

**Chair of the Health Committee**



**Dr Onkar Sahota**  
**London Assembly Member**

Sadiq Khan  
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(Sent by email)

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Dear Sadiq,

**Health Committee investigation – insecure housing tenure and the impact on children's health**

In October 2019, the London Assembly Health Committee examined the impact of poor quality and insecure housing on children's health and heard from a range of experts on this topic. This included representatives from the Children's Commissioner for England, academia, local authority public health and housing enforcement, Shelter UK, and Professor Paul Plant from Public Health England.

Insecure housing is an issue that affects the lives of many Londoners. One in four private sector rented homes fall below the Decent Homes Standard, which is the minimum standard used to measure homes and covers health and safety, state of repair, condition of facilities and thermal comfort.<sup>1</sup> Guests on the panel provided insight into how poor quality housing and residential instability impact the health of children, and the challenges faced by local authorities and health services in trying to minimise this impact. We also heard how you, as Mayor, can support both families with children, and local statutory services, to reduce the health inequalities caused by residential instability.

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<sup>1</sup> English Housing Survey, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2018

## **Extending the scope of housing standards**

The Committee heard how local authorities monitor the standards of housing at a local level, through regular inspections to identify homes that present health and safety hazards to the occupants and take action against landlords to address these issues. Boroughs will usually serve a notice on the landlords to remedy the hazard and have a range of powers at their disposal should the landlord not comply, or should the hazard get worse. Councils also possess the power to issue civil penalties of up to £30,000.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 4,000 private rented homes a year fail safety inspections due to having a serious health and safety hazard. In 2018, 1 in 9 mandatory licensable Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) dwellings were reported as having serious health and safety hazards<sup>3</sup>.

While these inspections assess the physical health and safety risks, the framework should be broadened to include hazards that impact on the mental health of families. Poor housing has been shown to have a significant impact on the mental health of parents and children, particularly in overcrowded houses, or where there is residential instability. Studies have found that that approximately 370,000 children (under 16) in London live in households that are considered overcrowded<sup>4</sup>. These conditions increase the levels of stress and anxiety for both parents and children, impacting on children's behaviour and ability to concentrate<sup>5</sup>. If not addressed early, the mental health impact on parents and children can escalate and become long term in nature.<sup>6</sup>

The Committee, therefore, calls on you to lobby the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to extend housing standards to include hazards that impact on mental health. Assessments that include mental health hazards are likely to identify health issues that go beyond just physical health risks and will assist local authorities to signpost tenants to health services.

### **Recommendation 1**

*The Mayor should lobby Central Government to expand housing standards beyond assessments for just physical health hazards, and issue guidance for local authorities on how to assess the mental health impacts of insecure and poor quality housing too, by September 2020.*

## **Closer aligned public health and housing strategies**

Housing has long been recognised as a social determinant of health, yet the Committee was surprised to hear that, at a local level, strategies for public health and housing were not

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<sup>2</sup> Shelter, [The Housing Health and Safety Rating System \(HHSRS\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> Local authority housing statistics, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2017 & 2018

<sup>4</sup> English Housing Survey, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019

<sup>5</sup> Coley, et al, Early Exposure to Environmental Chaos and Children's Physical and Mental Health. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 2015

<sup>6</sup> Mind, [Brick by brick – A review of mental health and housing](#), April 2017

better integrated. Since 2013, as part of the Health and Social Care Act 2012, local authorities are responsible for producing a Health and Wellbeing Strategy, which sets out the strategic priorities to improve the health of the local population. Ensuring that children and young people have the best start in life is always a central pillar to these strategies,<sup>7</sup> although they rarely consider how other service areas, such as housing, will contribute to this<sup>8</sup>. The Committee heard that the linkage between what the housing directorate is looking to achieve, and what the Health and Wellbeing Strategy is trying to achieve, is not always there.<sup>9</sup>

The Committee is aware that you aim to support health in all policies,<sup>10</sup> and this also needs to be reflected at a local level. The Committee urges you to promote to local authorities across the capital to include health impacts in all local strategies, and specifically, closer integration between local housing and health strategies to ensure a holistic assessment of the housing needs of the local population. The Committee is also aware that the new London Plan makes reference to Health Impact Assessments for new developments to identify the potential impacts of a development proposal on the health and wellbeing of the population. It is the Committee's view that wider adoption of HIAs should be encouraged with local authorities when considering development proposals.

**Recommendation 2**

*As Chair of the London Health Board, the Mayor should promote the inclusion of health impacts in all local level strategies, and closer integration between housing and public health strategies, including wider adoption of health impact assessments for development proposals, with a commitment to doing so provided by April 2020.*

**Bringing front line health and housing teams closer together**

Alongside the closer strategic alignment outlined above, the Committee believes there are practical actions which could be taken at a local level to help reduce the health impact of housing instability. One such measure is encouraging local authorities to raise awareness with their housing enforcement teams of the health impact of poor housing and housing uncertainty, and of the options available should they encounter this. Enforcement teams come into regular contact with families when undertaking inspections and assessment visits and will become aware of how housing circumstances contribute to their poor health. The Committee urges you to work with local authorities on raising awareness with their enforcement teams to identify signs of poor physical and mental health in the families they encounter on inspection visits, as well as signposting the services available to tenants where appropriate.

<sup>7</sup> Local government Association, [A Better Start – Supporting Child Development in Early Years](#), November 2018

<sup>8</sup> London Assembly Health Committee, 10 October 2019

<sup>9</sup> London Assembly Health Committee, 10 October 2019

<sup>10</sup> Mayor of London, [The London Health Inequalities Strategy](#), September 2018

The Committee also urges you to encourage expansion of landlord licensing schemes with local authorities. While HMOs are required to have licenses, individual councils can decide if licenses are required for landlords of properties other than HMOs. Licenses aim to improve living standards in the private rented sector, whereby properties are subjected to regular legal checks, and assess the property for health and safety hazards. Licenses protect tenants as well as landlords as regular inspections ensure that properties are kept in good shape, and identify crime and antisocial behaviour. Local authorities that make such licensing mandatory for all landlords are able to identify health hazards through regular checks and can enforce

**Recommendation 3**

*The Mayor should work with local authorities on raising awareness with their enforcement teams of signs of poor health in families they encounter on inspections, as well as signposting the services available to tenants where appropriate.*

**Recommendation 4**

*The Mayor should encourage local authorities to expand landlord licensing schemes to include as many properties as possible in the private rented sector.*

**Raising awareness with primary care**

The Committee found there is more which could be done by local health services in addressing health issues associated with poor or insecure housing. General Practitioners (GP) are often the first health professional with whom vulnerable patients will come into contact. This means that GPs are well positioned to provide clinical care, wider patient advocacy and community engagement. However, primary care services vary across London, and the level of engagement between GPs and relevant services such as housing is not consistent across the city<sup>11</sup>. This can be due to a variety of reasons including time pressures, patients not being forthcoming with relevant information, or the clinician viewing this as beyond the limits of their knowledge or remit. The Committee heard that housing applications have specific assessment criteria, and while referral letters from GPs may be relevant for medical purposes, they are not always sufficient to meet the housing application criteria<sup>12</sup>.

There is also a need for providing more targeted information to GPs so they can refer their vulnerable patients to appropriate services. GPs have found that social prescribing activity can help address wider determinants of health, and link workers can help patients who have more than just a medical need<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> The Kings Fund, Tackling inequalities in general practice, 2010

<sup>12</sup> London Assembly Health Committee, 10 October 2019

<sup>13</sup> NHS, [Social prescribing – Frequently asked questions](#)

I am also aware that the GLA and boroughs provide services that can be of help to vulnerable patients, however more awareness among GPs would allow wider use of these services. Moreover, these services can miss those with insecure or frequently changing tenancies. The GLA's Warmer Homes Advice Service provides fuel poverty advice, and is running a private rented sector pilot.<sup>14</sup> Information on such programs should be distributed to GPs to encourage referrals of vulnerable patients.

As a minimum, a standardised approach should be developed to aid GPs in providing the relevant information on their patient to housing services. I have had to provide such information myself in my work as a GP, and as a result have developed resources to aid the process, including letter templates to housing services. The Committee calls on you to work with local authorities on developing a standardised template for GPs that ensures relevant information is being included to make an appropriate referral on a housing application.

**Recommendation 5**

*The Mayor should work with local authorities to develop a standardised template for GPs to include the relevant information needed when the patient is making an application for housing services, and to raise awareness among GPs on avenues for services that can address health issues related to housing, such as social prescribing or schemes like the Warmer Homes Advice Service, by September 2020.*

**Recommendation 6**

*The Mayor should review the GLA's pilot providing the Warmer Homes Advice Service to the private rented sector and consider expanding the service. Learnings from the pilot should be shared with boroughs to support local efforts to support tenants. By September 2020.*

I would be grateful to receive a response to our findings and recommendations by **19 February 2020**. Please also send your response by email to the committee's clerk, Lauren Harvey ([lauren.harvey@london.gov.uk](mailto:lauren.harvey@london.gov.uk)).

Yours sincerely,



**Dr Onkar Sahota AM**

Chair of the Health Committee

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<sup>14</sup> Warmer Homes Scheme, GLA, 21 June 2019 <https://www.london.gov.uk/questions/2019/12229>