

Overview & Scrutiny

Room 118, 2nd Floor
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9th November 2023

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To:

Cllr Sade Etti, Deputy Cabinet Member for Housing Needs & Homelessness

Draft Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-25 (Findings & Recommendations)

The Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission held a discussion on the development of the Council's Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy on 18th September 2023. This was a helpful meeting which enabled members to constructively challenge how the strategy will be delivered, how the Council had considered risks, and the key measures of success before it is adopted by Cabinet.

Prior to this, the Commission held a discussion on the provision of temporary accommodation in Hackney on 22nd March 2023, with a particular focus on what is driving demand across London, how the Council is responding locally, and how it ensures temporary accommodation is of a high standard and meets the needs of the most vulnerable residents.

As part of the scrutiny process, the Commission also undertook [site visits](#) to temporary accommodation settings. This allowed members to gain a further understanding of the standard of temporary accommodation, as well as to hear about some of the experiences of residents, staff and providers.

The video recordings, alongside the agenda papers and minutes provide a public record of these meetings:

- Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission 22nd March 2023: [video recording](#), [agenda papers](#) and [minutes](#)
- Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission 18th September 2023: [video recording](#), [agenda papers](#) and [draft minutes](#)

The Commission would firstly like to place on record its thanks to Rob Miller, Strategic Director Customer & Workplace, Jennifer Wynter, Assistant Director Benefits & Housing Needs, Beverley Gachette, Strategic Commissioning Lead Rough Sleeping & Homelessness and Andrew Croucher, Operations Manager for their valuable contributions to both meetings. Similarly, we would like to thank Sally Caldwell, Strategy & Transformation Consultant and Helen Lewis, Associate Consultant at Homeless Link for sharing their insights and research.

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The Commission would also like to thank Cllr Sade Etti, Deputy Cabinet Member for Housing Needs & Homelessness for her contributions and ongoing engagement with the scrutiny process.

On the evidence provided and through consultation with officers, members of the Commission have outlined their findings and made four recommendations for consideration, which it is hoped will contribute further to the positive work that is already taking place.

We look forward to receiving an update on the progress of the development of the Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy Action Plan and the success of its implementation at a later date.

Yours sincerely

Councillor Soraya Adejare

Chair, Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission

Councillor Clare Joseph

Vice Chair, Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission

Cc:

- Jackie Moylan, Group Director Finance & Corporate Resources
- Rob Miller, Strategic Director Customer & Workplace
- Jennifer Wynter, Head of Benefits & Housing Needs
- Ben Bradley, Head of Mayor and Cabinet Office

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Recommendations of the Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission

The Commission welcomes the refreshed Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy 2023-25, and commends the evidence gathering and stakeholder engagement work undertaken to develop the key priorities. We feel assured that the Council's approach to homelessness and rough sleeping continues to meet its responsibilities for carrying out day to day administration and delivery of homelessness services and, in many places, go well beyond them.

We recognise, however, that there have been significant changes to the local, regional and national context which makes it ever more difficult for the Council to plan its services to meet its statutory obligations and support all residents approaching it for assistance. House and rental prices in Hackney continue to grow, and the supply of new affordable housing remains limited. The pandemic and current cost of living crisis has also intensified inequalities for vulnerable groups in Hackney, and there are increasingly competing demands on housing resources.

In addition, the Council can only do so much within the funding, policy and legislation parameters set by the government, particularly in regards to Local Housing Allowance rates, Homelessness Prevention Grant funding and welfare reform. The Commission strongly believes that regulation and leadership must come from the national government to tackle homelessness and its related issues, backed by adequate funding.

Collaboration and joint working

The Commission heard about the importance of the Council's departments and services working closely together, and collaborating with health, criminal justice and employment sectors, other London boroughs, and people with lived experience of homelessness, in order to effectively prevent and reduce homelessness in Hackney.

The Commission strongly supports a collaborative approach, and believes it is important that the strategy is viewed holistically and responsibility for its delivery is shared across the Council and in partnership with other agencies and organisations, moving towards a whole system approach to homelessness. Some leadership will certainly need to be devolved to external partners who can drive the work via the Homelessness Partnership Board.

We have already heard about positive examples of joined-up working in Hackney, such as the Greenhouse Day Centre (Single Homeless Hub) and the Housing First Scheme. Continuing in this vein and working together to explore further opportunities for collaboration will be important in identifying more people at the point where they are at risk of losing their home, finding ways to help them stay in secure housing, and ensuring holistic support to those with complex and multiple needs.

We welcome that, whilst Benefits and Housing Needs will hold responsibility for maintaining the action plan and reporting against performance, there is an ongoing expectation that colleagues, stakeholders and partners report regularly on progress to ensure the action plan is up-to-date and reflects current performance.

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Increasing affordable permanent and temporary housing

The Commission heard that the steady rise in statutory homelessness over the last decade is attributable to a range of factors, which includes the continuing shortfall in the delivery of new affordable housing relative to the levels of need in Hackney. We will continue to retain oversight over the Council's plans to build genuinely affordable housing and explore alternative methods of housing delivery, and plan to provide our views on the emerging priorities and delivery mechanisms for the Housing Strategy before it is adopted in 2024.

The Commission also heard that the Council's access to suitable temporary accommodation is diminishing due to the reducing availability of privately provided stock, largely due to the withdrawal of private landlords, other boroughs seeking temporary accommodation placements and government resettlement schemes. We therefore welcome the commitments made not only to explore all possible avenues to increase the supply of the Council's own temporary accommodation stock, but also to explore new ways of working with landlords who are interested in long-term investment in the borough.

Of particular importance to these areas of work will be the collaboration between Benefits & Housing Needs, Housing Services, Regeneration and Private Sector Housing to increase both affordable housing and temporary accommodation supply, obtain private rented accommodation and reduce the use of nightly-paid temporary accommodation, and continue to tackle disrepair, fuel poverty and illegal evictions in private rented properties. We hope that this is reflected throughout the Housing Strategy, and that proactive measures to try to intervene earlier by supporting residents at risk of homelessness feature prominently.

Improving the quality of temporary accommodation

Whilst the Commission is supportive of exploring innovative approaches to increasing the supply of temporary accommodation, we think it is of the utmost importance that providing a good standard of temporary accommodation remains a key component of the service. This is especially important as households are increasingly spending an extended period in temporary accommodation.

We recognise that Hackney is better at this than most - we heard that the Council currently makes 87% of private placements into registered buildings which meet quality standards (much higher than the London average of 30%) - and work is in progress to invest in the repair and maintenance of the Council's own hostel properties. Having said this, we feel more can be done to lobby central government to improve minimum basic facilities in temporary accommodation, ensure the Council's own temporary accommodation units go beyond statutory standards where possible, and that best practice is shared with other providers in the borough to encourage improved basic facilities and adaptations.

The Commission recognises that temporary accommodation was never intended to exist outside of emergencies, but we know that it is often far from a temporary arrangement. We therefore also came away with a sense that more needs to be done to ensure that there is greater input from people in temporary accommodation so that they can express their views

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on what needs to change and receive meaningful engagement with these views from providers and statutory agencies.

The Commission therefore recommends that:

- 1) The Council lobbies central government to include all accommodation provided under the Homelessness Legislation Act in the Social Housing (Regulation) Bill, and for an update to legislation and the Homelessness Code of Guidance to include minimum basic facilities and adaptations for temporary accommodation.
- 2) Benefits & Housing Needs ensures that the Council's own temporary accommodation stock in all cases includes minimum basic facilities and adaptations which go beyond those currently set out in legislation and the Homelessness Code of Guidance, such as the provision of WIFI, laundry facilities, adequate space for children to learn and play, safer sleeping equipment and enough bedrooms to accommodate family size.
- 3) Benefits & Housing Needs explores the options for funding and encouraging the creation of Temporary Accommodation Action Groups (TAAGs) or equivalent bodies in which residents have an active and inclusive role in every locality, so that people living in temporary accommodation don't feel isolated, and can express their views on what needs to change and receive meaningful engagement with these views from providers and statutory agencies.

Supporting residents with multiple and complex needs

The Commission heard that people approaching the Council for homelessness support increasingly require additional support beyond that which has traditionally been provided, including people with needs that are not eligible for adults' social care or NHS support. It is important that work to develop tailored accommodation and support pathways for people with complex needs continues, alongside ensuring all staff working with people experiencing homelessness have the right skills to help them feel better equipped to deal with their jobs and support their caseloads.

We were therefore pleased to hear that mental health and social workers have been embedded into the service to support staff to provide a holistic, wraparound and psychologically-informed service for vulnerable residents. It is also encouraging that multi-disciplinary meetings are utilised regularly to support complex needs individuals, facilitating collaboration with a range of services including Adult Social Care, Hackney Children's Services, mental health teams, commissioned providers for substance misuse and neighbourhood health structures.

We also heard about how the service is exploring possibilities to develop additional supported housing for people with multiple and complex needs and rough sleepers, and increase the capacity of available dedicated support. We look forward to supporting and challenging the service's work in this area, with a scrutiny session on the commissioning and provision of supported accommodation for rough sleepers and single homeless people scheduled on 22nd November 2023.

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Addressing homelessness amongst young people

The Commission heard about how the pandemic and cost of living crisis has affected young people in Hackney, and how it has led to an increase in homeless approaches to the Council from 17-24 year olds. In addition, we heard that it can be challenging to offer timely help to young people at risk of homelessness as they are more likely to approach the Council once they are already in housing crisis, and young people sleeping rough are more likely to be in less visible locations and tend to utilise different support networks to adults.

We were encouraged by areas of good practice in Hackney, including the Council's Edge of Care service and the youth-targeted pathway delivered collaboratively through the London Youth Gateway project. However, this trend is nonetheless concerning and we welcome the steps outlined in the draft strategy to meet these challenges, particularly in terms of developing youth-specific housing officers and encouraging young people at risk of homelessness to engage with services and support early intervention with their housing needs.

The Commission will seek to retain oversight over any developments in this area, and will explore the options for scrutiny involvement in developing solutions alongside the Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission where appropriate. Any future work would look to build upon the findings and recommendations made in regards to the recent joint scrutiny into housing support for care leavers.

Addressing inequalities in the housing market

The Commission heard that the pandemic and cost of living crisis has intensified inequalities in Hackney, with more and more households experiencing financial hardship, rent arrears and risk of homelessness. We were pleased to hear examples of positive joint working to mitigate impacts such as targeting vulnerable households in need of support through the Household Support Fund, utilising the Hackney Money Hub and making better use of data to understand housing and homelessness issues for specific groups.

We heard that LGBTQIA+ residents face significant challenges in accessing affordable and secure housing, with transgender individuals in particular experiencing higher levels of discrimination and risk of homelessness. We therefore welcome the emphasis in the strategy on addressing issues around accessibility and service provision, with a particular focus on young LGBTQIA+ residents, which coincides with ongoing council-wide work to develop and implement the new Equality Plan and LGBTQIA+ Strategic Framework.

Whilst stakeholder engagement has been broad, the Commission did come away with a sense that there is room for further engagement and consultation with local LGBTQIA+ organisations, groups and residents with lived experience of homelessness to ensure that housing solutions and wraparound support truly meets their needs. Looking at different and creative ways to allow people to participate will be key, especially in terms of young LGBTQIA+ residents.

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The Commission therefore recommends:

- 4) Benefits & Housing Needs undertakes further consultation with LGBTQIA+ organisations, groups and residents (including young LGBTQIA+ residents) to ensure homelessness services meet their needs, and engages those involved to hold the Council to account during the implementation of the strategy.