

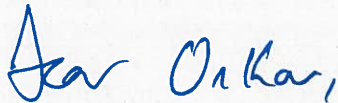
MAYOR OF LONDON

Dr Onkar Sahota

Chair of the Health Committee
City Hall
The Queen's Walk
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Thank you for your letter of 19 December 2019 bringing to my attention the Health Committee's investigation and recommendations. I welcome the committee's work on this important issue and the recognition that insecure housing tenure has an impact on the health of children and their parents.

My London Health Inequalities Strategy (HIS) recognises that the 'wider determinants of health' including things such as income and homes, affect our chance of living a long, healthy life. The link is clear between poor quality housing and physical health, in particular through injuries, illnesses related to damp and cold and poor mental health. Too many Londoners, both children and adults, are experiencing the adverse impacts on physical and mental health that result from living in insecure and poor quality housing. The HIS also identifies the critical stage in the early years of childhood, where we need to ensure the best start in life for children, and one of my five key aims is to ensure that every London child has a healthy start in life. This healthy start is a key way to improve the long-term health, particularly of the most vulnerable children in London.

It is essential to ensure that Londoners experiencing poor health directly because of their housing are readily able to access effective help. I have offered comments on the Committee's recommendations in this area separately, as enclosed. However, I am also keen to make it clear that work to ensure access to effective help needs to be undertaken in tandem with work to tackle the root causes of insecure and poor quality housing. Accordingly, I am doing all that is within my power to pursue the three key changes needed to address London's housing crisis and urging the Government to act, where change depends on it doing so.

First, Londoners need far more social rented and other genuinely affordable homes, so that fewer of them struggle to find and keep a home they can afford and, as a result, end up in sub-standard accommodation at the lower end of the private rented market. It is as the supply of social rented homes has fallen that more Londoners, including many more families with children, have come to rely on the growing private rented sector.

I have secured £4.8 billion from the Government that I am investing to support the delivery of 116,000 new affordable homes in London, as well as introducing a strategic target into the new London Plan that half of new homes are affordable. But I have also made it clear to the Government that London needs additional powers and funding to deliver the number of these homes the city needs; work conducted by the GLA and G15 group of housing associations found that London needs £4.9 billion per year in funding to build the quantity of homes required to meet the need for genuinely affordable housing.

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Second, Londoners need the Government to reverse the severe cuts it has made in the welfare benefits available to help people on low incomes pay their rent. For many, these cuts have made it much more difficult to cover the cost of renting a home. London's private sector tenants have been particularly hard hit. Growing numbers of Londoners have faced or experienced homelessness as they have become unable to cover their rent. Private sector tenants who depend on benefits, the majority of whom are in work, now have very limited leverage in the sector. They may have little choice but to settle for sub-standard accommodation and/or a home smaller than they need.

Third, the Government needs to radically overhaul the private rented sector, which is now home to over two million Londoners. They face a range of challenges, including rising rents and other costs, a lack of security and stability and, in some cases, poor conditions. London's private rented sector continues to be subject to an outdated regulatory system that was designed for a more marginal and short-term tenure, and local authorities lack the necessary backing and resources from the Government to use their existing enforcement powers to best effect.

As some of my comments on specific recommendations show, I am whole-heartedly committed to doing everything I can within the powers that I have to improve the standards of both private rented sector accommodation and the accommodation that local authorities provide for households who have become homeless, which is often found in the private rented sector. I recognise that action to improve the standard of accommodation, focused on those who need this most, will also contribute to reducing the health inequalities.

I am also taking action to support vulnerable Londoners, and those on low incomes, including many families with children to access fairer energy bills. On 13 January, I launched London Power, my new, fair-priced energy company. The first phase of my Warmer Homes grant programme was extended to the private rented sector on a trial basis in November 2018, and the private rented sector will be included from the very start of phase two. My officers are in discussion with boroughs about how the scheme can best reach and assist fuel poor private tenants. My Warmer Homes Advice Service, launched in February 2018, has been open to private tenants since its start. My Fuel Poverty Action Plan estimates that between 2012 and 2017 there were 1,400 to 4,200 excess winter deaths in London where fuel poverty and cold homes may have been a factor. While I welcome the introduction of Minimum Energy Efficiency Standards for private rented homes by the Government, I remain concerned that the cost cap of £3,500 is too low. I have made the case to the Government for this cap to be raised to £5,000.

Despite having no formal powers over the private rented sector, I have committed to do all I can to help London's renters. I have gone further than any previous Mayor by launching the country's first public database to 'name and shame' rogue landlords and letting agents and have worked closely with local authorities through my Private Rented Sector Partnership to crack down on criminal landlords and letting agents. Going further will require legislative reform by the Government, and in July last year I published my *Reforming Private Renting blueprint* ([www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/reforming_private_renting - the_mayor_of_londons_blueprint.pdf](http://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/reforming_private_renting_-_the_mayor_of_londons_blueprint.pdf)), setting out my vision for making renting more secure and affordable in London.

In relation to accommodation for homeless households, I have worked closely with local authorities to help them collaborate in ways that will leave them better placed to secure good quality, sustainable accommodation for these households. I part-funded the development work that led to the Capital Letters initiative and have invested £11 million in PLACE (Pan-London Accommodation Collaborative Enterprise), which will provide 200 units of high quality, local accommodation for homeless households. I am also engaging with local authorities to fund improvements to the

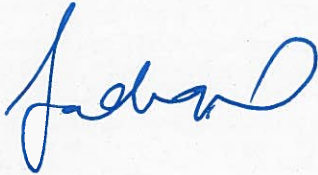
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Setting the Standard programme, which is a pan-London scheme for assessing the standard of Bed and Breakfast and other nightly-paid temporary accommodation used by London.

All of these measures will contribute to reducing the impact of insecure housing on the health of children, through improving access to effective help whilst tackling the root causes of this issue.

Thank you again for writing to me.

Yours sincerely,



Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London

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Response to the Health Committee's recommendations

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.

I agree that poor property conditions can impact on the mental health of renters and their households, including children. The current property inspection regime includes a range of hazards that could impact on mental health, including issues such as overcrowding, the physical security of the property, exposure to noise and availability of natural light. This framework – as well as the regulatory powers that enable local authorities to enforce against landlords letting out properties with serious health and safety hazards – is set by the Government. I will continue to call on the Government to ensure that these are fit for purpose in the context of the modern private rented sector in London.

Your recommendation also indicates the impact of tenure insecurity on renters' mental health. I am clear that weak tenancy rights – coupled with a shortage of rental housing – prevent renters from feeling secure in their homes, challenging unfair rent rises and enforcing their rights to better living conditions. In my blueprint for private rented sector reform, I call on the Government to end Section 21 'no fault' evictions, which enable landlords to evict renters without reason, introduce open-ended tenancies and reform court processes to ensure landlords can continue to let their properties with confidence. It also sets out my vision for a system of rent control in London. The Government has subsequently set out its intention to end Section 21, and I will continue to push them to ensure this is done quickly and as part of a wider package of measures to better balance the rights of landlords and renters.

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.

My new London Plan (the Plan) plans for growth on the basis of its potential to improve the health and quality of life of all Londoners and to reduce inequalities. To ensure that London's growth is Good Growth, the Plan is informed by six Good Growth objectives. Objective GG3 Creating a Healthy City promotes the use of Health Impact Assessments. GG3 states that those involved in planning and development must assess the potential impacts of development proposals and Development Plans on the mental and physical health and wellbeing of communities, in order to mitigate any potential negative impacts, maximise potential positive impacts, and help reduce health inequalities.

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.

I acknowledge the role that enforcement teams can play in recognising the signs of poor health in families they encounter on inspections. I will ensure that this is an area for discussion at a forthcoming meeting of my Private Rented Sector Partnership.

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However, as Environmental Health Officers are not qualified or best-placed to carry out detailed assessments about the impact of poor property conditions on individual renters' mental health, it is essential that there is close collaboration between environmental health and health professionals – and the Government needs to provide more resources to ensure this joint-working is consistently effective.

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.

I believe that well-designed and -operated landlord licensing schemes can greatly support local authorities to target their limited enforcement resources against the minority of poor quality and criminal landlords operating in London. Through my Private Rented Sector Partnership, I have been encouraging a more consistent and collaborative approach to property licensing schemes across London.

The Government currently has the final say over whether new licensing schemes can go ahead where they cover more than 20 per cent of a council's area. I was concerned that the Secretary of State for Housing recently refused Liverpool City Council's application to extend its selective licensing scheme for another five years, and I will continue to call on the Government to devolve responsibility for considering and approving selective licensing schemes to City Hall, where we have a much clearer idea of the size and complexity of London's private rental sector. This would ensure that all councils who need large licensing schemes are able to introduce them – while ensuring that councils retain autonomy over decisions to introduce schemes locally.

As I have previously set out, the Government should also introduce mandatory, light-touch landlord registration, which would form a publicly-accessible database of all legally-compliant landlords. This would support council licensing schemes by making it more straightforward to identify compliant landlords and target resources at those operating 'under the radar'.

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.

Where GPs are asked to provide information on the health needs of their patients for housing purposes, it is certainly helpful to GPs, their patients and local authorities to be clear on what information is required. This saves time for both GPs and local authorities and provides clarity and transparency for those in housing need.

However, it would not be practical for the Mayor of London to work with local authorities to develop a standard template for GPs to provide information. Local authorities have statutory responsibility for assessing and assisting individuals facing or experiencing homelessness and for the allocation of social housing, in line with clear legal frameworks for both. While all local authorities are obliged to give "reasonable preference" to applicants who need to move for medical or welfare reasons, each must establish their own allocations scheme to determine how those seeking social housing are prioritised. Varying schemes may treat different health needs differently. Given this, it makes sense for local authorities to develop their own templates for GPs who are providing information that may affect a patient's priority for social housing.

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I also recognise the importance of GPs and other health services being able to signpost patients in housing need to the help that they require. As you identify, the development of social prescribing provides an opportunity to do this, and we are continuing to work with NHS colleagues to help shape the package of information and training available for Link Workers, including to schemes such as the Warmer Homes Advice service and the Rogue Landlord and Agent Checker.

It is unfortunate that the duty for specified public authorities to refer people facing or experiencing homelessness to a local authority, that was introduced by the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, applies only to a limited range of health services – emergency departments, urgent treatment centres, and hospitals – when providing in-patient care. It would be useful to explore a scope for adding GPs to the list of public bodies subject to the 'duty to refer'. The potential value of such a duty, and existing duties, is of course subject to it being suitably resourced, and this is something I continue to raise with central government along with my local authority colleagues.

Recommendation 6

The Mayor should review the GLA's pilot providing 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.

The GLA's **Warmer Homes Advice Service** has been open to the private rented sector since it began in February 2018. The learning from the evaluation of the programme will be shared with boroughs.

The first phase of my **Warmer Homes grants programme** was extended to the private rented sector on a trial basis in November 2018, and the private rented sector will be included from the very start of phase two. My officers are in discussion with boroughs about how the scheme can best reach and assist fuel poor private tenants.