Hackney

	Minutes of the proceedings of
London Borough of Hackney	the Living in Hackney Scrutiny
Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission	Commission held at
Municipal Year 2020/21	Hackney Town Hall, Mare
Wednesday 22 March 2023	Street, London E8 1EA

Chair:	**Cllr Clare Joseph**
Councillors in Attendance:	**Cllr M Can Ozsen, Cllr Ian Rathbone, Cllr Penny Wrout, Cllr Clare Joseph, Cllr Joseph Ogundemuren, Cllr Sam Pallis, Cllr Sarah Young and Cllr Zoe Garbett**
Apologies:	**Cllr Soraya Adejare and Cllr Ali Sadek**
Officers In Attendance:	**Rob Miller (Strategic Director for Customer and Workplace), Ian Williams (Group Director for Finance and Corporate Resources), Beverley Gachette (Strategic Commissioner Mental Health & Prevention) and Councillor Sade Etti (Mayoral Advisor for Housing Needs and Homelessness)**
Other People in Virtual Attendance:	**Steve Webster (Resident Liaison Group Co-Chair)**
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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 Councillor Adejare. Councillor Joseph, as Vice-Chair, would chair the meeting.

1.3 Apologies for absence were also received from Councillor Sadek.

2 Urgent Items / Order of Business

2.1 The Chair advised that apologies had been received from the Mayoral Advisor for Private Rented Sector and Housing Affordability.

2.2 Item 5: Cabinet Question Time - Accountability of Private Rented Sector and Housing Associations was therefore removed from the agenda and postponed until a later date.

3   Declaration of Interest

3.1 There were no declarations of interest.

4   Temporary Accommodation

4.1 The Chair opened the discussion by explaining that unaffordable and insecure housing, a lack of social homes, and changes to benefits and local housing allowance had led to a sharp increase in homelessness in London in recent years, and that this had increased demand for temporary accommodation across the capital.

4.2 The Chair explained that the Commission had requested this item as it was keen to hear about the current situation with regards to the provision of temporary accommodation in Hackney. It was particularly keen to understand what temporary accommodation was like, how common certain issues were, and how it impacted people.

4.3 <u>Representing London Borough of Hackney</u>
- Councillor Sade Etti, Mayoral Advisor for Housing Needs and Homelessness
- Ian Williams, Group Director for Finance and Corporate Finances
- Rob Miller, Strategic Director for Customer and Workplace
- Beverley Gachette, Strategic Commissioner Mental Health & Prevention

4.4 The Chair invited the Mayoral Advisor for Housing Needs and Homelessness to give a short verbal presentation to supplement the written evidence included within the agenda papers. The main points are highlighted below.

4.5 The Council had a statutory duty to ensure that suitable accommodation was available to homeless households that are accepted as being in priority need. The Council, along with all other London councils, was experiencing a significant increase in the number of households facing homelessness and approaching the Council for help.

4.6 The Council can provide accommodation from its own stock or arrange for it to be provided by another landlord, such as a housing association or landlord in the private rented sector. If settled accommodation was not immediately available, temporary accommodation must be made available until the applicant finds a settled home or other circumstances bring the duty to an end such as where a household voluntarily leaves temporary accommodation.

4.7 The issue of housing affordability was particularly severe in Hackney. Households in temporary accommodation were at its highest point in 2021, with over 3,200 living in temporary accommodation. Of these, over 1,200 were placed outside of the borough, and over 2,000 were placed within the borough.

4.8 While the number of households placed in temporary accommodation had remained relatively stable, the profile of households had changed. Approaches from single households were continuing to increase, as well as the number of large families and households with multiple and complex needs.

4.9 The Council was committed to ensuring as many households were placed in temporary accommodation within the borough as possible, and within Council owned accommodation units where possible. In 2021, 249 households were placed in Council owned hostels, and 122 were placed in registered social landlord accommodation. A substantial number of units were also provided through repurposing void properties on regeneration estates.

4.10 At the same time, the Council had increasingly needed to make use of expensive short-term and nightly let accommodation to place households. This was because many landlords that remained in the temporary accommodation market chose to offer short-term and nightly let arrangements only as this was where they saw the greatest profits.

4.11 Nationally, statutory homelessness had been rising from 2011 onwards. This was attributed to many factors including the continuing shortfall in the delivery of new affordable housing. This was in part due the central government's prioritisation of owner-occupied housing over truly affordable social housing. Moreover, housing benefits reforms, including the cap on benefits, had meant that benefits support had not kept pace with rising rents.

4.12 The Chair then invited the Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace to give a short verbal presentation to supplement the written evidence included within the agenda papers. The main points are highlighted below.

4.13 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace firstly made a few points of clarification. Firstly, the figures for the Engage Hackney floating support service as described on p.g. 26 of the agenda papers were incorrect. The service was in fact commissioned to support 550 people per year at an average annual contract of £1,200,000.

4.14 Further clarification points were made in reference to Item 4b: Report of the Members' Site Visits to Temporary Accommodation. In relation to the point around dampness and lack of ventilation, it was advised that the Health & Safety Surveyor would validate if works were needed at the accommodation after the meeting.

4.15 In relation to the concern raised over a lack of adequate space in some accommodation and lack of access to communal spaces, it was advised that the Council and external providers met minimum space requirements in all cases. Communal spaces were not a legal requirement, but in some cases the Council provides them.

4.16 Some of the key strategic challenges that Hackney faced in terms of temporary accommodation provision were highlighted. These included rising demand, with a significant growth in approaches for housing and a rising population living in temporary accommodation.

4.17 This was attributed to several factors including a continuing shortfall in the delivery of new affordable housing relative to the levels of local need. 9372 socially rented homes had been sold under Right to Buy since 2010 in Hackney, of which 571 had been sold since 2015 and 2153 had been sold on by former tenants.

4.18 A growing number of private landlords were also leaving the market which was further diminishing the availability of privately rented accommodation. This had led to sharply increasing rents, and an increase in the number of evictions. Hackney had the fourth highest rate of homelessness in London after Newham, Westminster and Haringey.

4.19 The stock of suitable temporary accommodation was also diminishing due to the reducing availability of privately provided stock. The level of competition in the market had meant that the number of temporary accommodation properties which the Council had been asked to return to private landlords was increasing, with 170 properties currently in the process of being returned.

4.20 Work was in progress to invest in the maintenance of the Council's own hostel properties, addressing issues such as fire safety and mechanical/electrical systems. A programme of capital investment, including £2,300,000 next year, had been set aside to repair and maintain the properties to the required standard.

4.21 The significant increase in demand and costs meant that the cost to the Council was expected to reach circa £10,000,000 for the current financial year, with significant overspend. Government cuts to council funding and benefits caps meant that pressures were expected to worsen in the years to come.

4.22 Households were presenting with increasingly complex needs but not necessarily reaching the thresholds for mental health or social care support. In these cases the Council was looking to provide additional support to mitigate the challenges they face. This included commissioning the Engage Hackney floating support service, and embedding social workers (one generalist and one mental health) into the service.

4.23 The Council was also taking proactive measures to try to intervene earlier by supporting residents at risk of homelessness. The Money Hub had been launched to identify households in financial difficulty and work to make timely homelessness prevention interventions. It had paid out £378,000 this financial year in crisis funds and was helping households to access benefits they were entitled to but were not currently claiming, increasing incomes by £289,000 per year with an aim of £1,000,0000 by November.

4.24 The service was also working closely with mental health and social care colleagues and NHS partners to improve access to relevant services, for example through outreach/inreach work and developing community hubs.

4.25 Whilst the Council was working to increase the supply of temporary accommodation stock in Hackney, the constrained supply of affordable temporary accommodation meant that some family sized temporary accommodation was only available well outside the borough in areas such as Peterborough or Wolverhampton.

4.26 The Chair then advised that the Commission has reached out to local people to share testimonies of their time in temporary accommodation to better understand what it is like, how common certain issues are, and how it impacts people.

4.27 Listening to and giving a voice to local people was central to scrutiny's effectiveness and the work of the Commission. It allowed Members to hear directly from residents on issues that mattered to them, gave them a clear stake in scrutiny's work and enabled their concerns to drive service improvements going forward.

4.28 The public could not all be engaged in the same way - some may feel comfortable with formal, public meetings, others may find them alienating, and others face various barriers in attending meetings whether they're formal or not. Members therefore tried to be as accommodating and proactive as possible in involving the public in our work.

4.29 It was recognised that these testimonies represented a small sample of the experiences of those that have lived in temporary accommodation, and were not necessarily representative of the experiences of the majority.

4.30 However, Members felt it was important to explore the wider strategic themes and issues highlighted, and ascertain whether they speak to more common issues that may be familiar to Members who deal with temporary accommodation routinely through their casework.

4.31 Those in attendance were then presented with two resident testimonies. The main points highlighted are summarised below.

Resident Testimony 1

4.32 The resident had encountered issues with the standard of temporary accommodation, the move on from temporary accommodation and support for households with complex needs. In particular, the resident felt that the settled accommodation provided was not suitable to their needs, and that the temporary accommodation they previously resided in could have been of a better standard.

Resident Testimony 2

4.33 The resident had encountered issues with the standard of temporary accommodation, the move on from temporary accommodation and support for households with complex needs. In particular, the resident was not satisfied with the process for moving into settled accommodation, and raised concerns around anti-social behaviour, visitors and personal callers and privacy in the temporary accommodation they previously resided in.

Questions, Answers and Discussion

4.34 *A Commission Member asked how the Council ensured residents were aware of the challenges around the housing crisis, and how it remained in regular contact with households living in temporary accommodation and helped them to understand their options and rights.*

4.35 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace explained that the challenges around the housing crisis were an important focus for the Council's communications team. For example, there was a recent press release about the impact of Right to Buy in Hackney, and it regularly shared updates on its work in improving temporary accommodation standards and increasing housing supply.

4.36 If a household presented as homeless, a Personal Housing Plan would be created for that household which involved guidance on the support available to them, advice on affordability and how they may maximise their opportunities to secure alternative accommodation. This included setting expectations, especially in regard to

the housing register and exploring opportunities for accommodation in the private sector.

4.37 The Mayoral Advisor for Housing Needs and Homelessness added that the Homelessness Partnership Board brought together various stakeholders across the borough, which ensured conversations were had between the Council, its partners and service users to help identify opportunities for reducing homelessness in Hackney.

4.38 *A Commission Member asked what mechanisms were in place for households to provide feedback to the Council on their experiences of living in temporary accommodation, and whether the Council supported households to set up tenants' and residents' groups.*

4.39 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace explained that households were not intended to be placed in temporary accommodation for an extended period of time, and were often moved between different types of accommodation during their stay, and it was therefore difficult for them to organise in a similar way to residents living in settled accommodation.

4.40 *A Commission Member asked about the process for moving households between temporary accommodation units, some of the reasons for doing so and what notice and support was provided for households when moving.*

4.41 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace explained that there were a number of reasons why a household may be asked to move to another temporary accommodation, including private landlords asking the Council to return properties, and alternative accommodation therefore having to be secured.

4.42 *A Commission Member asked about how the Council ensured that temporary accommodation was of a good standard, especially in light of the increasingly extended amounts of time households were spending in temporary accommodation.*

4.43 The Mayoral Advisor for Housing Needs and Homelessness explained that households were increasingly spending an extended period of time in temporary accommodation, and ensuring a good standard of accommodation was a key component of the service.

4.44 There were over 3,500 children living in temporary accommodation in Hackney, all of which faced unique challenges. The Council therefore looked to offer additional support to them. It worked with CARIS Families, a charity which ran support services for children and parents living in hostels, and Hackney Playbus, a charity dedicated to bringing play opportunities and support to families who need it most.

4.45 Extended stays in temporary accommodation had negative impacts on households' health and wellbeing, and the goal was always to support them to find settled accommodation. Given the limited availability of social housing and high costs of privately rented accommodation this was challenging, although the Council did work closely with households to help them understand their housing options.

4.46 *A Commission Member followed up by asking about the policy on visitors and personal callers to temporary accommodation, and whether there was scope for this to be more flexible.*

4.47 The Mayoral Advisor for Housing Needs and Homelessness explained that the Council had needed to put in some restrictions around visitor and personal callers in order to ensure the safety and security of households living within temporary accommodation, especially children and vulnerable adults.

4.48 There were some occasions where a household may be allowed visitors or personal callers, for example if a resident needed help from family or friends to look after a child or for care needs.

4.49 *A Commission Member asked whether the Council was planning on looking at staffing levels in temporary accommodation, in light of increasing demand and increasingly complex needs.*

4.50 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace explained that the significant increase in demand and cost relating to temporary accommodation meant that the Council was significantly overspending in this area, and additional staffing was seen as unaffordable.

4.51 The goal was therefore to support residents to find settled accommodation as soon as possible. The reality was that there was unlikely to be social housing options available to many residents living in temporary accommodation, and the Council therefore worked with residents to help them understand how options outside of Hackney might help them, and encourage them to source their own housing.

4.52 *A Commission Member asked what the Council was doing to increase the supply of temporary accommodation stock.*

4.53 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace explained that there were a number of opportunities being explored by the Council to increase the supply of temporary accommodation in Hackney.

4.54 This included securing long-term leases on social landlord and private sector properties and securing investment for improvement works where possible, as seen for example at Cape House. It also included the acquisition of Local Space properties that were originally sold under the Right to Buy Scheme.

4.55 The Council had established a temporary accommodation delivery group to examine and identify potential temporary accommodation delivery programmes, map out the next steps and actions required to implement these programmes and work collectively to overcome any blockages or barriers. This included working with partner organisations, charities, the Greater London Authority and central government to identify opportunities.

4.56 The Group Director for Finance and Corporate Finances added that it was important to recognise that Hackney was not the only local authority facing acute challenges in supply of temporary accommodation. For this reason, the London Housing Directors Group and the Society of London Treasures had established a Temporary Accommodation Working Group to identify collaborative opportunities.

4.57 There were significant financial challenges across London. Landlords were increasingly exiting from the market, either letting for a higher rent or opting to sell, and in many cases Councils were being outpriced by external providers.

4.58 Innovative options were being explored, such as making use of underused Council-owned sites, repurposing Council properties and examining options to use modular development for temporary accommodation provision.

4.59 *A Commission Member asked how the Council communicated with households in time limited temporary accommodation on regeneration estates to help them understand the nature of their accommodation and find longer term solutions.*

4.60 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace explained that the Council worked closely with these households to ensure they had realistic expectations of their temporary accommodation, and to identify steps forward to secure settled and suitable housing.

4.61 *A Commission Member asked whether the Council was exploring the possibility of converting underused office spaces into temporary accommodation units.*

4.62 The Mayoral Advisor for Housing Needs and Homelessness explained that Capital Letters had recently provided evidence to central government on the possible options for converting office spaces into temporary accommodation in the borough. This work was still at an early stage, and Members would be updated as it progressed.

4.63 *A Commission Member asked how the Council offered additional temporary accommodation support to the Cheradi Orthodox Jewish community in light of their unique needs.*

4.64 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace explained that there were unique challenges in placing the Cheradi Orthodox Jewish community in temporary accommodation. This included large family sizes, the need to place households in close proximity to the N16 area and complex needs. It was working closely with Agudas Israel Housing Association to identify if there were any void properties within their housing stock that may be used as temporary accommodation.

4.65 The Mayoral Advisor for Housing Needs and Homelessness added that placing larger families in temporary accommodation was particularly challenging as the availability of suitable accommodation was low and diminishing.

4.66 *A Commission Member asked what the process was for households living in temporary accommodation outside of the borough reporting and tracking repairs issues.*

4.67 The Mayoral Advisor for Housing Needs and Homelessness advised that the Council had set aside £16,000,000 over the next five years to repair and maintain the Council's in borough temporary accommodation.

4.68 Council officers arranged to visit homes that were used for temporary accommodation to thoroughly assess the living conditions. This allowed officers to determine the root cause of any issues and identify the steps needed to remedy the issue. Health and safety officers, hostel managers and officers worked together to monitor and maintain health and safety standards.

4.69 *A Commission Member asked whether any other London Boroughs held temporary accommodation stock in Hackney.*

4.70 The Mayoral Advisor for Housing Needs and Homelessness advised that other London Boroughs had purchased temporary accommodation for their residents in Hackney, which added another challenge to increasing the supply of suitable accommodation. The Council itself was also looking at options to purchase temporary accommodation units across London where appropriate.

4.71 *A Commission Member asked how the Council supported temporary accommodation staff to carry out their role effectively, and whether the Council was looking at the ways in which it could attract suitably qualified people into these roles.*

4.72 The Strategic Commissioner Mental Health & Prevention explained that the increasingly complex and multiple needs of households in temporary accommodation meant that staff who were not necessarily equipped to support them were working beyond their normal remits.

4.73 To address the more complex needs there had been extra officers embedded into the service to support staff and provide a holistic, wraparound and psychologically-informed service for the most vulnerable residents.

4.74 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace added that the Council kept in regular contact with temporary accommodation staff to ensure they were appropriately supported to carry out their role effectively.

4.75 Attracting suitably qualified staff was challenging as temporary accommodation staff roles were increasingly difficult and relatively low paid.

4.76 *Referring to a previous question, a Commission Member asked whether there was any formal mechanism for households in temporary accommodation to give feedback to the Council on their experiences.*

4.77 The Strategic Director of Customer and Workplace explained that hostel staff and housing officers were in regular contact with households to hear about their experiences and what could be done to make their experiences of temporary accommodation better.

4.78 Self-organising action groups were less common as residents in temporary accommodation were not settled communities. However, there were some examples of this such as the Temporary Accommodation Action Groups.

5   Cabinet Question Time - Accountability of Private Rented Sector & Housing Associations

5.1 As previously advised, this item was postponed until a later date.

6   Minutes of the Meeting

6.1 The draft minutes of the previous meeting held on 16th February 2023 were presented.

6.2 Members agreed the draft minutes as an accurate record.

7   Living in Hackney Work Programme 2022/23

7.1 The Chair referred to the Commission's work programme and highlighted the discussion items planned for the remainder of the municipal year.

7.2 Members noted the change of date for the joint meeting with the Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission to review progress against the outcomes of the Child Q Safeguarding Practice Review, which would now be held on 25th April 2023.

7.3 A Commission Member asked how the Commission would continue its enquiry into temporary accommodation following the meeting. It was noted that the Chair would agree a way forward on any follow up action with Members.

7.4 A Commission Member asked whether the Commission would consider some of the findings of the Casey Review when devising its work programme for the new municipal year. It was noted that Members would have the opportunity to put their views forward before the work programme was agreed.

7.5 A Commission Member asked when the postponed Cabinet Question Time on Accountability of Private Rented Sector and Housing Associations would be held. It was advised that the Chair would look to agree a new date with the Mayoral Advisor as soon as possible.

8   Any Other Business

8.1 There was no other business.

Duration of the meeting: 7.00 - 8.30 pm