Joint Children & Young People Scrutiny Commission and the Governance & Resources Scrutiny Commission: Children in Temporary Accommodation

UPDATE ON RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1 - Review the visiting policies across all temporary accommodation hostels

The Council recognise that living in a hostel is, for most people, less than ideal and this can add to the stress and anxiety experienced by the household. It is also understood that visits from friends and relatives can help alleviate some of this stress. However, the Council must also ensure that the accommodation provides a safe and secure environment. Safety and security is of paramount importance and to this end, the Council has had to put in place restrictions on visitors and personal callers, in order to ensure the safety and security of everybody living within the accommodation, particularly young children.

It should be noted that many of our residents have come from estranged relationships or are fleeing domestic violence and are extremely wary of strangers and non-residents having access to the accommodation. We need to be able to accommodate their concerns as well.

An official visitor policy has been drafted reflecting ongoing feedback from residents and is currently out for officer consultation. The new policy formalises the current processes whereby residents can arrange for personal visitors, sets out the background against which decisions on whether a visit should be allowed are made and allows for a challenge to be made should a resident feel that a visit has been unreasonably denied.

In setting out the guidelines and the context in which they have been drawn up, we are hopeful that residents will understand that the restrictions placed upon them are for the general wellbeing of all. Once the policy has been agreed copies will be provided to all hostel tenants and the policy will be displayed at each hostel. The policy will be published on the Council's website.

Recommendation 2 - Gather information of the impact of living in temporary accommodation on children's development, achievements and outcomes to strengthen their evidence base and position to influence national policy by creating a data set for tracking the school performance and other developmental measurements.

The Benefits and Housing Needs Service have extracted details of children currently living in temporary accommodation and have shared this with Children's and Young Peoples Service and the Learning Trust. The Learning Trust will then cross match the data with school registers to:

a) establish that the children have been allocated a school place in Hackney and are attending regularly,

b) for those who are not on a Hackney School register, confirm that the child is registered at a school with another local authority,

c) where the child has been placed in TA outside the borough, identify the average travelling time and any impact this is having on their attainment.

Since the meeting of the Commission in December 2016, officers from housing, the learning trust and social care services have met to consider how best to go about sharing information between the respective services in order to consider the impact of living in temporary accommodation on children's development, achievements and outcomes. There are three significant challenges in respect of the sharing of information within the council to achieving this objective:

- Firstly, approximately half of the 2100 children living in temporary accommodation are placed outside of Hackney and / or do not attend a Hackney school. Whilst we know who those children are and where they are living, we cannot collectively and routinely access information about their attendance and attainment at school since it will be held by other local authorities. Any analysis of the impact of living in temporary accommodation will therefore be limited to those children attending school in Hackney for whom the impact is likely to be less significant since they have not experienced a significant move.

- Secondly, in considering the impact of living in temporary accommodation on attendance and attainment in school, it is necessary to develop a picture over a period of time, i.e. to have some understanding of the family circumstances prior to them being placed in temporary accommodation in order to determine whether this has had a detrimental effect. Currently the data (on children attending Hackney Schools) is providing a snap shot of children in temporary accommodation and their current attendance / attainment levels; initial analysis does not suggest that the profile of these children is significantly different from that of their peers. However, we are still trying to develop a mechanism for determining a "before and after" analysis.

- Thirdly, in order to broaden our understanding and analysis of the data, we have given consideration to the use of the data analysis systems developed for early help profiling and the identification of "troubled families". Potentially, this could expand the data set to include some health data but that requires existing information sharing protocols are rewritten since the existing protocols were not developed for the purpose of monitoring education performance of children in temporary accommodation. Similar considerations needs to be given to the development of any mechanism for data sharing between Housing Needs and Schools.

Consideration has also been given to the merits of the development of a "virtual school" for children in temporary accommodation, similar to that which is responsible for overseeing the education of children for whom we are a corporate parent. For the reasons given above, it would not be possible to develop such a service covering all children in temporary accommodation because the education data would not be available. For those children where such data is available, consent would be required from parents before that data was used to determine the provision of services / support. Information sharing governance allows for the sharing of child level data for the determination of service configuration; it does not allow for the use of that data for the provision of services without prior consent. Further consideration will be given to the identification of which families in temporary accommodation have a professional network over and above universal services in order to determine whether there is the capacity to intervene effectively.

Some early discussions have taken place about how best to support children who are living in temporary accommodation and having now made some progress on gathering data that will support a preliminary analysis of needs a further meeting will be held to consider what the appropriate support offer will be.

Recommendation 3 - Consider the development of an equivalent of 'virtual school' for children in temporary accommodation to improve and maintain attainment.

Establishing a 'virtual school' to promote and monitor the educational achievements of children and young people in in temporary accommodation is an interesting concept. However, at a time of not inconsiderable budget pressures across the whole of education, all new initiatives which require considerable resources to not only establish but maintain and hone, will need to be subject to close scrutiny in order to balance efficacy with cost. It must be borne in mind that local authorities are currently having to make difficult decisions regarding competing priorities. Consequently, Hackney Learning Trust will undertake an initial, limited, study to identifying any existing evidence base and to scope potential costs against anticipated benefits.

Recommendation 4 - Expand the partnership working and information sharing between Hackney Learning Trust and Housing Needs to schools in order to engage with the relevant professionals at an early point as possible to ensure children and young people are provided sufficient support to mitigate the negative impact of living in temporary accommodation.

As previously advised, the Benefits and Housing Needs Service are sharing with the Learning Trust data relating to children residing in temporary accommodation. With this as a platform, the Learning Trust can advise schools of individual pupils living in temporary accommodation.

Consequently, where that child is having difficulties with their schooling, the school can liaise directly with the Benefits and Housing Needs Service to identify a potential resolution.

On a related note, officers are continuing to reappraise the layout of the hostel stock to identify safe play areas that will help promote social skills, while also providing homework areas for older children to complete tasks and projects in a calm and quiet environment. We are also considering local spaces near hostels for the same purpose; recently we have been working with St Peters De Beauvoir Church, which is situated next door to one of our hostels, for use of the church space by the hostel residents.

Recommendation 5 - Carry out regular surveys with residents in temporary accommodation to aid the development of local policies and aim to improve the facilities available to create more of 'a sense of community' and improve residents' experiences of living in temporary accommodation.

Benefits and Housing Needs officers have met with both communications team and the consultation team to start the process of regularly surveying households in temporary accommodation.

Officers have agreed a format, and are currently pulling together a set of questions that will explore the tenants perceptions/observations of the condition and suitability

of the accommodation provided as well as the quality of the general service provided and the support and assistance offered.

The intelligence and information gathered will contribute not only to service improvement and better training, but also allow for improved communications with potential residents as part of a general induction programme.

Recommendation 6 - Continue to monitor the management and suitability of the hostels provided while also considering alternative ways of providing separate hostels, i.e. family only hostels, by learning from refuge provision and reviewing how this is provided elsewhere.

The Benefits and Housing Needs Service has been in contact with neighbouring boroughs with a view to establishing a benchmarking/Peer review group to look at hostel management and related service provision. The London Borough of Islington have responded favourably and an informal exchange of views and ideas has already taken place.

The Benefits and Housing Needs Service will always seek to place families in the most suitable accommodation available at the time the needs arise. We also recognise that in many instances, being able to offer a place in a family only hostel would provide additional peace of mind to many families, however, the mix of unit sizes within our hostels does not lend itself to exclusivity. It is also impossible to ensure this outcome without impacting on the speedy provision of shelter to homeless families.

Council owned hostels have been surveyed and there are unfortunately structural limitations to the design and layout of these buildings. Procurement of additional, new hostel accommodation will ensure that these requirements are taken into account.

The Service is making strenuous efforts to source suitable accommodation; for example, of the last 17 households that have presented due to domestic violence, there were only 5 instances where the Service were unable to place them in either self-contained accommodation or a Council run hostel.

Also the Service are continuing to make the most use possible of empty properties on regen estates as TA accommodation and there is an ongoing programme to refurbish voids for use as TA where is economically viable to do so.

It should also be noted that recent evidence shows that homeless households within temporary accommodation reject 40% of all properties that they have bid for at viewing stage, thereby prolonging their stay in temporary accommodation.

Regarding services provided to residents living in Council run hostels, a pilot is being conducted in two premises providing free Wi-Fi facilities. Availability in the communal areas of Median Rd hostel should be operational by the end of March, and in individual rooms in Leabridge Road hostel by the end of June. However, extension of these facilities to all hostels would require significant capital outlay and ongoing subsidy. Laundry facilities have been installed in three hostels to date, and surveys of the remaining premises have concluded that it would not currently be possible to extend this provision further within current stock. The Council will consult residents living in TA about their priorities for facilities in hostels and this will guide future plans for improvements.