Dear Mary,

Re: UK Voluntary National Review of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals

Thank you for your letter regarding the cross-Government Voluntary National Review of the UK’s progress towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. You asked for my views, as Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, concerning the progress the Government has made towards achieving Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

You asked whether the Government has engaged effectively with key stakeholders as part of the Voluntary National Review and in the preparation of its document setting out emerging findings. The Committee does not know whether or not the Government has spoken to key stakeholders. I can, however, confirm that the Government has not sought the views of our Committee.

I note that Sustainable Development Goal 11 includes further specific targets. I make general observations relating to the four targets that are most relevant to the Committee’s remit.

11.1 By 2030, ensure access for all to adequate, safe and affordable housing and basic services and upgrade slums

The Government’s emerging findings document argues that there has been “significant progress” to help first time buyers into the housing market and improving the delivery rate of affordable homes. The document highlights that 220,000 new homes were delivered in 2017-18 and that, between 2013 and 2018, 169,000 households bought a new-build home through the Government’s ‘Help to Buy’ loan scheme.

The Committee considers this to be an optimistic interpretation of the situation in the UK. It is widely accepted that the country is in the midst of a ‘housing crisis’; an expression used not only by campaigners, but by the Prime Minister herself. While it is welcome that 220,000 new homes were built in 2017-18, the Government’s own target is to deliver 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s. Other estimates suggest that 340,000 new homes are needed every year. The emerging findings document rightly notes that “development needs to pick up pace”. We note, in particular, that there continues to be an insufficient number of affordable homes, including homes for social rent.

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1 PM speech on housing to set out changes to planning rules, 4 March 2018
2 Government announces new housing measures, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 1 October 2018
3 NHF Press Release, England short of 4 million homes, 18 May 2018
The Government’s emerging findings document is right to acknowledge the challenge that, in 2015, 23% of houses failed minimum standard decent homes criteria. This reflects evidence we heard during an inquiry into the private rented sector last year, where the quality of accommodation is a particular concern at the lower end of the market. The 2016 English Housing Survey estimated that 800,000 private rented homes (17% of the total) had at least one Category One hazard, such as excess cold, mould or exposed wiring, while there were 1.30 million non-decent private rented homes in 2016, up from 1.22 million in 2006.\(^4\) In 2016, the Building Research Establishment claimed that poor quality housing led to health problems that cost the NHS £1.4 billion each year.\(^5\)

Sustainable Development Goal 11 requires the Government to ensure access for all to safe housing. However, the emerging findings document does not reflect ongoing concerns regarding the safety of several hundred high-rise residential buildings which are known to contain combustible materials in their external cladding. The tragic fire at Grenfell Tower in June 2017, and the subsequent review of the Building Regulations by Dame Judith Hackitt, highlighted significant failures in the construction industry, where cost-cutting was routinely put before the safety of residents. It is also concerning that, 20 months on from the fire at Grenfell, there are still 354 high-rise residential and public buildings with ACM cladding systems unlikely to meet Building Regulations yet to be remediated.\(^6\) There are likely to be several hundred additional buildings with other forms of dangerous cladding, but which have not yet been identified.

The Government’s emerging findings document notes the Government’s Rough Sleeping Strategy, which aims to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end it by 2027. Some argue that this is an ambitious target; others, that it is not ambitious enough. Regardless, we note that the most recent statutory homelessness statistics marked the twenty-eighth time that the number of households in temporary accommodation was higher than in the same quarter of the previous year. The 82,310 households in temporary accommodation included 123,630 children.\(^7\)

The Government notes the challenge of “building up a full picture of all the issues affecting vulnerable individuals and ensuring a joined-up service provision to help them”. However, we note that, in 2017, the National Audit Office criticised the Government for a lack of a joined-up approach across Government for tackling homelessness. Campaigning groups also argue that the Government’s own policies, particularly the Local Housing Allowance (LHA) and welfare cap, have contributed to an increase in rates of homelessness.\(^8\)

### 11.3 By 2030, enhance inclusive and sustainable urbanization and capacity for participatory, integrated and sustainable human settlement planning and management in all countries

The Committee recently called on the Government to reconsider its approach to capturing land value increases arising from public policy decisions, in particular the granting of residential planning permission and the provision of new infrastructure. We noted that captured value could be used to fund much needed infrastructure and public services in new communities. While the Government did not reject our recommendations, it did not embrace them either. Our view is that, if the Government is to achieve this Sustainable Development Goal, it may need to reconsider its approach to land value capture.

### 11.6 By 2030, reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by

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\(^5\) *The cost of poor housing to the NHS*, Building Research Establishment (BRE), 2016

\(^6\) *Building Safety Programme: monthly data release - February 2019*, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, February 2019

\(^7\) *Statutory Homelessness, April to June (Q2) 2018: England*, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, December 2018

\(^8\) *Shut Out: Households at put at risk of homelessness by the housing benefit freeze*, Shelter, 2017
paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management
In December 2018, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs launched the Resources and Waste Strategy setting out how the country can minimise waste, promote resource efficiency and move towards a circular economy. It addresses, for example, recycling rates of local authorities and proposals to standardise waste services across England. We have recently launched an inquiry into the implications for local authorities of this Waste Strategy and we will publish a report before the summer recess.

11.7 By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities
The Government’s emerging findings document highlights that, in 2017, 5% of urban areas in Great Britain was publicly accessible green space and, between 2015 and 2016, the UK Government awarded £1.05 million funding to create 87 pocket parks out of neglected urban spaces.

The Committee undertook an inquiry into public parks in 2016-17, during which we highlighted considerable challenges, including reduced council spending on parks management (budgets have been cut by up to 97 per cent), the need for parks to compete with other services for funding, and planning policy not giving parks sufficient weight, particularly as a result of pressures to increase housing supply. In recent months, we have highlighted in correspondence with the Minister for Local Government, Rishi Sunak MP, our concerns that the Government has been very slow to meet its commitments to provide additional funding to improve public parks in England.

I hope this information is helpful in your meeting with the Secretary of State in early May.

Yours sincerely,

Clive Betts MP
Chair, Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

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9 Resources and waste strategy for England, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, December 2018
10 Parks face threat of decline with severe consequences, Communities and Local Government Committee, February 2017