

Overview & Scrutiny

Room 118, 2nd Floor
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6th June 2023

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To:

All Housing Associations operating in Hackney

Cllr Clayeon McKenzie, Cabinet Member for Housing Services and Resident Participation

Cllr Susan Fajana-Thomas, Cabinet Member for Community Safety and Regulatory Services

Cllr Sem Moema, Mayoral Advisor for Private Rented Sector and Housing Affordability

Cllr Sade Etti, Mayoral Advisor for Housing Needs and Homelessness

Housing Associations Review & Accountability of Registered Social Landlords (Recommendations)

During the 2019/20 and 2020/21 municipal years, the Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission established the Housing Associations Review which explored the practices and approaches of Housing Associations operating in Hackney, and their relationships and partnership arrangements with the Council.

This work was put on hold due to the Covid-19 pandemic and cyber attack, and in recognition of the adverse impact that these events had on the Council, Housing Associations operating in the borough and Hackney residents.

More recently, the Commission has looked into a number of topics relating to the accountability of registered social landlords in Hackney (including the Council), which included reviewing progress against the implementation of the [Charter for Social Housing Residents](#), and exploring particular issues of local concern such as nominations and lettings, tenancy sustainment, repairs, complaints, safety and resident engagement.

The Commission has now decided to bring together some of its findings and recommendations from the Housing Associations Review, alongside the findings and recommendations of its more recent work on the accountability of registered social landlords.

Overview & Scrutiny

The Commission would like to extend its thanks to all participants who attended dedicated scrutiny sessions held across the 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2022/23 municipal years, and in particular those Housing Associations that engaged with the scrutiny process and the residents and representatives who shared their views and experiences of living in social housing.

The Commission would like to thank former Deputy Mayor and Cabinet Member Councillor Rebecca Renison, Cabinet Member Councillor Clayeon McKenzie, Cabinet Member Councillor Susan Fajana-Thomas, Mayoral Advisor Councillor Sade Etti and Mayoral Adviser Councillor Sem Moema for their engagement in the scrutiny process.

The Commission would also like to thank the officers from across Benefits & Housing Needs, Housing Services, Housing Strategy and Community Safety who have supported the scrutiny process, and it is hoped that their positive engagement will continue as they oversee and implement those recommendations which are taken forward by the Executive and Housing Association partners.

This was an extended piece of work in which members of the Commission received evidence from officers, residents and Housing Associations in Hackney. Wide ranging documentary evidence was submitted and considered by Commission members at three evidence gathering sessions undertaken as part of the Housing Associations Review, and a further four evidence gathering sessions in the 2022/23 municipal year. The papers, meeting recordings and minutes provide a public record of scrutiny activity, and can be accessed via the links below.

Housing Associations Review - 2019/20 & 2020/21

Topics and links	Meeting date
Repairs and maintenance <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Documentary evidence• Minutes	Monday 16th December 2019
Meeting housing need & development of new homes and approaches to existing stock <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Documentary evidence• Supplementary evidence• Minutes	Wednesday 19th February 2020
Formal partnership arrangements, community investment and recycling on estates <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Documentary evidence	Wednesday 15th July 2020

Overview & Scrutiny

- [Minutes](#)
- [Meeting recording](#)

Work undertaken in relation to accountability of registered social landlords - 2022/23

Topics and links	Meeting date
Housing Associations' progress in implementing the Charter for Social Housing Residents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentary evidence • Minutes • Meeting recording 	Wednesday 13th July 2022
Hackney Council's housing register and lettings policy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentary evidence • Minutes • Meeting recording 	Monday 7th November 2022
Hackney Council's housing repairs and maintenance service <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentary evidence • Minutes • Meeting recording 	Monday 12th December 2022

Registered social landlords manage significant shares of Hackney's housing stock, and all social housing units in the borough are managed either by the Council or Housing Associations. Social landlords play an important social role in housing and supporting people in housing need, and in the development and management of housing stock in the borough. Further to this, it is recognised that social landlords can also be influencers on the lives, experiences and life chances of many of Hackney's residents, across a range of factors.

While the Council has been working positively with Housing Associations on a range of issues over a number of years, the housing crisis continues to worsen and housing related needs are acute as ever. Although there are significant differences between the Council and Housing Associations both in terms of their approach to stock management and their underlying economic model, the Commission feels that there is every reason for the Council and Housing Associations to work even more closely together and build bridges between their priorities, principles and objectives.

Overview & Scrutiny

On the evidence provided and through consultation with officers, Members of the Commission have made a number of recommendations. In particular the Commission has made recommendations in the following five priority areas:

- Developing partnership arrangements
- Maximising nominations and lettings
- Supporting tenancy sustainment
- Safeguarding adults, children and young people
- Maintaining properties in good repair

It is hoped that the recommendations given below will contribute further to the positive work that is already taking place across the Council and in partnership with Housing Associations. We look forward to receiving an update on the recommendations that are taken forward at a future scrutiny meeting.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Soraya Adejare
Chair, Living in Hackney Scrutiny
Commission

Councillor Clare Joseph
Vice Chair, Living in Hackney Scrutiny
Commission

Cc:

- Rickardo Hyatt, Group Director Climate, Homes & Economy
- Ian Williams, Group Director Finance and Corporate Resources
- Stephen Haynes, Strategic Director Inclusive Economy, Regeneration and New Homes
- Rob Miller, Strategic Director Customer and Workplace
- Steve Waddington, Strategic Director Housing Services
- Aled Richards, Strategic Director Sustainability and Public Realm
- James Goddard, Strategic Head Strategy, Assurance and PSH
- Jennifer Wynter, Head of Benefits and Housing Needs
- Gerry McCarthy, Head of Community Safety, Enforcement and Business Regulations
- Ben Bradley, Head of Mayor and Cabinet Office

Overview & Scrutiny

Recommendations of the Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission

Developing partnership arrangements

The Commission notes the positive working relationships that have been developed between the Council and Housing Associations in the borough. For example, the Council and its Housing Association partners have a good track record in bringing forward affordable housing, which indicates that partnership working has to some extent been working.

However, there was a broad consensus that partnership working can be difficult without formal partnership structures in place. The Commission notes that the Better Homes Partnership has been in place to facilitate themed discussions on issues of importance between the Council and Housing Associations on a quarterly basis. However, attendance at these meetings has not always been consistent, and it was apparent that shared objectives and priorities were needed to provide a more strategic and coordinated approach to meetings.

The Commission notes that the Council has recently sought to reinforce its partnership working with Housing Associations through the establishment of the [Hackney Council Housing Associations Compact 2023-26](#), which was adopted by Cabinet in January 2023. Whilst this is encouraging, it is the Commission's view that the Compact should clearly outline how its objectives and priorities will be delivered and monitored. The [Waltham Forest Housing Compact 2019-24](#) is seen as an example of best practice in this area.

It is hoped that the development of the Compact will ensure that there is a strategic and coordinated approach to meeting the housing needs of residents across the borough, and bring greater transparency and accountability for the provision and delivery of housing support and accommodation.

The Commission therefore recommends:

- 1) Housing Strategy identifies, develops and agrees oversight and monitoring arrangements for the objectives and priorities outlined in the Compact to ensure there is ongoing review of delivery across the Council and its Housing Association partners.
- 2) Housing Strategy develops and agrees performance measures for output and outcomes against the objectives and priorities of the Compact, to be reviewed periodically through the oversight and monitoring arrangements.
- 3) All Housing Associations operating in the borough sign up to the Compact, and nominate at least one member of staff to attend meetings of any existing or new oversight and monitoring arrangements.

Overview & Scrutiny

- 4) Housing Strategy identifies a named officer as first point of contact for signatories to the Compact, and offers regular meetings with senior officers for signatories to discuss issues of importance.
- 5) All Housing Associations operating in the borough should share and maintain up to date contact details with Hackney Ward Councillors to ensure they can effectively advocate for social housing residents.
- 6) Housing Strategy reports progress against the delivery of the Compact to a later meeting of the Commission, likely to be held in 2023/24.

Maximising nominations and lettings

Despite the Council's own ambitious house building programmes, the demand for social housing has grown significantly in Hackney, at a time in which the availability of social housing has fallen. This is coupled with the increasingly complex needs of residents seeking social housing, and the considerable time many residents spend waiting for suitable housing.

The Commission therefore views the contribution of Housing Associations in providing affordable, stable and safe housing to residents on the Council's housing register as extremely important. The [Tenancy Standard](#) sets expectations of registered providers of social housing to let their homes in a fair, transparent and efficient way - including cooperating with local authorities' duties to meet identified local housing needs, and providing assistance with homelessness duties, including by meeting obligations in nominations agreements.

The Commission notes the current process for receiving nominations. This is guided by the East London Sub Regional Nomination Protocol, which describes how nominations and allocations will be shared out, and covers property types, tenancy types and the grounds under which a tenant can be refused. However, this agreement is not statutorily binding, and the Council places significant trust in Housing Associations to act in the spirit of the agreement and ensure the number of properties available for nominations is maximised. The Commission strongly feels that pre-tenancy checks should not become an obstacle for residents in need of social housing.

The Commission therefore recommends:

- 7) Housing Strategy undertakes an internal audit to understand whether the Council is receiving its share of properties from Housing Associations operating in the borough, and identifies measures to redress balances should shortfalls be identified.
- 8) All Housing Associations operating in the borough accept Council nominations for their social lets in all cases except where properties are withheld for

Overview & Scrutiny

overcrowded households to be internally transferred to a more suitable property.

- 9) All Housing Associations operating in the borough allow the Council to nominate on all affordable and social housing lets that become available.
- 10) All Housing Associations should re-let void affordable and social housing properties at a good standard within 28 days unless major works are needed which cannot be addressed in this time.
- 11) All Housing Associations operating in the borough routinely share data and information on their housing stock, voids, lets and allocations with the Council to help it best meet local housing need.

Supporting tenancy sustainment

Whilst the Commission recognises the complexity of issues social tenants may face, it is apparent that improved quality and greater consistency in the support offered by social landlords is needed to address the range of issues which as a combination might be threatening the ability of a household to maintain their tenancy. Not supporting vulnerable tenants early and effectively can lead to accumulating arrears, evictions, and in the worst cases rough sleeping.

In line with the requirements of the [Homelessness Reduction Act](#), the Council has adopted a prevent first approach which involves working with Housing Associations and other partners to try and identify those most at risk of homelessness in order to help them resolve any issues that may result in them losing their home. The Commission supports this approach, and believes that help to prevent the loss of the current home (if this is the applicant's preference), rather than a move to an alternative which will inevitably cause upheaval and stress to the applicant's household, and particularly to children, should be prioritised where appropriate.

The Commission notes the genuine progress from Housing Associations on financial inclusion and in supporting tenants through financial issues which could otherwise threaten their tenancies. However, the Commission feels that more could be done by Housing Associations to help tenants with a wide range of other challenges, and to be proactive in referring vulnerable tenants to the Council when a tenant may be at risk of homelessness. When engaged early, the Council and its partners are well-placed to provide high-quality housing advice, advocacy and tenancy sustainment support.

The Commission therefore recommends:

- 12) All Housing Associations operating in the borough refer tenants who are at risk of becoming homeless to the Council at the earliest opportunity, for example in

Overview & Scrutiny

cases of accumulating arrears and anti-social behaviour, to ensure early intervention to prevent homelessness.

- 13) All Housing Associations operating in the borough refer tenants to the Council before a possession claim is issued, and outline all pre-action steps taken in line with the [Pre-Action Protocol](#).
- 14) Housing Strategy and Housing Needs work with Housing Associations to share best practice and learning about tenancy sustainment and homelessness prevention, and encourage participation in relevant partnership meetings and initiatives.

Safeguarding adults, children and young people

Social landlords have a clear role to play in identifying safeguarding issues and working with safeguarding agencies to address issues at an early stage. In particular, and as set out in the [Charter for Social Housing Residents](#), landlords are well-placed to identify the early signs of domestic abuse, and through their allocations policies can offer an escape to safe housing.

However, a lack of support for households which had experienced or were at risk of domestic abuse was identified as an area of concern during conversations. The Commission heard that in some cases Housing Associations were reluctant to take ownership of issues surrounding domestic abuse, and to work proactively with vulnerable tenants and safeguarding agencies to provide support for victims of domestic abuse and their children within safe accommodation.

The Commission notes that the Hackney Registered Social Landlords Domestic Abuse Forum has been set up to bring together representatives of registered social landlords to discuss the possible challenges experienced when dealing with domestic abuse cases, and devise collaborative ways to best overcome these challenges and address the safety of social tenants experiencing domestic abuse.

The Commission therefore recommends:

- 15) All Housing Associations operating in the borough join the Hackney Registered Social Landlords Domestic Abuse Forum and nominate a responsible member of staff to attend its meetings.
- 16) Hackney Domestic Abuse Intervention Service (DAIS) and all registered social landlords co-produce and sign up to a domestic abuse protocol, detailing an agreed local domestic abuse pathway between the Council and Housing Associations.
- 17) All Housing Associations operating in the borough provide training resources and learning opportunities to equip their staff with the knowledge and tools to recognise domestic abuse concerns and signpost, refer and support residents

Overview & Scrutiny

at risk, including those provided by the City and Hackney Safeguarding Adults Board and Hackney Domestic Abuse Intervention Service (DAIS).

- 18) All Housing Associations operating in the borough sign up to the Domestic Abuse Champions Network, facilitated by London Borough of Hackney Domestic Abuse Intervention Service (DAIS), and nominate at least one member of staff to be a Domestic Abuse Champion.

Maintaining properties in good repair

The Commission understands the impact that the pandemic and cyber attack has had on the repairs and maintenance services of both the Council and Housing Associations. Adhering to social distancing and government guidelines, difficulty in recruiting and retaining suitably qualified operatives, and bringing IT systems back up to speed have caused significant repairs backlogs and delays.

As set out in the [Charter for Social Housing Residents](#), all social tenants should nonetheless be satisfied with their landlord's repairs and maintenance service, have responsive repairs completed right first time and be supported to keep their homes in good repair. It was made clear from conversations with social landlords and residents that these tenant satisfaction measures are not always being met.

The Commission notes that the Council and Housing Associations have identified a number of measures to clear repair backlogs, improve reporting and tracking processes and ensure repairs and maintenance services are fit for the future. It is hoped that this positive work continues in a transparent and accountable way, and that all repairs can be dealt with promptly and correctly at the first time of asking.

The Commission therefore recommends:

- 19) Housing Services ensures the rollout of any new ICT platform enables social tenants to track and monitor live repairs (including communal repairs), repeat visits and relevant performance data (such as response time and number of days taken to complete repairs) in a clear, accessible and consistent way.
- 20) Housing Services to report progress against its Repairs Improvement Plan to a later meeting of the Commission, likely to be held in 2023/24, and share performance and monitoring data with the Commission on a quarterly basis until otherwise agreed.
- 21) Housing Strategy works with all registered social landlords to agree a common set of performance measures for repairs and maintenance, and to routinely publish performance data to allow tenants to monitor and compare their landlord's performance. Some of these should include:
 - Percentage of repairs completed in target time
 - Percentage of residents satisfied with last completed repair

Overview & Scrutiny

- Percentage of complaints responded to on time
 - Average number of days taken to complete repairs
 - Average number of repeat visits per property
 - Annual spend on disrepair cases
- 22) Housing Services and all Housing Associations operating in the borough should provide social housing residents with information to ensure they are aware of their rights, are confident in navigating their routes to complain, and are aware of how to escalate to get redress where needed.
- 23) All Housing Associations operating in the borough nominate at least one member of staff within their repairs and maintenance teams to act as a single point of contact for disrepair complaints that the Council may receive.
- 24) Housing Services and all Housing Associations operating in the borough commit to holding and widely publicising regular local drop in repairs surgeries so that residents can raise issues and concerns face to face, and to routinely publishing data on the number of surgeries held and attendance figures.

Finance Comments

The Housing Associations Review and investigation into the accountability of registered social landlords sets out recommendations across five priority areas to further improve the positive partnership working that is already taking place across the borough to support our social housing tenants. These recommendations are cross cutting and involve our Housing Association partners and other partnership bodies.

There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. Taking forward the recommendations for Council services will need to be managed within existing cash limits, with awareness of savings to come in future years.

Any specific operational changes that come about as a result of this report will need to be scrutinised separately, in order to assess financial implications fully.