

London Borough of Hackney
Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission
Municipal Year 2023/24
Monday 18 September 2023

Minutes of the proceedings of
the Living in Hackney Scrutiny
Commission held at
Hackney Town Hall, Mare
Street, London E8 1EA

Chair:

Councillors in Attendance: Cllr M Can Ozsen, Cllr Clare Joseph (Vice-Chair), Cllr Joseph Ogundemuren, Cllr Sam Pallis, Cllr Ali Sadek, Cllr Zoe Garbett and Cllr Sade Etti

Apologies: Cllr Ian Rathbone, Cllr Soraya Adejare, Cllr Caroline Selman and Cllr Yvonne Maxwell

Officers In Attendance: Rob Miller (Strategic Director Customer & Workplace) and Jennifer Wynter (Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs)

Officer in Virtual Attendance: Andrew Croucher (Operations Manager)

Other People in Virtual Attendance: Sally Caldwell (Strategy & Transformation Consultant) and Helen Lewis (Associate Consultant, Homeless Link)

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Councillor Clare Joseph 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 Cllr Adejare (Chair), Cllr Maxwell and Cllr Rathbone.

1.3 As Vice-Chair, Cllr Joseph would chair the meeting.

2 Urgent Items / Order of Business

2.1 There were no urgent items, and the order of business was as set out in the agenda.

3 Declaration of Interest

3.1 There were no declarations of interest.

4 Draft Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy

4.1 The Chair opened the item by explaining that the Commission was keen to hear about the development of the Council's draft Homelessness & Rough Sleeping Strategy, which was due to be presented to Cabinet later in the year.

4.2 The Commission saw this discussion as timely, giving members an opportunity to challenge how the strategy will be delivered, how the Council had considered any risks and the key measures of success before it was adopted.

4.3 Representing London Borough of Hackney

- Cllr Sade Etti, Deputy Cabinet Member for Homelessness & Housing Needs
- Rob Miller, Strategic Director Customer & Workplace
- Jennifer Wynter, Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs
- Andrew Croucher, Operations Manager

4.4 External Guests

- Sally Caldwell, Strategy & Transformation Consultant
- Helen Lewis, Associate Consultant, Homeless Link

4.5 The Chair then invited the Deputy Cabinet Member for Homelessness & Housing Needs, Council officers and external guests to give a short verbal presentation. The main points are highlighted below.

4.6 Much of the housing crisis had been driven by issues that the Council was not in control of. This included central government policies on austerity measures, house building, rent controls, immigration and economic policy. This was in addition to the pandemic and cost of living crisis which had deepened and accelerated its impacts.

4.7 There were other ongoing issues which were affecting the Council's ability to deliver, such as Local Housing Allowance having been frozen since 2011, welfare reform, short term and limited temporary accommodation funding and housing affordability. Government commitment to address the housing market crisis and other homelessness issues had been limited.

4.8 There had also been more recent developments which were impacting the Council's ability to deliver. This included a volatile housing market, shrinking private sector with Buy to Let landlords leaving the market, and the temporary accommodation crisis in London.

4.9 There was an unprecedented demand for accommodation in Hackney, including from Home Office Asylum Seekers Programme, Afghanistan and Ukraine Resettlement Programmes, and increasing homelessness due to overcrowding and conflict.

4.10 There was a need to stabilise funding streams from different government departments (for example the funding from the Rough Sleeper Initiative, health, adult social care and substance misuse) to reduce uncertainty around service delivery, and the recent funding settlement meant that Hackney was under-resourced.

4.11 Homeless Link was the national membership charity for non-statutory frontline homelessness services and worked in partnership with the Council and homeless charities in the borough, and had been commissioned to support the development of the strategy.

4.12 Work to refresh the new strategy over the past year had included a review of the local, London and national policy context and analysis of data relating to homelessness gathered by the Council, local health services and mental health services.

4.13 It also included consultation with a wide range of stakeholders such as Council departments, external partners like the NHS, commissioned providers, voluntary and community organisations and central government, as well as people with lived experience of homelessness in Hackney.

4.14 A range of key issues were identified through this work including:

- Increasing youth homelessness
- Increasing complex needs presentations
- Pathway development including hospital discharge, single homelessness/rough sleeping supported accommodation
- Temporary accommodation crisis
- Procurement of longer-term housing, including private rented sector
- Global majority homelessness, LGBTQIA+ and inequality of outcomes
- Sub-regional and pan-London collaborative working continuity and opportunities.

4.15 It also identified a number of successes and achievements of the Council's current approach to homelessness and rough sleeping. These included expanding and reinforcing the Greenhouse and Street Outreach services for rough sleepers, enhanced pathway development and multi-agency working for example for hospital discharge, young people and care leavers and prison leavers, and developing relationships with the community and voluntary sector.

4.16 In regard to homelessness prevention in particular, successes and achievements included developing psychologically informed practice, embedding Benefits & Housing Needs staff in other service areas and poverty reduction work such as Hackney Money Hub to intervene in cases of homelessness earlier.

4.17 It was felt that Hackney's available levers could be considered at three levels: service development (e.g. procedures, workforce development and multidisciplinary working), collaborative working (e.g. pathways, joint working between Hackney departments and other London boroughs) and policy and research, campaigning and innovation.

4.18 There were a number of challenges facing the Council in preventing homelessness and supporting those residents approaching it for assistance. This included affordable housing supply, both temporary and long-term.

4.19 Ensuring access to affordable, decent housing within Hackney was made difficult by its dense population, high land values and increasing levels of landlord exit. New Homelessness Prevention Grant allocations and increased competition from other boroughs also made it difficult to manage temporary accommodation costs. Ensuring

strong alignment with the new Housing Strategy would therefore be particularly important.

4.20 Reducing the flow and entrenched numbers of rough sleepers in the borough was also a challenge, with market conditions meaning that many areas across London were experiencing rising numbers of people sleeping rough. Numbers of people coming onto the street for the first time were higher in Hackney than the London average, and many had complex needs.

4.21 Addressing homelessness amongst young people was an increasing priority since the pandemic and cost of living crisis, with young people less visible and more likely to approach the Council as a last resort. Young people experiencing homelessness often needed commissioned specialist accommodation, but were competing with many other cohorts for this housing supply.

4.22 Increasingly, residents approaching the Council for homelessness assistance had complex and multiple support and medical needs. Challenges in this area included insufficient supported accommodation, which risked the repeat of homelessness, with out of borough placements and/or the loss of social networks.

4.23 Forecasting changes in the size/composition of the 'Edge of Care' cohort was difficult, as housing, health and homelessness dataset did not work easily together. Some challenge and advocacy by staff within homelessness was also seen to be counterproductive.

4.24 The pandemic and costs of living crisis had intensified inequalities for Global Majority groups, and this inequality may manifest itself as hidden homelessness. Around 80% of preventable health issues related to social determinants, but these were difficult to address without affordable housing supply. The cost of living crisis meant more demand for Hackney services, in turn making services costlier to run. There was therefore a need to meet immediate needs and upstream interventions.

4.25 Another challenge was offering an effective pathway for non-UK national rough sleepers and people with no recourse to public funds without a coherent government policy response. These groups were particularly vulnerable in law and policy terms.

4.26 Analysing the impact of upcoming policy and legislative changes would be important, for example the end of Section 21 notices, and the Council-wide response would need to promote collective responsibility for addressing homelessness.

4.27 In terms of the strategy itself, there was a need to put it into practice. This would involve setting out deliverable actions and activities, with targets and goals. A robust action plan was currently in development to this end.

4.28 Delivering the actions would not rely solely on the work of Benefits and Housing Needs, but should be delivered in partnership with some leadership devolved to external partners who would drive the work via the Homelessness Partnership Board.

4.29 Work on some of the actions was already underway. For example, funding had been secured for the new Rough Sleeper Assessment Centre which would provide short-stay accommodation for people who needed further needs assessment and/or support to stabilise before moving into longer-term accommodation.

4.30 Immediate next steps in the development of the strategy included:

- Addressing the recommendations from PSG
- Presenting the strategy to the Executive for sign-off
- Publishing the strategy
- Working with partners and stakeholders to agree a detailed action plan that takes forward the themes and turns them into concrete actions and service improvements
- Through the Hackney Homelessness Partnership Board, oversee and monitor the delivery of the agreed actions and improvements.

Questions, Answers and Discussion

4.31 *A Commission Member asked for information on the support a resident would receive at the first point of contact when they were referred or present to the Council as homeless or at risk of homelessness.*

4.32 The Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs explained that there were many variables to what support was offered to those that presented as homeless or at risk of homelessness, and it often depended on where the first contact was.

4.33 The Greenhouse Day Centre provided a single point of contact for rough sleepers, many of which were single and often had complex needs. This provided a multi-agency service for rough sleepers and had shared pathways with a range of services including health, adult safeguarding and social care, probation and prisons to ensure wraparound support.

4.34 For example, two social workers were embedded within the service (one mental health specialist and one generalist) and worked across Homerton Hospital. In addition, the out of hospital model was set up last year with Peabody and Lowry House to ensure any discharge of care or bed blocking for homelessness reasons.

4.35 If someone were to present at Hackney Service Centre they would likely present as part of a family and/or with children. All staff were trained to provide a holistic, wraparound and psychologically-informed service. Many also had lived experience of homelessness and domestic abuse themselves.

4.36 The Strategy & Transformation Consultant added that it was more and more important for interventions to be made at an earlier stage. Joint working, signposting and collaboration was therefore imperative to ensure that relevant services had information on the needs of vulnerable residents.

4.37 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Homelessness & Housing Needs went on to say that The greenhouse health offer had been expanded, with more staff to ensure that residences needs are assessed and appropriate support is provided.

4.38 In addition, the coordination of housing related support has been brought together within the Benefits and Housing Needs Service, involving Council departments, health, housing associations and support providers to commission additional schemes.

4.39 *A Commission Member asked whether the Benefits and Housing Needs Service felt it had the internal capacity to meet demand for homelessness services and deliver the priorities of the new strategy.*

4.40 The Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs explained that, in terms of staffing levels, the service propped itself up with agency staff where appropriate and had a low turnover of staff within the service. Many of its agency staff wanted to stay on at the council as permanent employees too.

4.41 The biggest challenges were brought about by short term and limited government funding for homelessness services. This made it increasingly difficult for Hackney to sustainably plan services and to meet its ambition of preventing homelessness and supporting all Hackney residents approaching it for assistance.

4.42 The service had done various modelling and forecasting exercises, alongside public health and around the homelessness monitor itself, looking at population databases to understand what it could expect in terms of future homelessness so that the service was resilient and robust enough to deal with that.

4.43 A Commission Member asked what the current status of the Housing First scheme was, whether the Council was looking to expand the scheme and what options were being considered for longer-term funding.

4.44 The Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs explained that the service had made successful bids to the Department for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing (DLUHC) Rough Sleeping Initiative (RSI) to support the expansion of rough sleeping services including Housing First. This would facilitate the expansion of accommodation supply as well as reviewing the current support and progression models.

4.45 The Operations Manager added that the initial funding from the Clinical Commissioning Group was for 10 properties. The service then bid for RSI funding to increase supply by 15 units and the service was well on the way to delivering that and, once those properties were filled, this provided a long-term solution for homeless residents. The service was currently working with St Mungo's on delivery, and looking at other ways that it can secure longer-term funding for the scheme.

4.46 The service had also lodged a bid for funding from the Greater London Authority (GLA) and DLUHC for the Single Homelessness Accommodation Programme and specifically for young people. This would fund 10 accommodation units using the Council's own stock and enable it to provide specialised support packages for this cohort.

4.47 A Commission Member asked what the approach to placing residents in existing residential areas and estates, including those managed by housing associations, through the Housing First scheme.

4.48 The Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs explained that the service worked alongside St Mungo's and housing associations to ensure that residents were placed appropriately and had the support to sustain their tenancies and settle into their communities

4.49 A Commission Member asked for further information on how the Council was looking to explore new delivery models for temporary accommodation projects, and work with landlords who were interested in providing temporary accommodation.

4.50 The Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs explained that the Council worked closely with other London Boroughs to obtain additional private rented accommodation and reduce the use of expensive nightly paid temporary accommodation. For the last ten years there had been a cap on the amount of money that boroughs would pay for temporary accommodation, meaning they did not inflate the market any further than necessary, and there were also agreements in place about the amount of incentives that would be paid in each borough.

4.51 The Council not only provided incentives for landlords, but also renting advances and deposits for residents and helped with travel costs and viewings.

4.52 London Boroughs met on a monthly basis around this issue and were involved in various forums including the Temporary Accommodation Forum and the Housing Needs Forum to make sure that their work was completely joined up and to hold each other to account.

4.53 The Council was also exploring new delivery models for temporary accommodation projects, drawing on work by Common Projects and the Centre for Homelessness Impact. This involved working with Regeneration and Housing colleagues, for example to identify council managed and housing association properties that may be able to be used for temporary accommodation.

4.54 A Commission Member asked whether the Council had an idea of the amount of Buy to Let landlords who were likely to leave the market in the near future, and what impact this may have on the supply of council homes (provided the Council decided to buy these properties back).

4.55 The Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs explained that the Council had commissioned work from Savilles and the London School of Economics to understand the levels of Buy to Let landlords pulling out of the market and the impact that this may have on local council housing supply.

4.56 It was important to note that the council would consider whether or not to buy back a property in this way on an individual basis, depending on factors such as the capital funds available, housing need and demand for the type of property being offered, and any additional costs for refurbishment work.

4.57 Of particular importance was housing need, the demand for the type of property being offered and the area in which the property was located. This was because the service was seeing increasing approaches from residents with complex and multiple needs, meaning it needed more tailored or supported housing options.

4.58 A Commission Member asked how the strategy refresh had considered the particular needs of transgender and non-binary people who were at risk of homelessness, and how it would work with partner organisations to ensure that they did not face discrimination when accessing homelessness services.

4.59 The Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs explained that the Council's main partner in this area was akt, an LGTBQI+ youth homelessness charity working with young people who were struggling with their housing situation. Akt was a referral partner and operated out of the greenhouse Day Centre. This was because there was a clear intersectionality between young people, those who identify as LGTBQI+ and homelessness.

4.60 The Associate Consultant, Homeless Link Confirmed that none of the respondents to the stakeholder consultation undertaken during the strategy refresh had identified as LGBTQI+.

4.61 The Operations Manager added that the service had worked hard to ensure all frontline staff working with people experiencing homelessness understand and were sympathetic to the challenges and discrimination faced by LGBTQI+ residents. It was also looking to work with stakeholders and partners to identify housing solutions that would meet the needs of LGBTQI+ residents who were homeless or at risk homelessness.

4.62 The Strategy & Transformation Consultant added that the co-design workshops had brought to light the fact there was Intersectionality between a wide range of factors when looking at the reasons for people presenting as homelessness, including poverty, family breakdown and discrimination.

4.63 The multi-agency approach to this in Hackney was good, with a number of referrals that could be made to a variety of different organisations based on people's needs. Referrals for the particular needs of young people and LGBTQI+ residents were seen as examples of good practice.

4.64 The Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs added that work was underway to develop a homelessness prevention programme in schools to give young people realistic expectations of housing options and what it meant to live independently.

4.65 *A Commission Member asked how the strategy refresh had considered the particular needs of armed forces veterans, and how the Council would use the government's Op FORTITUDE funding for bespoke homelessness pathways.*

4.66 The Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs explained that even before Op FORTITUDE, the Council had an armed forces veterans covenant in place. In practice, there were not many armed forces veterans in Hackney, with the majority represented in outer London boroughs.

4.67 In the past year there had been only one homelessness presentation from an armed forces veteran. The Council was required by legislation to report to the government any presentations of homelessness where there was a history of military service. As a protected group, they also had high priority for social housing allocation.

4.68 *A Commission Member asked how the strategy would feed into the wider Housing Strategy refresh and plans to deliver more affordable housing across the borough.*

4.69 The Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs underlined the importance of the priorities of the Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy being reflected and actioned throughout the new Housing Strategy refresh and future delivery.

4.70 The service had been clear that the Council did not only need to increase the supply of affordable temporary and permanent housing, but also understand the different types of accommodation that was needed to reflect housing need and demand.

4.71 The Council was currently gathering the evidence base for the Housing Strategy refresh, including a strategic housing market assessment, and the Housing Policy Team would be reporting on this and the emerging priorities at the next Commission meeting.

4.72 A Commission Member asked for further information on the delivery of Hackney Living Rent homes, and the options being explored for expanding Living Rent products.

4.73 The Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs explained that the Regeneration Team was responsible for the delivery of Hackney Living Rent homes. These were affordable homes at below market rent for private renters who did not qualify for social housing.

4.74 The service believed that these products were important and would welcome increased numbers of Living Rent products, however it advocated that the immediate priority should be with those who were experiencing homelessness.

4.75 A Commission Member asked why there were increasing levels of homelessness amongst young people in Hackney over the past few years, and what actions were being taken to address this issue and related impacts such as on education and employment.

4.76 The Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs explained that the pandemic and cost of living crisis had particularly affected young people, increasing strain on family relationships and making it more difficult to manage on relatively low incomes. Welfare reforms, for example benefit caps, compounded these issues too.

4.77 The London Youth Gateway project was in place, delivered collaboratively through London Councils, which offered youth targeted homelessness pathways. Through this, the Council would continue work with other boroughs to develop sub-regional and pan-London protocols, to improve the consistency of responses for young people experiencing homelessness across London.

4.78 Government funding has also been made available for two groups of people through the Single Homeless Accommodation Programme, namely rough sleepers with multiple complex needs and young people. That being said, funding had generally been limited and short term in nature with government agencies and apartments often working against each other, meaning it was difficult to put in place a reactive service.

4.79 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Homelessness & Housing Needs added that the Council was looking to reintroduce the mediation scheme to reduce homelessness due to family breakdown, as well develop a homelessness prevention programme in schools.

4.80 The Strategy & Transformation Consultant went on to say that, whilst the youth homelessness pathway was an example of good practice, support for residents once they had been through this pathway often fell away. It was therefore important to ensure that young people were supported into stable employment or education as well as accommodation, and that the traumatic consequences of having been homeless were considered whilst tailoring support packages.

4.81 The Council therefore needed to be proactive in exploring opportunities for dedicated housing pathways for young people, such as a young person specific Housing First offer. This again pointed to the importance of joined up working between the Benefits and Housing Needs, Regeneration and Housing teams.

4.82 A Commission Member asked about how the Council worked with other London boroughs to lobby the government for increased long-term funding across housing, social care, public health and NHS services.

4.83 The Deputy Cabinet Member for Homelessness & Housing Needs explained that the Council did lobby the government for change in these areas alongside other London boroughs and the GLA, and through London Councils. It was recognised that funding was often limited and short-term in nature.

4.84 In any case, there were things that could be done locally to meet the challenges the Council faced. For example, There was a commitment alongside Regeneration and Housing colleagues to explore new delivery models for temporary accommodation products for example using the asset review to identify meanwhile sites - areas which were too small or otherwise unsuitable for new-build housing but could be repurposed for temporary accommodation.

4.85 A Commission Member asked whether the Council's homelessness database was affected by the cyber attack and, if so, what mitigations have been put in place since.

4.86 The Assistant Director of Benefits & Housing Needs explained that the homelessness database had not been affected by the cyber attack. It was a relatively new database which had been purchased to coincide with the introduction of the Homelessness Reduction Act in 2018. Whilst other systems had been affected, such as those within Housing Services, this did not have a significant impact on the Council's ability to deliver its homelessness services.

Summing Up

4.87 The Chair thanked Commission Members for their questions and all witnesses for their responses and engagement with the scrutiny process.

4.88 It was explained that, after the meeting, the Commission would reflect on the evidence heard and may make suggestions or recommendations for consideration.

5 Letter to Independent Office for Police Conduct: Child Q Investigation

5.1 The Chair explained that, at the joint Living in Hackney and Children & Young People Scrutiny Commissions follow up discussion on the partnership response to the Child Q incident held on 25th April 2023, it was agreed that the Chairs would write to the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) expressing its concerns regarding the delay in the publication of its report into the conduct of police officers involved in the incident.

5.2 The Chair then drew Members attention to the IOPC announcement the completion of its investigation on 14th September. It determined that three officers should face gross misconduct hearings for potential breaches of police standards, including allegations that Child Q was discriminated against by them because of her

race and sex. A fourth officer would face a misconduct hearing relating to there being no appropriate adult present during the strip search.

5.3 It would be important to continue to monitor and review the partnership work in response to the incident, including the outcome of this investigation and the second report from City and Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership published in June. The Chair would therefore be meeting with the Chair of the Living in Hackney and Children & Young People Scrutiny Commission to plan and agree the next steps and will update members in due course.

5.4 Members noted the agreed letter and the process and timescale for following it up.

6 Policing of Drug Use: Findings & Response

6.1 The Chair explained that, following the discussion held on 23rd January 2023 on the policing of drug use in Hackney, the Commission had brought together its findings and sent a letter to the Community Safety Partnership and Mayor's Office for Police & Crime (MOPAC) seeking assurances in several key areas.

6.2 It was noted that there was a typo in the cover sheet. The response from the Community Safety Partnership and MOPAC to the letter was received on 17th August, rather than 19th September.

6.3 In terms of following up this piece of work, the Chair suggested that the Commission may want to request an update from MOPAC on the success of the Local Policing Scrutiny Panel pilot and plans for work in subsequent years and beyond at the appropriate stage.

6.4 A Commission Member asked for further information on the Serious Violence & Gangs Board, namely on the process and timelines for the election of a Chair and its work programme. The Chair agreed to follow this up in writing after the meeting.

6.5 Members noted the letter and response to the findings of the scrutiny session on the policing of drug use.

7 Overview & Scrutiny Public Engagement Protocol

7.1 The Chair explained that the Overview & Scrutiny Public Engagement Protocol was agreed by Scrutiny Panel at its meeting on 13th July 2023.

7.2 The protocol was developed to provide guidance and information to scrutiny councillors, officers and the public to support public engagement in the scrutiny process in response to technological changes and efforts to increase resident participation.

7.3 A Commission Member suggested that Overview & Scrutiny look to develop a feedback mechanism for those members of the public who engage in its work to inform future work and any suggestions for improvement.

7.4 Members are asked to note the Overview & Scrutiny Public Engagement Protocol.

8 Minutes of the Meeting

8.1 The draft minutes of the previous meeting on 10th July 2023 were presented.

8.2 Members agreed the draft minutes as an accurate record.

9 Living in Hackney Work Programme 2023/24

9.1 The Chair explained that the item was to consider and agree the Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission work programme for the 2023/24 municipal year.

9.2 The draft work programme had been drafted by the Chair and Vice-Chair taking into consideration the suggestions made by Commission Members, as well as suggestions made in the public survey and by key stakeholders.

9.3 The Chair then invited Commission Members to make any comments on the 2023/24 work programme.

9.4 A Commission Member asked whether the Commission would undertake a formal review during the 2023/24 year. It was explained that the possibility of a review into the Council's approach to the long-term viability and future use of community halls had been explored, but was not possible this year. A briefing would instead be provided later in the year, which may be used to launch a review in the next municipal year.

9.5 A Commission Member asked about how the Commission was fulfilling its statutory role in respect of scrutinising the Community Safety Partnership. It was explained that the Commission scrutinises the Community Safety Partnership at least once a year, often taking the approach of looking at a themed area which falls under its statutory responsibility.

9.6 Members agreed the work programme for the Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission for the 2023/24 municipal year.

10 Any Other Business

10.1 None.

Duration of the meeting: 7.00 - 9.05 pm