



London Borough of Hackney
Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission
Municipal Year 2023/24
Tuesday 12 March 2024

Minutes of the proceedings of
the Living in Hackney Scrutiny
Commission held at
Hackney Town Hall, Mare
Street, London E8 1EA

Chair:	Councillor Soraya Adejare
Councillors in Attendance:	Cllr Clare Joseph (Vice-Chair), Cllr Joseph Ogundemuren, Cllr Zoe Garbett and Cllr Caroline Selman
Councillors in Online Attendance:	Cllr Yvonne Maxwell
Apologies:	Cllr M Can Ozsen, Cllr Sam Pallis and Cllr Ali Sadek
Officers In Attendance:	Nathan Keates, Project Manager Housing Strategy & Policy
Other People in Attendance:	Cllr Sem Moema, Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability
Officer Contact:	Craig Player  020 8356 4316  craig.player@hackney.gov.uk

Councillor Soraya Adejare in the Chair

1 Apologies for Absence

1.1 The Chair updated those in attendance on the meeting etiquette and that the meeting was being recorded and livestreamed.

1.2 Apologies for absence were received from Cllr Oszen, Cllr Pallis and Cllr Sadek.

1.3 Cllr Maxwell was in online attendance.

2 Urgent Items / Order of Business

2.1 There were no urgent items, and the order of business was as set out in the agenda.

3 Declaration of Interest

3.1 In relation to Item 4, Cllr Garbett declared that she rented a property in the Private Rented Sector.

4 Draft Private Sector Housing Strategy 2024-29

4.1 The Chair opened the item by explaining that the Commission was keen to hear about the development of the Council's draft Private Sector Housing Strategy 2024-29, which was due to be adopted by Cabinet later in the year.

4.2 The Commission saw this discussion as timely, giving members an opportunity to challenge how the strategy would be delivered, how the Council had considered any risks and the key measures of success before it was adopted.

4.3 It followed on from the Cabinet Question Time held in June 2023 where the Commission looked at how the Council worked with the Private Rented Sector (PRS) to ensure effective accountability and protection for private renters.

4.4 Representing London Borough of Hackney

- Cllr Sem Moema, Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability

4.5 The Chair then invited the Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability to give a verbal presentation. The main points are highlighted below.

4.6 The number of private rented homes had doubled in the last decade to 34,000, or one in three households. This strategy set out how the Council, along with its partners, would support the improvement of housing and management standards in the PRS.

4.7 Continuing the Council's work around improving the PRS for residents and tackling rogue landlords was considered important to 89% of residents, and not having enough homes to rent was considered the second largest challenge facing Hackney.

4.8 This strategy would work alongside other key strategic documents such as the Strategic Plan, Poverty Reduction Strategy, Housing Strategy and Community Strategy, and key to its success would be collaboration and shared responsibility for its delivery across the Council and its partners.

4.9 Market rents in Hackney had increased by 49% since 2010, at an average of £2,102 per month. To be able to afford to rent comfortably in Hackney, a household income of £65,000 was needed which was more than double to average median household income.

4.10 Key priorities included supporting homeowners to improve the energy efficiency of their homes, pursuing building owners to remediate their buildings to ensure they were safe, working with private landlords to tackle the issue of damp and mould, and improving thermal comfort and reducing energy costs.

4.11 Priorities also included continuing to promote landlord licensing and enforce compliance where necessary, improving the standards and management of exempt accommodation, decreasing the number of empty homes in the borough, and reviewing the challenges and opportunities in the short-term let sector.

Questions, Answers and Discussion

4.12 *A Commission Member asked how the Council was engaging with harder to reach and marginalised groups (e.g. LGBTQIA+, people with complex needs, young or older people, Black and Global Majority communities) in developing the strategy.*

4.13 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability explained that, in preparing the strategy, the Council had commissioned a comprehensive review of the PRS, alongside an updated Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA), detailed discussions with partners and a tenant and landlord survey.

4.14 Data gathered from other pieces of work, such as the evidence base for landlord licensing extension and information held by other services such as the council tax database, had also informed the priorities of the strategy. Key advocacy groups such as London Renters' Union had also been engaged at this stage.

4.15 As part of the consultation process, the Council planned to engage with a wide range of groups and organisations to ensure the strategy was representative of Hackney's communities. This would include people on low incomes and key workers, as well as older people, younger people and faith groups.

4.16 *A Commission Member asked how the Council had engaged with renters unions and advocacy groups such as ACORN and London Renters Union in the development of the strategy, and how their views fed into the draft priorities.*

4.17 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability explained that a range of key stakeholders would be engaged as part of the consultation process. The Mayor of Hackney had recently met with ACORN, and regular dialogue was had with ACORN, London Renters Union and New Unity on issues within the PRS.

4.18 The Council was seeking to reach out to as many demographics as possible through the consultation process, and renters unions and advocacy groups were key to capturing these voices. The strategy itself was still in draft form and could be amended to better reflect this.

4.19 *A Commission Member asked about how the Council used its enforcement powers proactively to raise standards in the PRS, particularly around building safety.*

4.20 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability explained that the Council used a range of enforcement powers to regulate the local private rented housing market. These included formal, deterrent focused powers such as inspections, issuing fines and banning orders.

4.21 Having said this, the current approach was geared towards prevention and using informal actions to bring about compliance such as advice, warnings and negotiating agreements where it was likely that it would achieve compliance and the consequences of non-compliance do not pose a risk to the tenant.

4.22 It was noted that a breakdown of the Council's use of formal enforcement powers, such as statutory notices, civil penalty notices, criminal penalties, rent repayment orders and banning orders would be provided after the meeting.

4.23 *A Commission Member asked about how the Council worked to educate tenants of their rights and responsibilities, and where they should go for advice and guidance when issues arise.*

4.24 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability explained that educating tenants on their rights and responsibilities was important, but currently limited due to budget constraints. Future work around this would involve increasing the use of social media as a platform for the Council's standards, commitments, enforcement action, advice and support to both landlords and tenants.

4.25 *A Commission Member asked for further information on how the Council planned to support older private tenants, recognising that it was increasingly likely that many tenants would reach retirement age in the PRS.*

4.26 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability explained that the Council was looking to more proactively inform and advise landlords of the challenges for older people living in unsuitable properties and the potential support landlords could offer. Other options being explored included the opportunity to enable people who owned their home to use equity in their home to support adaptation costs.

4.27 Pensioner poverty was a concern, with many older people living on a low income and having extra costs such as disability or care needs. This was coupled with rising rents, high heating bills if living in a cold, poorly insulated home, and the cost of living crisis. It was also exacerbated by the level of Local Housing Allowance, which was often far below rent.

4.28 The most recent household survey confirmed that 7% (over 2,400) of privately rented households had a head of household aged 55 years and over, and that people were living in the PRS for longer, with 6.5% of tenants having lived in their current home for over 10 years.

4.29 *A Commission Member asked for further information on how the additional £400k which was allocated for the expansion of the Private Sector Housing Team would be spent, and what impact it would have on the team's output.*

4.30 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability explained that the growth was primarily targeted at the expansion of the team of Environmental Health Officers. The result had been that the team was working at an increased level of efficiency and doing more proactive work. 50% of the growth had been used so far, with recruitment issues meaning that the growth had been limited for the next financial year (although could be added back in if needed).

4.31 *A Commission Member asked about how the Council worked with tenants who may be fearful of reporting issues due to threat of eviction.*

4.32 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability explained that part of the work to address this issue was around being more proactive in terms of enforcement to identify issues with the PRS without relying on tenants coming forward to report issues. This was coupled with making it easier for tenants to report issues to the Council and promoting understanding of their rights.

4.33 Those facing retaliatory eviction were often left vulnerable and desperate to move in order to avoid homelessness, and as such close collaboration with other departments and partner agencies such as homelessness services was also vital.

4.34 A Commission Member asked about how the Private Sector Housing Team worked with other departments and organisations to share information on housing issues and vulnerability, and ensure residents in the private sector had access to the right support.

4.35 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability explained that sharing intelligence and making every contact count were key elements of the Council's approach to the PRS. It was important that the Council got the best outcomes for tenants and residents by reducing inequality and narrowing the gap in quality of housing across tenures. This could be achieved by partnership working and tackling challenges through positive collaboration.

4.36 A Commission Member asked about the impact that attracting investors in the PRS might have on the supply of social housing in the borough.

4.37 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability explained that, with one in three residents living in the PRS in Hackney, there was a clear need to support private renters and encourage greater professionalism amongst the borough's landlords. Ultimately being a landlord in the PRS was lucrative and, whilst cost pressures around increasing interest rates and mortgage costs had seen some leave the market, the majority remained.

4.38 The strategy sat alongside the Council's commitments to building more genuinely affordable homes at social rent, and recognised that building more social housing alone was not enough to ease the housing crisis in Hackney. It was important to also ensure that new and existing homes in the PRS were of good standard and genuinely affordable.

4.39 A Commission Member asked for more information on what the Council understood about the length of tenancies in Hackney, and what benchmarking took place to understand other London Boroughs' approaches to supporting tenancy security.

4.40 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability recognised that a lack of security in terms of length of tenancy was an issue and explained that the Council had successfully lobbied to end Section 21 'no fault' evictions, meaning all landlords would need to provide their tenants with a valid reason for ending the tenancy.

4.41 In terms of benchmarking, comparable London Boroughs such as Camden or Islington had bigger teams working across the PRS than Hackney did. This meant that they were able to work more proactively with landlords and tenants to resolve issues and support tenancy sustainment.

4.42 A Commission Member asked for an update on whether the Private Sector Housing Team had recruited to the vacant Empty Homes Officer position to take forward work to bring empty homes back into use.

4.43 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability explained that the introduction of an Empty Homes Officer would increase staff capacity to investigate empty homes and look at the options to bring them back into use.

4.44 It was noted that an update on the recruitment timelines for the Empty Homes Officer would be provided after the meeting.

4.45 *A Commission Member asked whether there were any other London Borough which had proposed incentives to encourage landlords to join the London Landlord Accreditation Scheme and attend local Landlord Forum events.*

4.46 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability explained that she did not know whether a similar approach had been adopted in other London Boroughs. However, there was a need for collaboration in raising awareness of tenant and landlord responsibilities and in expanding good practice across the PRS.

4.47 The majority of landlords in the borough provided a professional service to their tenants and, if in breach of any rules, it was not necessarily through wilful neglect but rather through lack of knowledge.

4.48 It was also important to make the distinction between these landlords and rogue landlords. Rogue landlords were not landlords who just 'got it wrong', A rogue landlord had little regard for Fair Housing Laws, adhering to building codes, or respecting a tenant's rights to privacy in their rental home.

4.49 *A Commission Member asked for further information on the impact of cost pressures on landlords operating in the borough, such as increasing interest rates and higher mortgage costs.*

4.50 It was noted that further information on this would be provided to the Commission after the meeting.

4.51 *A Commission Member asked about the lobbying that was being undertaken by the Council around key legislation such as the introduction of the Renters' (Reform) Bill and raising Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates.*

4.52 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Private Rented Sector & Housing Affordability recognised that reports that the Renters' (Reform) Bill may be watered down were concerning, and the Council was lobbying with other London Boroughs to ensure it was not delayed any further and remained a key priority for any incoming government.

4.53 Similarly, the Cabinet Member for Homelessness and Housing Needs worked with other London Boroughs to lobby for an increase in LHA entitlements to help housing benefit claimants living in Hackney's PRS to maintain their tenancies.

Summing Up

4.54 The Chair thanked Commission Members for their questions and all witnesses for their responses and engagement with the scrutiny process.

4.55 It was explained that, after the meeting, the Commission would reflect on the evidence heard and may make suggestions or recommendations for consideration as part of the strategy consultation process.

5 Update on Housing Strategy 2024-29

5.1 The Chair opened the item by explaining that the Commission had requested a brief update on the development of the Council's new Housing Strategy 2024-29 and the timeline options for its publication.

5.2 Representing London Borough of Hackney

- Nathan Keates, Project Manager Housing Strategy & Policy

5.3 The Chair then invited the Project Manager Housing Strategy & Policy to give a verbal update. The main points are highlighted below.

5.4 The current outline for the Housing Strategy aimed to present a draft strategy to Cabinet in June 2024, undergo a 12-week public consultation period thereafter, then present the final strategy to Cabinet in December 2024. This did potentially have to account for the impact of two pre-election periods - the London Mayoral Election and General Election. This was Route One.

5.5 If the Council was to wait and go in lockstep with the Local Plan Review, the timeline in terms of months would be exactly the same but one year later. This was because the earliest a Local Plan Review would be ready was June 2024. This route wouldn't be impacted by the pre-election periods. This was Route Two.

5.6 There was also a Route Three, where the Council could hold off a year as in Route Two, to account for the Local Plan review, the various elections and prepare another Position Statement / Emerging Themes document for Cabinet in December 2024.

Questions, Answers and Discussion

5.7 *A Commission Member asked what the 12-week public consultation process for the draft Housing Strategy might look like.*

5.8 It was explained that there was a statutory requirement for the Council to formally consult the public on the draft Housing Strategy for a 12-week period. The methods of consultation were still to be determined.

Summing Up

5.9 The Chair thanked Commission Members for their questions and to the officer for his responses and engagement with the scrutiny process.

5.10 It was explained that the Commission planned to come back to the strategy in the new municipal year to look in detail at the emerging priorities and how they might be delivered.

6 Minutes of the Meeting

6.1 The draft minutes of the meeting held on 27th February 2024 were agreed as an accurate record.

7 Living in Hackney Work Programme 2023/24

7.1 The Chair referred to the Commission's work programme.

7.2 Members were thanked for their hard work over the course of the year, which had seen the Commission look at a number of key issues of local concern and strategic importance to the Council, partners and residents. This included resident engagement, housing repairs, anti-social behaviour, social landlord accountability and homelessness.

7.3 The Chair & Vice Chair would be working over the coming weeks to bring any outstanding findings and recommendations together and ensure that any follow up action was coordinated with the relevant Cabinet Members.

8 Any Other Business

8.1 None.

Duration of the meeting: 7.00 - 8.10 pm