

Letter from Westminster

CONVENTIONAL wisdom would have you believe there is no other story in Westminster these days outside of Brexit.



Don't get me wrong, it rightly dominates the House and its committees so the idea that Parliament is not debating Britain's exit from the EU is one of the silliest political myths of our time.

But here's the thing, Members of Parliament can multi-task and there's plenty else going on. One very good example is The Homelessness Reduction Bill sponsored by my Conservative colleague Bob Blackman MP.

Like constituents who wrote to me, I am supporting Bob's Bill which passed its Second Reading in the House of Commons last month and returned this week for the detailed scrutiny of Committee Stage. I am pleased to say the Bill, unusually for a Private Members' Bill, has Government support.

The proposed law, backed by campaigners including Crisis and St Mungo's, will change the help available to homeless people right across the country, including here in Winchester.

So how will the bill help someone threatened (and this is the key point) with homelessness? Currently, the council would probably say they couldn't do anything to help until the landlord had issued an eviction warrant.

In the meantime tenants are left to search fruitlessly for accommodation. The Bill aims to address this by extending the definition of 'threatened with homelessness' from 28 to 56 days.

So the council would have a legal duty to help someone 56 days before they became homeless. This means the definition of homelessness is important.

The Bill changes this definition by explicitly stating that people are to be treated as homeless on the day a valid notice expires. This would mean someone served with a notice seeking possession would be entitled to help just after the notice had been given – and long before the bailiffs arrive.

While many local authorities are doing their best in difficult circumstances, the law means that in order to qualify for help, homeless people have to fall into certain legal categories that make them a 'priority'. These cover families, pregnant women, the elderly and people with disabilities – and rightly so – yet unfortunately, large numbers of people fall outside these categories, even if they're sleeping on the street, and often that means they can't get help.

This Bill therefore would introduce a new legal duty on councils requiring them to prevent and tackle homelessness through a new required help and advice plan regardless of whether or not they're deemed to be 'priority need'. Aside from ending a longstanding injustice, this will also benefit the public purse, since homeless people are more likely to need public services such as accident and emergency, substance rehabilitation services or the police.

This is a bill for social justice, and while no-one is naïve enough to think it's a magic wand, it deserves support to create a lasting legacy of which we can be immensely proud.

Full details of my work, local and in Westminster, via www.stevebrine.com

Steve Brine
MP for Winchester & Chandler's
Ford

24.11.16