



Sian Berry AM Chair of the Housing Committee

Sadiq Khan

Mayor of London
(Sent by email)

11 March 2022

Dear Sadiq,

I am writing to you on behalf of the London Assembly Housing Committee regarding our recent investigation into overcrowding in London. As you know, Londoners are disproportionately affected by overcrowded housing compared with people living in the rest of England, with severe consequences for their health and wellbeing, particularly children.¹ Overcrowding worsened during the pandemic, with estimates that the overcrowding rate rose to as high as 15 per cent in London,² making it even more vital that action is taken to alleviate this problem.

On 18 January 2022, we held a meeting with a range of experts to discuss the scale of overcrowding in London and the structural challenges, consequences and potential policy options that would help tackle it. Guests at our meeting included: Tom Copley (Deputy Mayor for Housing and Residential Development), James Gleeson (Housing Research and Analysis Manager, GLA), Charles Trew (Head of Policy, Shelter), Beatrice Amia Cingtho-Taylor (Head of Housing Needs, London Borough of Harrow), Hakeem Osinaike (Operational Director of Housing, London

¹ According to the latest figures from the English Housing Survey, in 2019-20, 9.2 per cent (322,000) of London households were overcrowded compared with 2.5 across England as a whole.

² London Assembly Housing Committee meeting, 18 January 2022

Borough of Brent), and Jamie Carswell (Director of Housing and Safer Communities, Royal Borough of Greenwich). I am writing to share our key findings and recommendations.

The extent of overcrowding in London

At our meeting, we heard from the Deputy Mayor for Housing and Residential Development, Tom Copley, who informed us that overcrowding rates in London had risen to 15 per cent among those living in the private rented sector (PRS) and social rented sector, before falling slightly to 12 per cent. The Deputy Mayor attributed the increase in overcrowding to the longstanding lack of available housing, particularly larger homes, as well as shortcomings in the welfare system, where a mixture of benefit cuts and caps, such as Local Housing Allowance limits, the overall benefit cap, and the two child limit, may have left some families unable to access the size of home that matches their needs. From the Deputy Mayor and other witnesses, we heard about the importance of building new social housing as a means of tackling overcrowding, and concerns were voiced over the net loss of social rent accommodation, due to sales, demolitions, and insufficient new construction.

The Deputy Mayor also told the Committee that those living in the PRS faced higher rates of overcrowding and that compliance with the Decent Homes Standard was comparatively lower in that sector compared with any other type of tenure. Representatives from London Boroughs explained that in an effort to help those most urgently in need, households were normally being placed in the PRS, which was not typically the best option, but a temporary one until more suitable, alternative, long-term accommodation could be found.

We also heard about the considerable pressures that Black, Asian and other minority ethnic groups face due to overcrowding. The Deputy Mayor highlighted statistics from the 2011 Census indicating that overcrowding rates were as high as 36 per cent among the Bangladeshi community in London and 25 per cent among the Pakistani community. It was also reported that those of Black and Asian ethnicity in Brent made up the majority of severe overcrowding cases, using information gathered from the local housing register.

The Assembly has previously raised concerns about the lack of larger family-sized homes being built through the Affordable Homes Programme, and the lack of family-sized home targets in the Mayor's new London Housing Strategy, and it has also questioned the assumptions and weightings used in relation to overcrowding in the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA).³ The Deputy Mayor was questioned by Committee members about the low number of larger family-sized homes being funded through Affordable Homes Programme (AHP) grants. Committee members also questioned whether the Mayor's approach of offering flat rate grants that did not vary with the size of home under the 2016-23 AHP, and especially whether his approach of building smaller affordable homes was helping to tackle overcrowding. The Deputy Mayor responded saying: "We offer negotiated grant rates already through the 2016 to 2023 programme, which means that boroughs can make the case for additional funding for larger

³ For example: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/affordable_housing_monitor_2020-2021.pdf,

homes.” We also asked about changes in the terms of the 2021-26 AHP, which now allow for larger grants for larger homes.

Consequences of overcrowding

At our meeting we heard from experts on the adverse consequences that overcrowding has on individuals. Cramped and overcrowded conditions are a source of serious strain on occupants’ physical and mental health, with 40 per cent of overcrowded households reporting significant mould, compared with 16 per cent of households not living in overcrowded conditions. Overcrowding also heightens the risk of respiratory diseases, and this is a major concern in the wake of the pandemic and has broader health implications. Charles Trew, Head of Policy at Shelter, told us that children living in overcrowded households are up to ten times more likely to contract meningitis. In addition, these children have less space to play and study, which impacts their development. Parents also suffer, with lack of privacy and disturbed sleep due to sharing bedrooms or sleeping on floors/sofas.

In short, an overcrowded environment contributes to major physical and mental pressures, which have a variety of longer-term consequences for both children and their parents.

Data collection

The Committee discussed deficiencies in the available data on overcrowding. We were told that the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities stopped sponsoring a question in 2010-11 on the Office for National Statistics’ Integrated Household Survey, which previously provided data on overcrowding at a borough level. This survey stopped running in 2015 and now overcrowding data comes from the Government through the English Housing Survey, without borough-level breakdowns.⁴ When we asked representatives of several London Boroughs whether they measured overcrowding within their local authority, we heard reports of the limitations to gathering information on overcrowding.

Hakeem Osinaike, the Operational Director of Housing at the London Borough of Brent, told the Committee that Brent Council was reliant on homeless applications and housing register applications to determine overcrowding in the PRS, but that this provides relatively limited data. Beatrice Cingtho-Taylor, Head of Housing Needs at the London Borough of Harrow, also reported difficulties collecting relevant data. Again, the Committee was told that the housing register was used to look at the number of households that were overcrowded and searching for larger accommodation. However, we were told that there were limitations in this method, which was largely a result of prioritising support for those in severely overcrowded accommodation. This potentially impacts the accuracy of the data, as it may not capture those living in less severely overcrowded housing.

The Committee notes that you have previously stated that more regional data on overcrowding in London will be provided through the 2021 Census. However, as this is only available once every ten years, on its own this would not provide enough information on trends or timely data

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-housing-survey-2020-to-2021-headline-report>

on changes to overcrowding. Further, the 2021 Census data is likely to be impacted by the coronavirus pandemic and may not be reflective of conditions in a post-pandemic London. We appreciate that data on overcrowding was historically collected by Whitehall departments, and that there are potential cost implications for the GLA to collect its own data. However, for you to exercise your Mayoral powers and for local authorities to meet local needs and support families into more suitable accommodation, it is vital that you have access to relevant information on the scale of overcrowding within our communities, and we make recommendations about this below.

Factors contributing to overcrowding

The scale of overcrowding in both the PRS and social rented sectors has hugely increased due to the lack of access to larger social rented homes. We heard from the Deputy Mayor that there are many families renting in the PRS that 15 years ago would have been living in a larger social rented property. Today, the situation is desperate: Hakeem Osinaike told us that the wait for a four-bed social rented house in Brent is now 17 years.

Given the lack of larger homes in the social rented sector, many families remain overcrowded in both the PRS and in social housing. In 2017, GLA analysis showed that 27 per cent of households with children in social housing, and 35 per cent of similar families in the PRS, lived in overcrowded homes.⁵

The challenges facing local authorities in helping overcrowded families who are claiming benefits were raised several times during our meeting. The Local Housing Allowance, set at the 30th percentile of rents in a broad rental market area,⁶ is not sufficient to rent larger homes in the PRS in many London boroughs, and the number of properties available through that route may not be enough to meet demand. Officers from Harrow told us that they have varying success in negotiating deals with landlords when acquiring properties so they are at, or as close as possible to, the LHA rate. Several witnesses raised concerns that the overall benefit cap can in some cases act to reduce or restrict access to larger homes, especially for families with more children, leading to higher levels of overcrowding in the PRS. The Committee is aware of your call to the Government for a 'triple lock' protection for private renters in London during the COVID-19 pandemic, which included proposals to restore the LHA rates to median market rents and to suspend the benefit cap.⁷

It was also brought to the Committee's attention that discretionary housing payments (DHP) - additional payments made to those who are struggling to pay for their housing cost - are often a postcode lottery and improvements need to be made in the way they are administered. We are aware that this is beyond the remit of your powers as the Government is responsible for DHP allocations through local authorities. However, we were also told that DHPs are not widely advertised and that more needs to be done to raise awareness of their availability.

⁵ Housing in London 2017 <https://data.london.gov.uk/download/housing-london/27e10d40-bb04-4028-95a6-606bd13d7777/Housing-in-London-2017-report.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/local-housing-allowance-lha-rates>

⁷ [GLA press release, 22 April 2020](#)

We heard from Hakeem Osinaike about some success in Brent in moving homeless or overcrowded families in the PRS into larger homes provided through longer-term agreements with landlords. However, we also heard how this option is not attractive to families in overcrowded social housing since, by accepting this kind of offer to move to the PRS, even on relatively secure terms (for that tenure), they are concerned this may negatively affect the prospect of being offered a more secure council tenancy later.

The Committee discussed under-occupancy and the potential role that downsizing could play in tackling overcrowding. The Committee is aware of longstanding London-wide programmes to try to encourage downsizing from under-occupied social rented homes, including the Housing Moves and Seaside and Country Homes programmes, and we welcome this work. We heard that some local authorities are also working with people in under-occupied accommodation to find them suitable housing they would like to move into. However, it remains a challenge for local authorities as many Londoners living in under-occupied homes are owner-occupiers and, in many cases, own their property outright.

Powers and devolution/regulation

The Committee heard evidence from some boroughs that one way to drive up standards in the PRS could be through allowing boroughs to have more power to create and expand their own landlord licensing schemes. Hakeem Osinaike told us that Brent Council had evidence that where licensing was introduced, the quality of private rented accommodation has gone up. Charles Trew further explained that having these schemes in place, along with a landlord register, would give councils the power to enforce standards appropriately.

While we recognise that better enforcement and engagement with landlords in this way will not directly affect the prevalence of overcrowding, better standards in general could reduce the impact of overcrowding on physical and mental health as outlined above. However, it is also important to stress that we should be seeking to avoid overcrowding in the first place, not just mitigate its effects.

The Committee is aware that you have previously urged the Government to devolve powers to you to approve local authority licensing schemes and enable a London-wide scheme, though this has not yet resulted in any changes in policy. The Levelling Up White Paper published in February 2022 includes proposals to introduce a national landlord register, end Section 21 evictions and extend the Decent Homes Standard to the PRS, and the Government has indicated that a further White Paper will be published in the spring where these proposals will be set out in detail.⁸

Recommendations

Given the urgency of the situation and the harm that overcrowding in London is causing, as a result of our investigation we are recommending the following:

With the Deputy Mayor for Housing and Residential Development, you should create a new action plan for tackling overcrowding in London, setting targets not just for new construction of larger homes and social and affordable housing through grants, but also for a measurable reduction in this problem. The action plan should review opportunities within all your housing and planning policies and funding programmes and tell Londoners how you will, among other actions:

- improve data collection so that the true extent of overcrowding in London is known, and so that interventions can be targeted to the people and areas most in need;
- incentivise councils and social landlords to build and acquire homes of all sizes, affordable at or close to LHA, including family-sized homes, including with suitable grant levels;
- tackle the racial inequalities that are systemic in overcrowding in London;
- improve options for helping people who, across all tenures, live in homes that are not the right size for their household, including those who could downsize;
- collect and publish data on downsizing outcomes as a result of new building, particularly where smaller units are intended for use by under-occupiers;
- do more to help improve overall affordability and standards in respect of privately rented homes, so that more families can be housed securely in the PRS;
- work with boroughs to improve access to and awareness of discretionary housing payments for those who need additional support.

In addition, the Committee is planning to examine the PRS at our next meeting, and we are keen to see details from the Government of its plans for reform, and details from you of your plans for the proposed London Private Rent Commission. We therefore request an update from you on this work ahead of our meeting on 22 March 2022.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sian Berry', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Sian Berry AM
Chair of the Housing Committee