

LONDON ASSEMBLY

City Hall

Kamal Chunchie Way

London

E16 1ZE

Tel: 020 7983 4000

www.london.gov.uk



Sem Moema AM

Chair of the Housing Committee

Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London
(Sent by email)

27 April 2023

Dear Sadiq,

I am writing to you regarding our recent investigation into resident voice in social housing in London. As you know, the Grenfell disaster highlighted the importance of the quality and safety of social housing. It also served as a powerful reminder of why it is vital that social housing residents are listened to, that they have avenues for raising complaints, and that their landlords are adequately and swiftly responding to their concerns.

To support our investigation, we held a meeting on 1 February 2023, with a range of residents and industry representatives to discuss the overall state of quality and conditions in the social housing sector in London, and what could be done to improve standards within the existing stock. The meeting was split into two panels. Guests at the first session included Chyrel Brown (Chief Operating Officer at One Housing Group), Tom Copley (Deputy Mayor for Housing and Residential Development), Lara Oyedele (President of the Chartered Institute of Housing), and Jed Young (Acting Corporate Director for Homes and Neighbourhoods at the London Borough of Islington). Guests during the second panel included Khalid Mair (Chair of Imani Housing Co-op and BME London Landlords Tenants Forum), Pat Turnbull (London Tenants Federation), Kwajo Tweneboa (housing campaigner), and Sam Vacciana (Board Member at the Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations). This letter summarises the themes that emerged from our investigation and puts forward a series of recommendations.

Regulation of existing social housing

The meeting discussed the scale of poor conditions in London's social housing. The Deputy Mayor for Housing and Residential Development suggested that while the number of social rented homes that do not comply with the Decent Homes Standard in London has significantly decreased, there were still around 15 per cent classified as non-decent.¹ Housing campaigner Kwajo Tweneboa revealed some of the issues which London tenants were dealing with, including severe damp and mould, pest infestations, black ceilings, leaking sewage, and flooding among others. He went on to say that the current regulatory environment was inadequate and weighted against the interests of tenants, and that further changes were needed to ensure firmer regulation and stricter penalties to hold to account housing providers and landlords who fail their tenants.

Since the Grenfell disaster in 2017, the GLA has consistently called on the Government to appoint a social housing tenant as a national Commissioner for Social Housing.² Such a Commissioner would act as a watchdog for social housing policy and ensure the voices of those living in social housing are heard by national policymakers. During our previous investigation into resident voice, held in 2018, the Committee recommended that the GLA should appoint a **London** Social Housing Commissioner to champion residents' interests and encourage social housing landlords to promote meaningful ways of involving residents in decision making. The Committee felt that this could strengthen the GLA's call for a national social housing commissioner by trialling it in London.³ In your response to the Committee's 2018 report, you emphasised that this role should be a national one, to ensure that the Commissioner has influence on national policy and legislation.⁴

At our 1 February meeting, we asked the Deputy Mayor for an update on this recommendation. The Deputy Mayor told us that a London Commissioner would not have the same impact as a national Commissioner, as they would not sit on the board of the Regulator of Social Housing. He went on to state that social tenants currently have other avenues to provide their input on housing policies in London via the London Tenants Federation and the London Housing Panel.

However, at the 1 February meeting, there was strong agreement among members of our second panel, made up of social housing residents, that there should be a social housing Commissioner for London. The panel argued that such a Commissioner would raise the profile and importance of social rented housing. A London Commissioner would have experience of living in social rented housing in London, and would use this experience to champion the interests of London's social tenants. Our guests were clear that this Commissioner should work alongside existing panels such as the London Housing Panel,⁵ which the guests felt was neither a substitute for a Commissioner nor a tenant representative body.⁶

¹ London Assembly Housing Committee, [Transcript 1 Feb 2023 – Panel 1](#)

² See, for example, GLA press release, [Sadiq calls for social housing tenant to be appointed as Commissioner](#), June 2018

³ London Assembly Housing Committee report, [Hearing resident voices in social housing](#), November 2018

⁴ [Letter from the Mayor to the Housing Committee](#), January 2019

⁵ Trust for London, [London Housing Panel](#)

⁶ London Assembly Housing Committee, [Transcript 1 Feb 2023 – Panel 2](#)

Recommendation One: The GLA should establish a Social Housing Commissioner or Champion for London who would be responsible for championing tenants' rights and interests. A similar recommendation was made in 2018. Given the changing nature of London's housing market, we believe this is still required.

Social housing funding

Guests at the meeting noted that, alongside improving existing stock, understanding the need and ramping up the delivery of social rented homes in London is also imperative to improving living conditions for London's social tenants. Pat Turnbull stated;

“To remind us as well, the last Strategic Housing Market [Assessment] was in 2017 and that is what reported a housing need. That showed that 47% of all homes built between 2016 and 2041 needed to be social rented, and that 78% of the backlog of unmet housing needs was social rented. We need a new [Strategic Housing Market Assessment], and I am sure it will come up with even larger figures than the ones I have just quoted.”

In response to a Mayor's questions, you have previously indicated to the London Assembly that the results of the 2021 Census will put officers in a better place to build a picture of the nature and extent of demographic change that has taken place since 2017 and that this would inform the best way forward with regard to reviewing and, if needed, revising the SHMA.⁷

Recommendation Two: As the initial results of the 2021 Census have now been published by the Office for National Statistics, with plans to release the remaining results by the end of this year, the Committee recommends that your officers review and revise the Strategic Housing Market Assessment to determine the extent of social housing need in London. The results should be reflected in the next Mayoral housing strategy, London Plan, and negotiation of future housing targets. The Committee notes these actions are likely to be in the next Mayoral term.

At our meeting, the Deputy Mayor noted that funding remained a challenge, and that social landlords, like the wider housing sector, had competing priorities for funding, i.e. deciding whether to focus investment on new build or retrofit and building safety. This has made it a challenge for social landlords to invest on the scale needed to improve their current stock of social homes. The Deputy Mayor told the Committee that the GLA has commissioned research by Savills UK to provide tangible estimates on the funding needed to transform and improve the stock of social housing in London. **We request that a copy of the research undertaken by Savills UK is provided to the Committee as soon as it is available.** The Committee would like then to invite officers from the Housing and Land Directorate for an informal meeting to discuss the research and next steps.

In relation to social landlords' capacity to improve homes, Jed Young, Acting Corporate Director for Homes and Neighbourhoods at the London Borough of Islington, told us that the national seven per cent cap on social rent rises for 2023-24 would have a negative impact on available funding for investment for social landlords. At the same time, the impact of the cap on social

⁷ [MQI](#), September 2021

tenants was also noted by Pat Turnbull, who told us that a rise of seven per cent in social rents was unaffordable for many tenants.

Recommendation Three: The GLA should undertake research with social landlords and tenants on the impact of theseven per cent cap on social rent rises in London. This should explore the impact on social landlords' ability to build new homes – and any impact on the Affordable Homes Programme - as well as their ability to maintain and improve existing stock. Additionally, the research should seek to understand the impact on tenants of increased rents during a cost-of-living crisis.

Affordable Homes Programmes (AHP)

While regulation falls outside the remit of the Mayor, the Committee understands that the GLA can still utilise its position as a grant giver to encourage compliance with the Regulator of Social Housing (RSH). The Deputy Mayor told the Committee that he has written to investment partners under the Affordable Homes Programme 2021-26, setting out the actions that the GLA will take if the RSH issues notices for non-compliance against a housing provider, such as for failing to maintain properties to a high standard. These actions include funding being limited or withdrawn and providers being stripped of their investment partner status, depending on the severity of the breach. The Committee welcomes this approach to funding and notes that three social housing providers in London have already had their funding frozen under these new measures.

Recommendation Four: The GLA should regularly publish a list of all social housing providers stripped of their investment partner status and/or funding under the GLA's Affordable Homes Programme 2021-26, as a result of regulatory violations, so that Londoners can identify social landlords in breach of regulatory standards.

Complaints procedures of social landlords in London

The culture surrounding the relationship between tenants and providers was also raised by guests at our meeting. As Khalid Mair, a social housing tenant told us, there is an imbalance in the power dynamic between tenants and providers. This was echoed by Pat Turnbull who highlighted that she had never used the complaints procedure in 25 years as chair of a tenants and resident association, highlighting that persistence and going directly to more senior figures, was the only way to get issues resolved.

These sentiments were echoed by Lara Oyedele of the Chartered Institute of Housing. She noted that the current complaints system was enough to discourage tenants from making complaints in the first place. We heard how the consolidation of social housing providers over the last ten years means complaints procedures are disconnected from residents, with multiple departments, and drawn-out engagement processes that fail to respond to the initial concern of tenants and residents. This runs the risk of leaving social housing residents without a clear voice to raise provider failures.

Recommendation Five: Social housing providers in London should be encouraged by the GLA to conduct reviews of their complaints systems, to identify and address any shortcomings, and develop policies that can be implemented to shift blame away from tenants for housing problems that are a reflection of inadequate maintenance.

Recommendation Six: The GLA should encourage boroughs to work with social landlords on a clear complaints process for social housing tenants. This should include themselves if they are a landlord. Boroughs should also provide social housing tenants in London who have complaints but have received an unsatisfactory service from their landlords' complaints process, advice on how to navigate the complaints system through all levels up to, and including, the Housing Ombudsman.

Better Social Housing Review

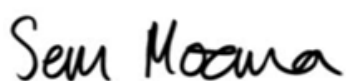
In June 2022, the National Housing Federation and Chartered Institute of Housing set up a Better Social Housing Review to tackle social housing issues in England. The review was led by an independent panel with direct experience of social housing. The review was chaired by Helen Baker, Chair of Shelter.⁸ In December 2022, the panel published its report, making several recommendations to government and social landlords including a call for housing associations to work together to undertake a comprehensive national audit of social housing. At our meeting we asked the Deputy Mayor to provide us with more detail on how you will support social landlords in undertaking a stock audit or condition survey. He recently wrote to tell us that he would keep in close contact with London's social housing landlords and would 'remain open to assisting the sharing of best practice where this adds value to the work already being done by organisations in the sector, including the authors of the Better Social Housing Review report.'⁹

Recommendation Seven: The Committee encourages the GLA to work with the National Housing Federation and the Chartered Institute of Housing to understand how the recommendations from the Better Social Housing Review can be implemented in London, and to report back on actions taken to the Committee.

High quality social housing is critical to the health and wellbeing of Londoners. We believe the recommendations outlined in this letter are vital to ensuring that social residents' and tenants' voices are listened to, that social landlords uphold their duty to protect tenants and that every social tenant in London lives in a high-quality home.

I would be grateful for a response to this letter by **30 June 2023**.

Yours,



Sem Moema AM
Chair of the Housing Committee

⁸ The Better Social Housing Review, [About the review](#)

⁹ [Letter from the Deputy Mayor for Housing and Residential Development to the Housing Committee](#), February 2023