

Written evidence submitted by the London Borough of Hackney (MRS0450)

1. About Hackney and Hackney Council

1.1 While Covid-19 does not discriminate in its infection of people, the impact of the crisis appears to, so we welcome the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry.

1.2 We share the concerns raised locally and nationally about the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on certain communities. For this reason, we have called on the Equality and Human Rights Commission to review the Government's coronavirus response and the impact of their actions on individuals with protected characteristics, as defined by the Equality Act 2010.

1.3 Hackney is a mix of different communities. According to the 2011 Census:

- Around 40% of the population come from Black and Minority Ethnic groups and over 89 languages are spoken in the Borough.
- Hackney is home to one of the largest groups of Charedi Jewish people in Europe, representing 7% of the borough's overall population, and also a large muslim community.
- 14.6% of Hackney's population reported they were disabled or they experienced long-term limiting illnesses.
- Hackney is a young borough, with 25% of its population under 20 and a further 23% aged between 20-29 years. People aged over 55 make up 18% of the population.

1.4 Equality of opportunity and improving life chances are at the heart of what we do. 'Tackling Inequality' has been the first priority. It is central to our Community Strategy¹, Single Equality Scheme² and all of our work.

1.5 We know that there is a clear link between inequalities for many people with a protected characteristic and economic deprivation. In London, poverty is largely driven by markets and austerity - unaffordable housing, the cost of living, the hollowing out of the labour market, and national changes to welfare and social support systems. In Hackney, one in three households are in poverty after housing costs and nearly half of children live in poverty.

2. How people have been affected by Covid-19 or the response to it

2.1 We are aware from our own work to support local residents through lockdown, as well as statistics recently published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), that people who were already at greater risk of poverty and of growing inequalities are more likely to be exposed to the virus and its after-effects and by the economic impacts of this pandemic. They will be under greater pressure as a result of social isolation and are marginalised by some of the new ways essential services are delivered. Thinking about their health needs during the stage of the crisis will be vital.

2.2 We are committed to continually appraising our responses to check it is targeted and does not further entrench inequality. We know we need to set up the right medium-term support for those already affected by Covid-19, to prevent further disadvantage.

2.3 Deaths in Hackney

2.4 As of April 28, local death records show that almost 70% of all deaths registered in City and Hackney were people born outside the UK and 58% of deaths were people employed in routine and manual occupations. Of these deaths, 52% were men, 48% women and two thirds were people aged 70+. This indicator appears to show that people from ethnic minority backgrounds, older people and those from a lower socio-economic background are disproportionately affected by the epidemic.

2.5 Employment and economy

2.6 In Hackney the employment rate for residents from ethnic minority backgrounds is lower than for white residents and black male graduates are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed as their white counterparts. The employment rate for disabled residents is around 40% lower than for non disabled residents, and women between 24 - 49 years have a lower employment rate and a higher unemployment rate than men.

2.7 Our Inclusive Economy Strategy³ aims to enable local neighbourhoods to thrive, support local businesses and connect residents to high-skilled, quality employment opportunities. Despite the interventions we are making as a local authority to try and mitigate against this, the Covid-19 outbreak jeopardises these aspirations.

2.8 There are gaps in Government support to businesses. Workspace providers do not qualify for rates relief; those supplying restaurants and pubs do not qualify for financial assistance; self-employed people working out of limited companies with income from dividends do not qualify. The threshold for rate relief does not account for London property values. Government support for self employed people will not arrive until June.

2.9 In the longer term business closures will lead to a loss of employment for local people. Large-scale businesses closures in poorer neighbourhoods may lead to blight.

2.10 In Hackney, claims for Universal Credit increased by 4,000 from mid-March to mid-April, an increase of 60%. Some digitally excluded residents have been unable to contact Jobcentre Plus online or by phone and fear losing benefits.

2.11 We welcome the additional £20/week Universal Credit uplift and the increase in LHA rates back to the 30th percentile. However, in a high rent area like Hackney, many households will not benefit from these changes, as in households where no one is working claims will exceed the Benefit Cap.

2.12 Many new claimants have never applied for benefits and are unfamiliar with the system. We agree with the Resolution Foundation⁴ that the availability of Universal Credit as a safety net should be widely publicised. We are concerned that those with as little as £6,000 savings

still receive reduced payments and those with over £16,000 savings will not qualify. Messaging around rent holidays needs to be clearer as some are not aware they will have to pay eventually.

2.13 We welcome that claimants can take an advanced payment rather than waiting five weeks, but are concerned this will be taken from future payments when they are potentially meeting other debts.

2.14 Longer term, as claimants are reassessed and conditionality rules start to be reapplied some may no longer be eligible for Universal Credit. We urge the Government to take this opportunity to provide the DWP with the long-term funding needed to speed up the claims process, and dispense with some of the conditionalities associated with Universal Credit, for example, the need to attend regular meetings at the Jobcentre or permanently abolishing the Minimum Income Floor for self employed people.

2.15 *Financial strain on the voluntary sector*

2.16 We commend the work of the voluntary sector, which has been at the frontline of the response, offering crucial support for residents and underpinning plans to support the most vulnerable.

2.17 Diverse, densely populated urban communities like Hackney with high socioeconomic deprivation need strong voluntary and community sectors. There is a need to ensure that all organisations, including smaller charities providing tailored support to communities with protected characteristics, like organisations providing services to specific ethnic groups, disability organisations and LGBTIQ organisations have adequate funding. That support needs to go beyond the immediate “crisis response” and recognise the vital role of the voluntary sector in addressing the broader direct and indirect impacts of coronavirus.

2.18 The results of one national survey⁵ reveals that 9 out of 10 ethnic minority-led micro and small organisations are set to close if the crisis continues beyond 3 months following the lockdown

2.19 On 18 March 2020, Hackney CVS issued a survey seeking to capture the impact of Covid-19 on local voluntary sector organisations. Fifty organisations responded. In addition, Hackney CVS reached out to nearly 100 more organisations through their networks and online forums.⁶ Almost all respondents noted a loss of funding as one of their top concerns. Some respondents stressed they may end up needing to close their services completely.

2.20 The £750m Government support will not meet the estimated £4bn loss in income by charities over 12 weeks. Some will have to cut back or close.

2.21 *Lockdown / social isolation*

2.22 We know there were people experiencing loneliness and social isolation before the Covid-19 outbreak. We were concerned by the findings of the ONS's May 2020 report into Personal and Economic well-being in Great Britain. ⁷

2.23 *Housing / homelessness*

2.24 Homeless people are among the most vulnerable in our community. The Covid-19 outbreak has amplified this. It is virtually impossible for those in hostels sharing kitchens and bathrooms with others to self isolate. Before the lockdown over 70% of those on our housing waiting list where ethnicity was known were non-white and where gender was known, 64% were women.

2.25 Hackney Council, working with the GLA, has housed over 80 rough sleepers. Some of these are individuals with no recourse to public funds for whom there are limited pathways into lasting accommodation.

2.26 Voids have decreased as house moves are restricted. New-build completions are likely to be down. Housing waiting lists are likely to lengthen.

2.27 Loss of rents as tenants are furloughed, lose their jobs or misunderstand entitlement to rent holidays will increase financial pressure on councils and Registered Housing Providers.

2.28 Over a third of Hackney's households live in Private Rented housing. The full impact of Covid-19 on the Private Rented Sector is not yet known. We are concerned that even with the uplift to Local Housing Allowance, this will not fully cover the cost of rent and that those without savings will fall into arrears and eventually face eviction.

2.29 In a sustained economic downturn rents and house prices could fall, some landlords may face repossession. Home owners may slip into negative equity, or face foreclosure.

2.30 The Private Sector Housing Team is providing advice and support for landlords and tenants. We are lobbying the Government for increased protection for private tenants.

2.31 Councils need support from the Government to plan and meet potentially large increases in demand for temporary accommodation and social housing.

2.32 *Food access*

2.33 Before the Covid-19 outbreak it was evident that a significant number of residents could not afford nutritious food. We have developed a Food Poverty Action Plan⁸ with the Food Justice Alliance.

2.34 The Covid-19 outbreak has worsened the situation. Smaller food-based charities have struggled to secure enough food to scale up their operations. Hackney Council has to date

delivered nearly 5,000 food parcels to residents in addition to those on the Government's shielded list. The Council has also, at times, had difficulty securing sufficient food. We echo the concerns of Professor Tim Lang about the fragility of the food supply chain and hope this will be addressed in the emerging National Food Strategy.

3.35 Around 5,000 Hackney residents are receiving food through the Government's shielding programme. These parcels often do not contain the right mix of produce to create meals. Residents report an absence of culturally specific ingredients, options for people with allergies or medical conditions, vegans and vegetarians.

3. People with protected characteristics

3.1 Older people

3.2 In Hackney 21% of shielded residents are aged 70+, and 53% of residents who are receiving food assistance are aged 60 and over.

3.3 Those infected by Covid-19 may need additional support for some time. We share the concerns of groups like Cancer Research UK⁹ about long-term serious illnesses and excess deaths from other diseases undetected or untreated during this crisis.

3.4 Older people are most likely to be digitally excluded. During this crisis older people risk being unable to tap into formal and informal support now delivered online.

3.5 Children and young people

3.6 We know from our poverty reduction work that households with children are particularly susceptible, especially lone parent households, those with a disabled member, special educational needs, larger households (with more than two children), those with children under five, workless households, ethnic minority households and those where parents have lower levels of educational attainment.

3.7 The current lockdown and school closures will place even more pressure on these families, the bulk of whom live in overcrowded accommodation without direct access to outdoor space. We are concerned about the extra stress on parents going out to work, or those working from home while looking after young children. We have seen a 60% increase **3.8** in referrals to our Domestic Abuse Intervention Services. We are concerned about the wellbeing of children and young people exposed to domestic violence and substance misuse.

3.9 We are anticipating a further increase in referrals as lock down eases and some of the existing barriers to seeking help / leaving the home are lifted.

3.10 With less adult oversight at home, school or in open spaces young people may be at greater risk of grooming and illicit activity. We know from our work on Digital Inclusion¹⁰

that many families are not adequately digitally connected or have insufficient devices to enable their children to effectively engage with educational or social activities online. This is likely to adversely affect their educational prospects.

3.11 The supermarket voucher scheme for families on Free School Meals has faced delays, and there continues to be uncertainty regarding arrangements for the summer holidays. There was a three and a half week delay in extending the eligibility for Free School Meals to include (some) children with no recourse to public funds (NRPF) following the Government's initial announcement.

3.12 There is no other national recognition of the additional needs of children whose families have NRPF who are ineligible for Section 17, or Section 4 Asylum Support. Councils are having to meet these additional costs.

3.13 We echo the concerns of the Sutton Trust¹¹ about the negative impacts of predicted grades on students from ethnic minority, and working class backgrounds. These concerns are echoed by parents and community-led groups due to unconscious bias in the classroom.

3.14 We share the Institute for Fiscal Studies¹² concerns about the long-term scarring effects for young people entering the job market during recession.

3.15 In Hackney we are offering lessons and youth activities online, providing hot meals at schools, engaging with vulnerable young people and providing employment support to college and university leavers. The Government is not fully recognising or addressing the needs of children and young people from socio-economically deprived backgrounds in this crisis.

3.16 *Disability*

3.17 The factors outlined above are compounded for young people with special educational needs and disabilities. We note the extensive objections raised by disabled people, their families and disability organisations to relaxing SEND reform duties from the 2014 Children and Families Act and also the Care Act duties, which loosens the Council's obligations to provide specialist provision alongside personal and respite care. While Hackney continues to **3.18** provide support to disabled people, as for all Councils Covid-19 has placed considerable strain on Hackney's budget. We expect a £19m shortfall in the next three months due to Covid-19 costs exceeding government funding, and we urge the Government to adequately fund Councils to ensure all residents are appropriately supported now and into the future.

3.19 The Government must not absolve itself of the responsibility of providing oversight of the provision of disability services in light of the Special Needs and Disability (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 and their changes to section 42 of the Children and Families Act.

3.20 Changes to the Mental Capacity Act could severely restrict the liberties of people with longer periods of detention and reduced oversight.

3.21 *Marriage and civil partnership*

3.22 March - August 2019 saw nearly 700 marriages and civil partnerships in Hackney. Cancellation of wedding and civil partnership ceremonies will put many couples under financial strain given the average cost of a wedding is now over £15,000.

3.23 *Pregnancy and maternity*

3.24 We share the concerns of organisations like Maternity Action¹³ that women claiming Maternity Benefit (mainly lower paid, and self employed) will be worse off under Universal Credit rules than those claiming Statutory Maternity Pay from their employers, as Maternity Allowance is counted as earned income and deducted from Universal Credit, whereas Statutory Maternity Pay counts as unearned income and is not.

3.25 *Race*

3.26 The Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre found that 35% of almost 2,000 patients critically ill with Covid-19 in UK hospitals were non-white — nearly triple the 13% proportion in the country's population as a whole.

3.27 In London 44.9% of all NHS trust staff are from black, asian and other minority ethnicity backgrounds, as are 67% of the adult social care workforce in the capital.

3.28 In Hackney, 50% of council staff are from diverse backgrounds, but there is an overrepresentation of black, asian and minority ethnicity staff in the bottom quartile — 63.1% vs 36.9%.

3.29 Locally, we are addressing this issue through our Single Equality Scheme which focuses on workforce diversity and leadership culture to tackle the underlying and systemic issues that might drive these inequalities.

3.30 This suggests that vital key workers responding to the crisis will be more diverse. Ethnic minority staff are on the frontlines of tackling the greatest public health crisis in a generation, while disproportionately making-up those who are critically ill from the virus itself.

3.31 In addition to being more heavily represented in frontline roles, people from ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to have poorer clinical outcomes where they live in larger, multigenerational households or where they have higher rates of underlying health conditions like diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease.

3.32 Workers from outside the European Economic Area (EEA) who become ill, are furloughed or rendered jobless cannot apply for state benefits and are charged to use the NHS. They will be forced to return home, live off savings or go into debt.

3.33 A quarter of Hackney's residents do not have English as a main language. This is particularly true for older residents, who may miss out of key messages.

3.34 Conditions on movement imposed during lockdown concerns all communities but impact some communities more than others. One parent spoke at an online meeting about the risks involved in taking her child to regular medical appointments, using public transport. Another spoke of the stress of moving around the borough to go shopping to buy food for her child with food intolerances. Speaking of communities that have negative experiences of Stop and Search, one Faith partner said:

“African Caribbean men are more reluctant to go out to the shops... due to the fear of being stopped and charged for being out unnecessarily.”

3.35 *Religion or belief*

3.36 We are concerned that during the Covid-19 outbreak some may be at greater risk of harmful religious practices. Some faith or ethnic groups may feel that state interventions aimed at enforcing social distancing were unfairly applied, or that the particular needs of their communities are being overlooked.

3.37 We are working hard to ensure fairness and maintain cordial community relations. However, more resources may be needed to rebuild trust once lockdown ends. At the same time we celebrate the huge voluntary and community effort through Mutual Aid and civil society. We will need time to properly understand the lessons of this crisis so we can harness these excellent relationships and structures to better support vulnerable residents in future.

3.38 The Government Parcels which are being delivered to the Extremely Vulnerable Group do not cater for any dietary requirements or religious restrictions. The onus is placed on local government. The Jewish community in particular has faced challenges providing Kosher food to those shielding or self-isolating.

3.39 We have supported our faith communities by providing grants and fundraising support; worked with Orthodox Jewish leaders to produce and distribute advice in print, as they do not access the internet; funded a group of Orthodox Jewish organisations to establish a helpline and Kosher Food Hub; and worked with the Muslim community to develop guidance for Ramadan and organise weekly Faith Forum meetings online.

3.40 The national response to Covid-19 needs to fully recognise the disproportionate impacts on racial and faith communities and the additional costs of providing a culturally competent response.

3.41 *Sex*

3.42 Women with NRPF are particularly vulnerable during this crisis, especially if they are or become victims of domestic abuse.

3.43 Under existing legislation, there is provision for support for women with NRPF under the Children's Act provided they have children. Before the current crisis, we along with local domestic abuse providers were concerned about increases in victims of domestic abuse with no recourse to public funds without children, for whom no statutory provision is made. Now, the Council has been going beyond the existing legislative frameworks to ensure we provide these women with accommodation but this needs to be funded and supported by the government.

3.44 Like many sectors, the childcare market has been significantly impacted by Covid-19. We are concerned about the disproportionate impact this will have on women, both as workers in this sector and as with regards to their own childcare options.

3.45 *Sexual orientation*

3.46 We are concerned that the social isolation that many Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual people face due to family estrangement and rejection from the wider community may be amplified at this time and that specialist advice and support must be in place, including mental health support. LGBTIQ people are also at higher risk due to health inequalities, the number of young homeless, and also because people avoid treatment for fear of discrimination.

3.47 *Gender reassignment*

3.48 In addition to loneliness and isolation, we are concerned that gender reassignment treatment may be delayed for some as NHS resources are targeted to fighting Covid-19 and that some may be tempted to self-medicate.

4. Recommendations

4.1 We urge your committee to call on the Government to:

4.2 *In the next three weeks:*

4.3 Take a holistic approach to Covid-19: As we have tried to illustrate, the impacts of Covid-19 go way beyond those directly affected by the disease. These needs must be recognised and fully met.

4.4 Recognise that providing a response that effectively meets the needs of diverse, densely populated urban communities with high socioeconomic deprivation costs more than for more

affluent communities. These costs need to be fully met¹⁴ to avoid harmful cuts to frontline services in future.

4.5 Ensure that any future public health response to this crisis does not further entrench health inequalities. This can only be achieved by recognising the differing needs of diverse communities, including language barriers, and addressing the digital divide with regards to contact tracing, especially if there is an over reliance on apps and online reporting.

4.6 Ensure those receiving Government food parcels can access culturally appropriate food and foods that meet religious requirements like Kosher and Halal to reduce the need for people to go out shopping. Government food parcels should also offer options for people with food allergies, medical conditions as well as vegan and vegetarian options and ingredients to cook nutritious meals.

4.7 Extend funding to support the protection from domestic abuse of women with no recourse to public funds to include those not eligible for support under the Children's Act.

4.8 Address gaps in support to businesses and the voluntary and community sector.

4.9 Publicise the availability of Universal Credit as a safety net and the availability of face-to-face services at Jobcentres for those without digital access.

4.10 Delay advance benefit repayments for at least six months.

4.11 Suspend Section 11 of the Coronavirus Act and ensure adequate funding is available to ensure disabled people and those with Mental Health needs receive the support they need.

4.12 Initiate a public information campaign to prevent scams.

4.13 Provide families with assurance that the Free School Meals voucher scheme will continue during the summer holidays to avoid holiday hunger, should the lockdown continue into this period.

4.14 Introduce a fairer and more adequate safety net, for example relaxing some of the conditionality of Universal Credit and the ban on migrants from non-EEA countries claiming benefits.

4.15 *In the next six months*

4.16 The Government should consider long term impacts on low income residents and ensure that the benefits system is adequately resourced to support this.

4.17 Lift the visa cap for migrants working in key sectors.

4.18 Remove the data sharing duty between health and immigration enforcement.

4.19 Correct some of the key factors driving health inequalities such as the housing crisis.

4.20 Value care workers, cleaners and supermarket workers. This is a chance to improve employment conditions, skills and progression routes.

4.21 Build on the numerous positive examples of public, private and community partnerships and Mutual Aid for people on lower incomes.

4.22 Develop a system of flexible, high quality childcare that is properly funded to help parents to take full advantage of a more remote, agile workplace.

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¹ <https://hackney.gov.uk/community-strategy>

² https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Vg5tLUBj-laVQ7RH0S4oe_cUH7aE8aMq/view

³ <https://hackney.gov.uk/inclusive-economy-strategy>

⁴ <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/no-work-no-pay/>

⁵ <https://www.ubele.org/news/2020/4/30/9-out-of-10-bame-micro-and-small-organisations-set-to-close-if-the-crisis-continues-beyond-3-months-following-the-lockdown>

⁶ https://hcvcs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/hackneyvcs_survey_final.pdf

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/personalandeconomicwellbeingintheuk/latest>

⁸ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1JO6KQL9FrUNBwUuaSUXtfmj5cJE1EUs/view>

⁹ <https://scienceblog.cancerresearchuk.org/2020/04/21/how-coronavirus-is-impacting-cancer-services-in-the-uk/>

¹⁰ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_PD1WLcjgVuwpacLx7nE1w3cchBEZ_9R/view

¹¹ <https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/grade-calculation/>

¹² <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/10180>

¹³ <https://maternityaction.org.uk/2020/03/universal-credit-when-is-maternity-pay-not-maternity-pay/>

¹⁴ <https://www.lgcplus.com/finance/hackney-mayor-couldnt-rule-out-s114-without-extra-funding-23-04-2020/>