC'), on a wide range of housing and homelessness issues. However, before the Covid-19 pandemic, Shelter did not have any dialogue with central or local government on pandemic planning and preparedness. Although Shelter, via its services, does assist people with housing emergencies, Shelter does not have any expertise or experience of being able to comment on preparing and planning for pandemics and so would not have had anything to say to government on this issue as it does and did not come under our core aims and focus.
10. After the Covid-19 pandemic started, Shelter did have more regular contact with central government. However, Shelter's public campaigns and discussions with government were restricted to the response to national lockdowns and associated public health measures.
11. For example, Shelter had an extensive dialogue with DLUHC on the effectiveness of the 'Everyone In' initiative, and its successor initiatives including Protect, Protect Plus and Protect and Vaccinate. However, these initiatives, as Shelter understands them, were implemented in response to the Covid-19 Pandemic and so Shelter's work and dialogue on these issues was not related to the Government's planning and preparedness for pandemics generally.

12. By way of further example, similarly, at the start of the pandemic Shelter also called on the government to increase the Local Housing Allowance rates for Housing Benefit. Shelter was therefore pleased to see that the rate was increased to match the '30<sup>th</sup> percentile' of rents in each local area as part of the Spring Budget. This was however something that Shelter had been asking for a long time prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic in order to make private renting more affordable. The ask was made again at the start of the Covid-19 Pandemic in order to help try to mitigate the economic impact of Covid-19 on private renters rather than being a request in respect of the government preparing for a pandemic.

13. Shelter therefore doesn't have the required expertise, evidence or experience to be able to comment on planning and preparedness for pandemics. As mentioned earlier in this statement however Shelter may have useful evidence in respect of the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups and the government response to Covid-19 and so would look forward to contributing to the Inquiry on this as and when required.

I, Polly Neate, believe that the facts in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief in its truth.

Signed:

**Personal Data**

Polly Neate

Dated: 12<sup>th</sup> April 2023