

Towards a Housing Strategy

First Stage Consultation Report

Executive Summary

The *Towards a Housing Strategy* consultation was launched by Mayor Biggs in an article in *East End Life* on 16th May 2016, with a housing survey available online. As of 1st August 2016, 409 surveys were completed – approximately 65% of these were completed in face to face consultations by officers in the Borough's markets, with the remainder completed on the Council's website.

The data below has been extracted from the survey data recorded. The data received from the survey cannot claim to be statistically accurate in representing the views of the majority of those living in Tower Hamlets; however it does provide a good insight into the key issues concerning people in the Borough which will be valuable for informing the development of the housing strategy.

It should be noted that prior to this consultation being held, the work of the Mayor's Housing Affordability Commission, Somali Task Force and consultation on the Local Plan in late 2015 and early 2016 also provided valuable feedback from across the Borough's communities on a wide range of housing issues.

Methodology

The questions in the survey were primarily developed around the findings and recommendations from the Mayor's Housing Affordability Commission which ran from December 2015 to February 2016 and through wider policy discussions with the Lead Members for Housing.

Before the online survey went live, it was tested by council colleagues in order to ensure it worked and surveys could be submitted without any technical problems arising. The paper survey questions were tested on colleagues who did not work day-to-day in housing, in order to ensure the questions were clear so that residents in Tower Hamlets could understand what they were being asked to comment on. As a result of this, the language used in some of the questions was simplified in order to make it 'less techy'. Survey results were examined in order to ensure they were representative of the demographics of Tower Hamlets.

Events and Consultations

As part of the consultation, Council officers held over a dozen events across the Borough. Officers carried out face to face surveys in markets, idea stores, residents meetings, as well as briefing colleagues, management teams and partners in internal and external meetings. Specific engagement included holding an All Member briefing event, attending the Children and Partnership Board, the Parent and Carer Council, the Interfaith Forum, Housing Options partners, holding three internal staff events, hosting a stall in Mulberry Place, and attending the Tenants and Residents Federation open meeting.

Respondents' profiles

Please note that not all respondents completed the monitoring survey. Therefore, the stats headlines do not add up to 100.

- Gender of those completing the survey: 49% female, 36% male.
- Landlord: 24% LBTH, 25% HA, 16% PRS, 16% owners, 2% homeless.
- Ethnicity: 28% Bengali, 26% British, 4% white, 3% Black, 1.5% Somali.
- Age Group: 16-24 (6%), 25-35 (23%), 36-45 (24%), 46-54 (11%), 55-64 (10%), 65+ (8%)
- 40% of respondents live in the Borough, while 5% work in LBTH. For the remaining 55% the question was not answered.

Top 10 Housing Concerns of Residents in Tower Hamlets

The top 10 housing concerns below were recorded from the comments made to officers by the public during the face to face surveys, and from the online survey which gave the public the opportunity to add specific comments.

| | |
|-----------|---|
| 1 | Overcrowding |
| 2 | Waiting List (too long) |
| 3 | Expensive / high rents |
| 4 | Local people should get housing priority |
| 5 | Repairs (Poor quality / Take too long) |
| 6 | Lack of parking |
| 7 | Lack of affordable housing |
| 8 | Lack of key worker housing |
| 9 | Low household income |
| 10 | Affordable rent is not affordable |

Examples of Housing Concerns

The comments below are a cross section of comments received during the face to face surveys and online. They are intended to give Members a feel of the type of comments being made by the public on key housing issues. A full list of comments is available for Members should they wish to look at them.

OVERCROWDING

“Teenagers of the opposite sex sharing the same room. For example a teenage boy 16 sharing with a teen girl of 13.”

“I have four girls that all currently share a room. The council should spend an evening in my home watching how hard it is for my daughters aged 13, 10, 8 and 2 to share one bedroom together with no private space for themselves!”

HOUSING REGISTER

"The waiting list is too long."

"People jump the housing queue."

"I think it is really important for the Tower Hamlets council to strive to house those on the housing waiting list, as it is only fair as some families have waited years. So to try and build more housing which will accommodate for affordable rent will be ideal, so everyone can benefit from it."

HIGH RENTS

"Many of us cannot afford to pay £250 - 300 per week so I would like to see more homes which is less than £200."

"The average working family cannot afford a rent of £250-£300.00 per week."

"The council need to build new homes that we can afford as many of us do not earn more than £15,000 PA and we cannot afford to pay rent of £300 + per week. Priority needs to be given to those that have medical needs and need a ground floor property. There is a shortage of ground floor properties and these are being given to those who do not even need a ground floor. Old estates and buildings can be refurbished to save money than demolishing and building new build homes."

"People on housing benefits should not be in prime area like zone 2!"

"Rent is very high and unaffordable. As someone who earns between 18-20k I struggle to pay the rent every month and have to scrape to get by. I find myself in situations where I am having to lean towards borrowing from the bank in order to make it through the month financially. The flat I live in is small and isn't even worth the money I pay for it."

HOMES FOR LOCAL PEOPLE

"No outer borough placements and homes for local people."

"Properties bought by the wealthy as investments at the expense of residents - it is pushing prices up."

"Only people born and bred in Tower Hamlets should get priority housing."

"Local people don't get housed. People from the EU come here and get housing priority while we have to go private."

REPAIRS

"Standard of homes is not good. Not modern."

"Repairs are a problem - waiting too long and contractors not doing what they say."

"Amount of time it takes THH to carry out repairs - not good enough."

"Quality of housing association repairs and services is poor - they should be required to document and evidence management support."

“Process for repairs is too long - limited options.”

“Make better use of empty properties.”

LACK OF PARKING

“No parking.”

“Public service areas should also be increased including GPs, schools, green spaces etc. - parking should also be considered, it is not enough to say a building is 'car free' - this does not seem to ensure that people cannot gain access to a resident permit, as there seems to be numerous 'work-around' this. The best solution would be to ensure all buildings have parking available at an affordable cost.”

LACK OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

“Affordable homes allow people to stay in, contribute feel part of their local area. Expensive small private houses and flats create transient, tense cramped areas in this city of ours. That will be the slums of the future.”

LACK OF KEY WORKER HOUSING

“How are local communities being supported with all the new housing such as schools, doctors surgeries and local services? These new apartments create problems with school places and push locals further from their school catchment areas. Why aren't there more key worker builds?”

“How are key workers being supported in the borough? What about key workers who live in overcrowded conditions for example? What incentive is there for them to continue to teach in London? How are those with median incomes able to pay rising rental rates in tower hamlets or afford homes? They are unable to do either.”

“Housing for key worker staff should be a priority.”

LOW HOUSEHOLD INCOME

“Too many homes feels like those on low income pushed out.”

“The majority of Tower Hamlets is full of families on very low income and those living in poverty. the last thing the council could do is encourage more higher earning individuals to come and live in this borough as that will inevitably lead to the social cleansing of the majority of residence that have lived in Tower Hamlets for the entirety of their lives.”

AFFORDABLE RENT IS NOT AFFORDABLE

“Define affordable housing, whom is it affordable too, based on what calculations?”

“These affordable rents are too high for family's to afford. I myself refused a 3 bed flat of £203 a week because we couldn't afford it. Also stop offering family's 9th floors with young babies. It's dangerous and not safe.”

Housing Survey Statistics – Short Survey

The questions below were asked in order to gauge the level of support for the broad proposals of the Housing Strategy document. The survey results reveal that a majority residents support the direction of travel set out in the document.

| Survey Question | % of Respondents who think this is 'Very Important' | % of Respondents who think this is ' Important' |
|---|---|---|
| Building new council and housing association homes with rents that people can afford to pay. | 82.6% | 10% |
| Building new homes on its own estate for median income households (e.g., a single person or two people) who earn between £30,000 and £45,000 per year - before tax. | 46.5% | 26.7% |
| The council works with housing associations in LBTH to make them more transparent and responsive, to improve the quality and management of housing association homes and will intervene where possible to improve services. | 61.9% | 22.7% |
| Using council land to build new homes as well as modernise council estates. | 67% | 20.8% |
| The council to work with private landlords to improve the quality and management of private rented housing and take action against bad landlords. | 61.9% | 23.7% |
| The council providing homelessness services to people who are not legally defined as homeless, but who the council think it is important to give advice and support to. | 46.7% | 31.3% |
| Continue to give priority to people in most housing need on the housing register. | 66% | 19.6% |

Long Survey Data:

In addition to the data included in the short survey responses above, approximately 140 people went on to complete a longer version of the housing strategy survey on the LBTH website. Support for the proposals was more mixed than in the short survey particularly in relation to developing homes outside the borough and some aspects of the proposed changes to the allocations scheme.

Housing Survey Statistics –Long Survey

Question 1 – The cost of council and housing association affordable rented homes

| | More homes at higher rents | Fewer homes at lower rents | No view |
|---|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| The council may have to make the difficult decision of deciding whether to have more rented homes at higher affordable rents (closer to the government’s affordable rents which are up to 80 per cent of market rents) and in the region of £250 - £300 per week for a two bed flat or have fewer homes at rents closer to current council social rents or (closer to the council’s social rents) and in the region of £110 - £150 per week for a two bed flat. | 33% | 57% | 10% |

Question 2 – Should we build new homes in lower value areas

| | Building new homes in lower cost parts of Tower Hamlets | Build new homes at cheaper rents outside Tower Hamlets | No view |
|--|--|---|----------------|
| The council may have to make the difficult decision of deciding whether to build more rented homes at rents close to current council rents in either lower value areas or perhaps outside of the borough. Which do you think is most important | 60% | 35% | 5% |

Question 3 - A new rental product for median income households

| | Agree | Disagree | No View |
|--|-------|----------|---------|
| The Mayors Housing Affordability Commission has recommended that the council should consider developing homes at higher rents on its own estates for median income households e.g. a single person or two people who earn between 30000 and 45000 - before tax. These homes would be let on a separate waiting list and be built alongside homes at lower rents for people in greater need. Do you agree with developing new homes on estates with a mix of rents which are affordable to local people on different income levels? | 58% | 37% | 5% |

Question 4 - Repairing and improving council stock or building new homes on council estate land

| | Repairs and improvements to existing housing stock | Building new affordable homes on council estate | A mix of both improvements and new homes | No View |
|---|--|---|--|---------|
| Due to the government's decision to reduce rents by 1 per cent for the next 4 years, the council will have less money to spend on council housing, which means there are difficult decisions about where to spend the money that is available. In respect of the council's housing managed by Tower Hamlets Homes, which of the three options do you think the council should prioritise? | 13% | 19% | 64% | 4% |

Question 5 - Improving private rented housing

More tenants than ever before now live in the private rented sector. The council is introducing a private sector licensing scheme to register private landlords in the east of the borough in the autumn, with the aim of improving services and rooting out bad landlords. What kind of changes would you like to see in accommodation provided in the private rented sector?

| | Agree | Disagree | No View |
|---|-------|----------|---------|
| Longer tenancies. Currently most private tenancies are usually for between six months and a year and may not be renewed | 71% | 13% | 17% |

| | | | |
|---|------------|------------|------------|
| More action on bad landlords, for example, landlords who do not carry out repairs or who harass tenants | 88% | 5% | 8% |
| License private landlords of houses in multiple occupation in the borough | 71% | 13% | 16% |
| Have a standard of service, like the London Rental Standard, promoted by the Mayor of London | 76% | 8% | 16% |

Question 6 - Meeting homeless households' needs

Homelessness continues to be a major issue in the borough. The council has a legal duty to meet certain homelessness people's needs – usually the most serious based on the Common Housing Register Allocation Scheme - which may be met using council or housing association accommodation or using private sector housing.

Others may just be entitled to housing advice. While the council delivers many new affordable rented homes a year, we still cannot build enough homes to meet everyone's needs. Private rented housing in the borough is too expensive to house homeless people who are on low incomes. This is likely to mean some homeless people will be placed outside Tower Hamlets on a permanent basis. This means we need to consider radical solutions. The council is also considering other ways to provide temporary accommodation for homeless people. To meet these needs:

| | Agree | Disagree | No View |
|--|--------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Should the council build and / or buy temporary accommodation in the borough | 57% | 25% | 18% |
| Should the council build and/or buy temporary accommodation outside the borough | 46% | 40% | 13% |
| Should the council use suitable private rented housing (and council and housing association temporary accommodation) to end its council's homelessness duty. | 50% | 34% | 16% |

Question 7 - Allocating council and housing association homes to households from the Housing Register

The council is also consulting on changes to the Housing Allocation Scheme in as part of the consultation on the draft Housing Strategy. The Scheme sets out the rules that decide whether an applicant can join the Common Housing Register and what priority band they receive. We are looking at a number of changes. These include:

The council currently operates a 10 per cent quota for Band 3 applicants who are not in housing need, given the housing demand from other applicants on the register. Do you think we should consider:

| | Agree | Disagree | No View |
|---|--------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Remove the quota entirely | 34% | 41% | 26% |
| Reduce the percentage quota to 5 per cent or less which will increase the lets available to higher priority applicants, including homeless families | 39% | 42% | 19% |
| Reduce the quota and restrict them to 1 beds only which will increase the lets available to higher priority applicants, including homeless families | 33% | 47% | 20% |

| | About right | Too long | Too short | No view |
|---|--------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------|
| On the three year continuous residence rule, do you think the length is | 50% | 15% | 24% | 11% |

| | Agree | Disagree | No View |
|---|--------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Should we, retain the residency requirement but create a sub-band in Band 2 for cases in housing need but have not lived in the borough for 3 years continuously. | 31% | 48% | 21% |
| Should the council only allow room sharing if children of opposite sex are under 10 years of age | 51% | 34% | 15% |

The results from the longer survey demonstrated broad support for the proposals in the Towards a Housing Strategy document, however there were mixed responses to the allocations question on Question 7, which have been taken into consideration for the allocations report.

Additional Comments:

Respondents were able to make additional comments on the housing survey, both after each question and at the end of the survey. The word cloud in figure 1 represents some of the most frequent key words used by those commenting on the housing strategy.

Figure 1: Word Cloud generated from additional comments on the survey

