

Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee

Oral evidence: Housing Conditions in England, HC 1154

Tuesday 27 January 2026

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 27 January 2026.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Florence Eshalomi (Chair); Andrew Cooper; Chris Curtis; Mr Lee Dillon; Maya Ellis; Mr Will Forster; Andrew Lewin; Mr Gagan Mohindra.

Questions 189-219

Witnesses

I: Dr Laura Neilson, CEO, Shared Health Foundation; Joe Lane, Deputy Director of Projects, Office of the Children's Commissioner; Matt Downie, CEO, Crisis; and Christa Maciver, Director of Campaigns and Social Change, Justlife Foundation.

II: Stephen Philpott, Director of City Housing Solutions and Support Services, Birmingham City Council; Councillor Grace Williams, Deputy Director and Executive Member for Housing and Regeneration, London Councils; Paul Kitson, Corporate Director of Inclusive Economy, Housing and Culture, Newham Council; and Joseph Donohue, Strategic Lead for Homelessness, Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Laura Neilson, Joe Lane, Matt Downie and Christa Maciver.

Q189 **Chair:** Good morning everybody, and welcome to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Select Committee. I am Florence Eshalomi and I am the Chair of the Committee. Will my Committee colleagues please introduce themselves?

Mr Gagan Mohindra: I am Gagan Mohindra, the Conservative Member of Parliament for South West Hertfordshire.

Mr Lee Dillon: Good morning. I am Lee Dillon, the Lib Dem MP for Newbury.

Mr Forster: I am Will Forster, the Lib Dem MP for Woking.

Chris Curtis: I am Chris Curtis, the Labour MP for Milton Keynes North.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Andrew Lewin: Good morning. Andrew Lewin, the Labour MP for Welwyn Hatfield.

Maya Ellis: I am Maya Ellis, the MP for Ribble Valley.

Andrew Cooper: I am Andrew Cooper, the Member of Parliament for Mid Cheshire.

Chair: Can our guests introduce themselves, please?

Matt Downie: I am Matt Downie, the chief executive of Crisis.

Dr Neilson: I am Dr Laura Neilson and I lead the Shared Health Foundation.

Joe Lane: I am Joe Lane, the deputy director of the Office of the Children's Commissioner.

Chair: Thank you very much for joining the Committee this morning. Following the general election in 2024, one of the first pieces of work this Committee undertook was looking at the crisis in temporary accommodation. We talk about the housing crisis, but I think it is fair to say that we also have a big crisis in temporary accommodation, on which we published our report last year. We have a series of questions on the issue, so I will hand over to my colleague Gagan.

Q190 **Mr Gagan Mohindra:** Could each of you describe how you see the current state of temporary accommodation in England?

Matt Downie: Thank you very much for the invitation to the Committee. The way I would describe the current state of temporary accommodation is a normalised emergency. When the records are broken every time the statistics come through, not just for overall temporary accommodation but for children in temporary accommodation or any other way you seek to cut the data, there appears to be no way of generating greater political expediency through the statistics, because they are normalised, with the exception of what Laura and her organisation have given us in terms of recent data.

I find it very difficult, because on the frontline we are helping 10,000 households that are homeless every year, and the use of temporary accommodation, the conditions of the temporary accommodation and the fact that people are now having to be advised all the time that unless you put up with it you will be deemed intentionally homeless—things like that—it is distressing for everybody involved. It is something that requires both a sense of political activity and agency to be recovered in terms of how this is dealt with, not to just simply think about the issue as only temporary accommodation. It is obviously a subset of the wider housing crisis that we have and if we just think about how to have better temporary accommodation, we will lose the bigger picture.

Dr Neilson: I specifically look at children's experience of temporary accommodation, and I think we can say that in the last couple of years that has only got worse. It is becoming nearly normalised in certain parts



HOUSE OF COMMONS

of the country that significant proportions of children are spending significant amounts of their childhood in TA. I agree with Matt that the system has become used to that. That shock factor when I first started talking about this just doesn't seem to be there any more.

I think the impact of TA on children is becoming more apparent. We have mortality stats, but we also now increasingly have evidence of children falling out of education, falling behind in education, delaying milestones, having accidents and having injuries. We have also allowed a TA system that is increasingly fragmented, so children face multiple moves across multiple boroughs, losing all sense of connection and attachment. We are starting to see quite a lot of medium-term consequences of that as well.

I think the standards have fallen even further. Some of the accommodation that I visit just breaks your heart. How can you have kids living without adequate bedding, without access to cots, without kitchens, without any play facility? How can you have kids who are chucked out at 10 in the morning and don't know where they are going to be at 4 o'clock in the afternoon? They lose contact with grandparents. They quite often lose contact with their other parent, because sometimes they are in single-sex accommodation or the dad is not allowed to stay there. There is all sorts of stuff.

In the TA system we are increasingly losing the human and we are just counting stats, and even the stats are getting worse, so the human cost is significantly worse. The other thing is that the financial cost is massive. This is not a system that is cheap; this is a system that is expensive and getting poor outcomes. That should be a concern for any Government and any local authority area.

Joe Lane: The Office of the Children's Commissioner exists to protect and promote the rights of children in England, and that means we speak to lots of children and hear from lots of children. Since Dame Rachel de Souza became Children's Commissioner, we have heard from over a million children directly, and in all those conversations, meetings and bits of research you hear time and time again about the impact of living in temporary accommodation. That goes from it being an everyday occurrence to a child to it being incredibly severe, having an incredibly serious, explicit impact on their lives.

Let me pick out two things. I was recently in a school in central London and I was taken on a lovely tour by a year 9 boy. He had really interesting ambitions, told me all about his sister, who is very impressive as well, and it was just very uplifting. Towards the end of the conversation he told me that he was in school in central London and he had had to move from Tottenham to Croydon. He told me about the bus journeys he was taking. I was thinking that for lots of the adults I work with that would be the very first thing they told me on a morning: "I've had a complete nightmare morning. I've had to take three buses and it has taken me nearly two hours to get to work." To him that was just his



HOUSE OF COMMONS

wallpaper. He was just like, "I've moved," and he was taking it in his stride. It is obviously incredibly upsetting and alarming that he is having to go about his school career, and from what I could tell succeeding, with this incredible challenge of being moved around the country, being moved around the capital and into different bits of temporary accommodation.

We run a service called Help at Hand, which supports children with social workers and care leavers, and we do direct advocacy for those children and young people. We hear about some of those severe instances of children, care leavers, and care leavers with children, living in temporary accommodation. In one recent case, a pregnant care leaver had had housing but had to be moved out due to a robbery. She had been put in temporary accommodation in another local authority, and then fell into that typical story of being moved from unsuitable temporary accommodation to unsuitable temporary accommodation, struggling to get her priority status back in the local authority where she should be placed. That was having a direct impact on her as a care leaver, but then also potentially on her pregnancy and on her child.

Echoing previous statements, this is a normalised emergency. At the Office of the Children's Commissioner we see that daily across the full spectrum of severity.

Q191 **Mr Gagan Mohindra:** I will let Christa settle in before I come back to her with the first question.

The Committee has heard that there is a lack of national data on the quality of temporary accommodation. Do you think the Government should instruct local councils to collate data in a way that can be collated nationally? Do you have confidence that the Government can improve the quality of TA while demand continues to rise?

Matt Downie: On your first point, the lack of data is a real problem, not simply for overall policymaking but for individual decision making as well. It is possible for people and families to be lost in a system because the data does not follow them. Frankly, out-of-area placements are a good example of this: people can be sent somewhere and the destination area local authority does not know who the people are, where they are, let alone what their support needs are.

The H-CLIC data has surface-level information, but underneath that we know a whole series of anecdotes that tell us there are problems. We see it all the time. I don't think any of us sit here today and say we know the full picture and therefore what the policymaking should be. That is something that needs to be written into the system.

As we start to consider the ideal conditions or the implementation of decent homes, or Awaab's law, or those sorts of things, that has to be followed with the data. Otherwise, you are just going to be reliant on



HOUSE OF COMMONS

individual complaints, which is no way to service a system where people are having to put up with what they are told to be grateful for.

Dr Neilson: I think the lack of data has been a barrier for us making good policy decisions and gathering an evidence base. We do not have data about even how many times families move. We do not have data on the facilities they have. We rely on individual stories and narrative, and lots of us have done lots of work to collate those, but we do not have a system for raising awareness of significant accidents or events that happen in TA. You cannot do any triangulation. You cannot say, "This is the risk factor that is the most important beyond costs." The lack of data prevents any further scrutiny of what is going on, because you just cannot find out.

Q192 **Mr Gagan Mohindra:** Do you think that is the reason why it has not happened to date?

Dr Neilson: There are lots of reasons why it has not happened to date. I think this Government have been more interested in TA than the previous Government—I will say that. They have been more curious. Data is difficult for organisations to collect and handle and then triangulate, so there is the mechanics of it, but that should not be a barrier, particularly in the modern world.

There has been a reluctance to see. It is almost like if we lift the stone up, what will we find under it? I would encourage us to just look and find. I think the families and the individuals who are coming out of the system are repeatedly telling us the same stories. There is truth and merit in that, but the data does not back it up. I would encourage some really good data.

The other thing is that you cannot correlate the performance of different areas against anything. There are no performance indicators apart from cost or length of stay, and even that is not collected well enough to be able to scrutinise it. At the moment, you really have a lack of transparency of what is going on.

Joe Lane: One specific thing on data that the Children's Commissioner is concerned about is this potential issue of council-owned B&Bs or temporary accommodation, which to our best understanding at the moment is just missing from the data. When we collect data on the number of children living in B&Bs and unlawful B&Bs, that includes commissioned facilities, with shared facilities, but not if that is owned by the council. That is an explicit data gap that we are concerned about. We have a live data request with local authorities at the moment to tell what we think will be the first story of how many children are living in that accommodation. We are urging the Government to say, "We will collect that and add that to the statistics in particular," so that it does not act as an unintended consequence that we are moving children out of privately owned B&Bs and into B&Bs owned by local authorities.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Thinking about data more generally, I would think of not as, “Why don’t we know this data about a poorly functioning and important market?”; it is about why we are not collecting data about a public service, albeit a public service that we wish did not exist. This is Government money, and from an accounting perspective we are spending money on something we do not know about. It would be like not knowing where our schools are. A shift in mindset in thinking about this as a public service is important.

One opportunity, I guess—and it is positive to see in the strategy—is that there was mention of the single unique identifier for children. The Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, this important bit of legislation, should create this unique identifier, and then there should be measures attached to that in the strategy around asking or telling local authorities to inform schools, GPs and so on. That should lead to better data sharing in terms of service provision for children and a better understanding of things. When a child falls out of a window, which is surprisingly common, and suffers severe injuries, that can be linked to them living in temporary accommodation. At a national level, it might potentially link to a provider of temporary accommodation, and we can do something about that.

There is lots and lots of work to be done to make sure it is an adequate system. Anybody who has worked in a public service knows that, at the moment, if a local authority just throws lots of information at schools and the NHS, that is not going to lead to a brilliant service. There is an important piece of work, which is about how we can make the most of that and make sure we are making the best of it in terms of public service delivery, so that when we know that information about a child we are responding to that and helping them, and we are collating at a national level to do some of this. Let’s tell the story more clearly about the problems we have in areas like this.

Q193 Mr Gagan Mohindra: Christa, do you want to formally introduce yourself? The first question I asked was about how you would describe the current state of temporary accommodation in England.

Christa Maciver: Thank you for having me. I am Christa Maciver, the director of campaigns and social change from Justlife Foundation. Apologies for being late; my train was an hour late from Manchester.

In terms of the conditions and what we see as the prevalence of the poor conditions in temporary accommodation, I think they are probably far more prevalent than we are aware of. On the poor standards in temporary accommodation, do we know the scale of the problem? How do we understand what we can do to solve it? It is really hard to know the full scale of the problem.

Like Laura was saying, we have a lot of anecdotal stories from individuals who have gone through temporary accommodation. A lot of them are often attributed to B&B accommodation, but I would say that probably the poor conditions are more widespread than just in B&B accommodation. We need to be careful not just to assume that because



somebody is in temporary accommodation and it is not B&B, the conditions are not of a detriment to their mental and physical health.

Some of that is based on some data that we have gathered through our temporary accommodation action groups, which are bodies that meet in nine different local authority areas in England. Some 81% of people who lived in temporary accommodation all said that their accommodation was of poor quality, and that poor conditions were prevalent or very prevalent in their accommodation. A lot of the issues are around damp and mould, overcrowding, infestations, and it being unsecure accommodation. We get stuff around not having locks on their doors. I am sure you have heard about all these things already.

We are also talking about data. There is not publicly available data on what conditions there are. A lot of that is because we don't have to record it when we put people in temporary accommodation. There does need to be a suitability assessment, according to the guidance. I think the pressures are so high right now that I do not know how much that is actually happening—whether the housing people are going into is being checked or not beforehand.

We often hear that because pressures are so high, even if somebody has some form of disability or mobility issues, it is assumed that we can put them somewhere where there is lack of accessibility in the room because it is just temporary. But we know that these things are not temporary any more. We have average stays of over two years in a lot of areas now.

Part of the problem we are also seeing—and we agree with what Joe was saying—is that temporary accommodation is a safety net. It is something that is prescribed in law here in this country that we do not have in a lot of other countries, and that is something that we could be proud of; however, not at the scale that it is being used at right now.

Q194 Chair: Thank you very much, Christa. I think one of the issues—we will be talking to local authority colleagues later—is around the guidance that local authorities have. We know that guidance is issued to local authorities under the Housing Act 1996 in terms of the conditions of their temporary accommodation. Do any of you feel that the current guidance is strong enough? Is there a lot more that local authorities should be doing in terms of strengthening the state of their temporary accommodation?

Matt Downie: Similar to the issues around unsupported exempt accommodation that this Committee has looked into a lot, there is a really difficult thing to say, which is that local authorities are both reliant on and have a problem with bad-quality temporary accommodation and exempt accommodation. They are in a sort of devil's situation where they have no choice but to do something to discharge homelessness duties and to use what they possibly can.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

It is good that the Government want to do something about enforcing the law around longer stays in bed and breakfasts, or want to do something about poor conditions in temporary accommodation, but these things are about enforcing the things that are already written. The actual underlying issue is that we are at risk of talking about making better something that should not exist anywhere near the scale that it does, rather than looking at the causes of why that situation is there to start with, and thinking about a situation where people can leave homelessness behind in housing rather than in alternative forms of homelessness.

I totally do think the guidance should be stronger. I think it should not be guidance: it should be statutory guidance. We should be much tighter on these things. The game of where to put people when there is no housing is almost a game of whack-a-mole. If you clamp down on one thing, something else will pop up.

Dr Neilson: I do not think the guidance is strong enough. It is virtually unenforceable, if we are being honest. I think the system knows that and I have definitely had that fed back to me in specific cases where they go, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" The guidance needs to be much more around what is it to actually live—the five basics campaign of how you live in a modern world now. You do need wi-fi. All our public services and benefits and stuff now rely on that, so we cannot be providing temporary accommodation without wi-fi. You need somewhere to be able to wash your clothes. You need to be able to cook. You need to be able to go to the bathroom safely. You need safety, and for women and girls particularly they need safety from sexual predators and grooming and all that stuff. They need locks on their doors. Some of this is really basic. The guidance needs to enforce the fact that the basics are important.

The other thing is that the guidance should probably—it is slightly different from physical safety, but what is the risk stratification of harm from being in TA? That does vary from situation to situation. We know that pregnant women are particularly at risk of harm in TA. They are very vulnerable. Their children are much more likely to be born with complications and they probably very likely have a higher risk of stillbirth and late miscarriage. We know about that.

We know that children with neurodiversity needs struggle in TA. We know that children who have physical needs where you cannot accommodate them struggle. If you can't move your wheelchair around, you are basically bedbound. If you rely on a hoist and that hoist does not come with you, you cannot have a shower. I saw a child in A&E who was living in TA, who relied on a hoist, and who was put into TA where they could not have the hoist. The parents then tried to move the child and shower them and it all went completely wrong, as predicted, and he had fractured his femur. That was predictable, but there is nothing in the guidance for any of that risk stratification of harm. I think the guidance should be made more practical.



Q195 **Chair:** Joe, in our report we recommended that the Government should introduce mandatory inspections for temporary accommodation, obviously mindful of the challenges that many local authorities are facing up and down the country. Do you think that would help to address the issue around the state of temporary accommodation?

Joe Lane: One of the benefits we have at the Office of the Children's Commissioner is that we look across public services, and some of the challenges we see in this space—in temporary accommodation and children living in temporary accommodation—reflect or are similar to problems we see in other services.

An issue that the Children's Commissioner is very exercised by is looked-after children living in illegal children's homes. That is a very clear statutory obligation that local authorities have. They have a sufficiency duty and they have to provide children's homes for looked-after children. Even in that instance they still are not able to always do that. That links to some of these substantive issues we are thinking about today in terms of housing markets, housing supply and being able to actually find the accommodation.

Within that, one of the big policy questions is whether we know how to make things happen at a local authority level. If we are saying this is going to be the responsibility of a local authority, whether that is about looked-after children, care leavers, victims of domestic abuse or children in temporary accommodation, do we know the levers we can pull and can we actually make things happen at the end of that? One of the things we would say in lots of those spaces is that more proactive market management is helpful.

It almost never works when a local authority says, "We need to provide something, and the way we're going to do that is to take an individual"—I am oversimplifying a bit here—"and then we are going to look at the market and say, 'Is the provision for we need that person there?'" Almost always the answer is no. What does work is where a local authority says, "I have a duty to provide emergency temporary accommodation, I have a duty to provide accommodation for looked-after children, and we're going to take a proactive approach." That could be owning it themselves, buying it, building it, being proactive in making sure the conditions in individual housing settings are adequate, registering and licensing, or about how they do the commissioning process around procuring temporary accommodation. Yes, I guess we would give our support to any mechanisms that encourage or enable local authorities to do some of that proactive market management.

Q196 **Chair:** Christa, we have a situation where many councils are frankly unaware of the state of their temporary accommodation. How do you think we can find routes to help to find redress for people who are having to stay in that accommodation, especially some of the families who are stuck in that accommodation?



Christa Maciver: There are two things here. There is better reporting mechanisms for families that are a lot clearer. What you find right now is that when someone is placed in temporary accommodation, the question of who is in charge of the maintenance of that accommodation keeps coming up. If it is a social landlord that is managing it on behalf of the local authority, but they are leasing private housing, that can be complicated. Is it the private landlord that has to do it? Is it the local authority? Often, people are being passed from pillar to post. Clear mechanisms for being able to report things would be helpful.

On the conversation about proactive inspections, I say this because I know there is very little resource, but what if there was more resource? I have seen in the past experiences where, when you proactively inspect places without somebody having to report it, you do see an improvement in standards. What we used to see was that when people reported it, if they were worried about retaliatory evictions from landlords, they would not want to say what room they were in, even if it was in their room that was the problem. You have to figure out how inspections are going to happen, and how we are going to find where the poor-quality conditions are. I think proactive inspections would be helpful, but there just is not the resource for them right now.

Matt Downie: I want to be positive for a second and say that we run a scheme to help local authorities specifically to tackle elements of homelessness in their areas for particular cohorts they are worried about. It is a scheme called Built for Zero, where we work on live data to find out the real needs of every person in that cohort, what their journey to homelessness has been and what a different solution might be.

We worked for over a year, up to September last year, with Calderdale Council in Yorkshire on children and families in temporary accommodation bed and breakfasts, and they achieved a reduction of 34% of families in temporary bed and breakfast accommodation over that period of time, a 37% reduction in children in those circumstances, and a big chunk of savings to their own budget. It is worth saying that all we did was facilitate good local authority staff making decisions they wanted to make with a bit of extra capacity, and a bit of fresh thinking on, "Let's think again about who these people are. Let's go back to them and find out what their real circumstances were and revisit why the original homelessness application was treated in this way." Often, you find that people had been put on waiting lists when they were more than happy to have some other resolution than to wait for 20 years for some social housing, and so on.

I raise it because I certainly do agree that without additional new burdens funding and all the regulation requirements the local authorities are going to have more of, that is an issue, but you can install innovative thinking, energy and a sense of agency back to local councils that are up for it.



Dr Neilson: There are providers who want to do a good job. We have done a project where we have worked with providers who are going to be providing TA for a long time, and they have been, so it is now their core business. We worked with them about what a gold standard would look like in their property, how they get there, and what it looks like to have a psychologically safe environment, or a play area. Over years they did do it. I think you can drive up standards that way as well.

I have encouraged our local authorities to then almost not use the places that have not engaged in that improvement programme. You can tackle it both ways. There are good people trying to provide TA for good reasons, as well as people with not such good reasons. It is not all the same.

Q197 **Andrew Lewin:** Matt, I thought your Built for Zero campaign was really compelling. Would you be willing to write to the Committee with a few more details of that project, what worked, and how you are looking to expand it? That is exactly the role of the Committee: looking at good local best practice and how we can play a part in understanding it, but amplifying it nationally as well.

Matt Downie: Yes, I would love to send a full briefing. It is not just that area and that issue. We do it with prison leavers, rough sleepers, a whole range of issues and local authorities, and it is a model that has been proven in different jurisdictions around the world. I am more than happy to.

Q198 **Maya Ellis:** It is really good to hear, Matt and Laura, some of those stories of best practice. I completely agree that we need to pull that out.

We hosted a roundtable before Christmas, which I convened with families in temporary accommodation. What you all said at the beginning absolutely came through—that all these families start with stories of how they are getting on and what their children are doing in school, and then you start to unpick some of those stories underneath it. It takes my breath away every time I speak about it.

My question is about the next stage—things such as the decent homes standard and Awaab's law. I am interested in how you see that is going to help. I guess I have to frame that in the context of whether, as you have touched on, if we cannot implement existing requirements and legislation, you see the new plans making a difference. Are they going to drag us in the right direction? I am interested in your thoughts on how that legislation looks and the gaps in it, but also how we realistically get there without just papering over the fact that all these experiences are happening now and we almost do not seem to take them seriously enough.

Christa Maciver: Unless we are able to make those changes alongside other bigger systemic changes that the Government did speak about in their strategy, those things will not happen fast enough. We do not have enough housing, so that is where part of the problem is. I almost feel like



HOUSE OF COMMONS

temporary accommodation is becoming our new social housing, because we just do not have enough social housing.

I do think, however, that we need better standards in TA. We just need to make those changes and then we need to find a way to work together to get there. Just like we are trying to figure out ways that we can help local authorities do that locally, some of it is going to have to be collectively working together. There is not going to be enough resource and there is not going to be enough opportunity to do it right now because it is so complex. Temporary accommodation sits within social housing and the private rented sector, so it is already covered by the Regulator of Social Housing. It is then about thinking about how you regulate the other ones that are not in social housing.

It is already complex, so we need consistent universal rules for everything that is used as temporary accommodation. Once we set those it is going to take a while to get there, and we are going to need everybody to come together to think about how we do that. It can't just be charities; it has to be local authorities—it has to be the people making those rules—because it will be hard. It is hard, which is why we have not done it so far.

Joe Lane: One of the things that was positive in the strategy was the attention paid to some of those foundational changes that need to happen so those more discrete or more specific laws can have an impact. One of those that is important, I think, is local authority funding settlements—ensuring local authorities have funding security over a long period of time—but then also that you have that right balance of flexibility in terms of what they can spend, you are ringfencing and you are attaching money to programmes that are particularly important.

There is something in this space that is a careful balancing act for central Government to say, "It's going to look different in different local authorities and we do not want to prescribe." For temporary accommodation that is particularly true—the variability is massive—but equally local authorities have so much to do, and it is so vital that we give some level of direction to say that some of the grant funding local authorities are getting does need to be spent. There is that work on making sure we are getting an element of that spending on the preventive work and trying to keep children out of temporary accommodation, as well as that investment in providing and procuring the housing supply that we need.

Dr Neilson: I think we can take improvement learnings from other bits of the public sector. I come from a more health background, and the long game of improvement is about milestones along the way and measured points. Sometimes this space feels a bit like, "Oh, it's so difficult that we cannot try," or, "There isn't a panacea for this year so we'll just wait."

Joe's point about market planning is really important. We know that where local authorities work collectively, regionally or at metro mayor



level you can get better outcomes, because we move families across borders all the time. There needs to be co-ordination, there needs to be planning, and there needs to be a realistic view of what temporary accommodation we are going to need, because it is not going to go down quickly. Pretending that next year it is going to be different is not grown up, so we need to do some planning.

Then I think we do need to hold what is the bottom. We should not be scared to hold the bottom. If we hold those minimum standards well, we will have less consequences in other bits of the public sector. I think it is possible.

Matt Downie: Not to repeat anything, but I think the next panel will definitely tell you about the enormous and growing number of requirements for local authorities to stick to different standards. That is definitely true. I am worried that the 10-year wait for the decent homes standard to come into force in private and social homes is an awful long time.

Chair: We have definitely relayed that to the Minister.

Matt Downie: The one thing I would say is that in the preparation for the Government's strategy the sector was asked to do a lot of work with local authorities and others about some of the principles for that. Something really positive emerged from the local authority discussions. People were saying, "Localism can go so far. We're up for accountability and consistency of ambition here, in terms of minimum housing standards," but also saying that the future is not inevitably temporary accommodation.

If you look at local authorities in Wales and Scotland, they have both recently been asked by their Governments to produce a rapid rehousing transition plan. Over a period of years, how will you wean yourself off temporary and emergency accommodation and towards mainstream housing for everyone? What does that mean for housing supply? What does it mean for standards in TA, and for caseworking? Those things are real disciplines that are out there that England can learn from, and benefit from, and that helps us to imagine a scenario where we are not just thinking about an ever-decreasing emergency situation.

Chair: I think it is unsustainable at the moment in terms of seeing boroughs spend so much on TA. We are at the risk—someone mentioned it earlier—that TA is going to be accepted as social housing. We cannot find ourselves in that situation, so it would be good to see what other devolved authorities are doing so that we can share that. That would be helpful.

Q199 **Maya Ellis:** Laura, you framed that in a compelling and simple but focused way, saying there is a floor and there are the staged approaches. You are absolutely right, Christa, that it cannot just be down to charities. I am interested to hear from the panel, or from you, Laura, what is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

missing from what the Government are currently doing. What are some of the simple things that you don't see that could help everyone—in your organisations and in local authorities—to get to that stage of agreeing a floor and the next stages over the next few years?

Dr Neilson: If I take something simple like wi-fi, I keep hearing all these wonderful pilots where people are given SIM cards. It is all very complicated, the charities are involved, there is lots of admin and people have to ask for it. Why do we not just put wi-fi in buildings? It would be much more cost-effective. It would be there—something as simple as that.

If you are housing people in temporary accommodation and you have 50 units, you need four washing machines. There has to be a space for washing machines. If you going to have children living in TA for more than six weeks, you need somewhere for them to learn to walk. You need a playroom. What you are saying to the market is that you can have six months a year to get there, but if the standard is there, most of the landlords will do it because it is their core business. The only other route they can go down for their property is to go with the Home Office, which is a whole different thing.

I agree that if we have the same standards across public-funded accommodation, and that was a minimum, and those standards were held across the Home Office, across temporary accommodation, across the baseline social housing, then it is less complicated for councils, local authorities and landlords to keep up with all this stuff. Sometimes the more tricky bits are very long-standing damp issues and things like that, but some of the real basics that people say they need to make their lives bearable and workable are not that difficult and not that expensive.

Christa Maciver: For a lot of the issues, there are sometimes place-based solutions that can happen while we are waiting for the longer-term changes to happen. What we have seen in areas where we have temporary accommodation action groups, where we bring together the local authority, landlords, residents and charities to talk about the biggest problems and how we address them together, is that often it is just about—it sounds so simple—talking to each other.

There are so many areas where, as a charity, we see the poor impact on people, so we challenge local authorities. We still have this “us and them” experience, and then local authorities don't always want to work with us. That is not true everywhere, but in some places that is still the case. In those areas where we have had temporary accommodation action groups, we have seen that when the communication is improved, and when the information sharing is improved, people's experiences improve, because we are hearing what the problems are more often, and it can make a difference. It also helps people to understand where they are in their journey. It is so complicated that often they do not understand what it means where they are. There is not a lot of information out there for people.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q200 Mr Forster: In my Woking constituency I have over 50 households in B&B at the moment, and I know it will be about the same for some of the other Members, or maybe worse. The Government set a target to eliminate the unlawful use of B&B accommodation for households with children by the end of this Parliament. Do you think that target is achievable? What steps do you expect local authorities will need to take to avoid households with children going into B&B accommodation for six weeks or more?

Dr Neilson: It is definitely achievable. It is challenging, but I think it is achievable and we need to achieve it. We have a generation of kids living in bed and breakfasts for long periods of time, and that should be unacceptable socially.

It is about the stuff we have probably already talked about—planning, doing some modelling well, looking at processes. From our experience, some of the families who get caught in TA for more than six weeks have—this reflects what Joe was saying—issues that the system has not really thought about ahead of time, and therefore it panics. In particular, we do not have enough housing for people with disabilities full stop, but we also do not have any routes for people with disabilities to come out of TA very easily. Families with mixed households, where you have merged households and lots of children, or you have more than two or three children, stay in TA a long time. Doing some modelling about who is actually blocking the system, why they are staying there a long time and working routes out—that research is very doable—will massively help local authorities.

The other thing is that I would encourage this to be held at a local authority level, at really senior level. We have seen areas around the country where somebody very senior in the local authority has taken responsibility and chaired an action meeting or chaired some committee regularly every fortnight, and things move and things improve. Where it is delegated to somebody with less authority, it is hidden a bit and it is all over here, we do not see the traction. Some of this is about ambition, some of this is about leadership, and some of this is about practical planning, but it is possible.

Christa Maciver: I will quickly add that B&Bs need to be part of a bigger plan, because what we have also seen, and you can see in some of the statistics, is that the B&B numbers have gone down, which has been amazing, but out-of-area placements have gone up by almost the exact same amount. I think the difference is about 400 households.

What we have seen in our research is that the choice between staying in a B&B or being placed out of household comes down to: are you connected to your support networks? If you are trying to access certain support that your local authority provides, then if you are out of area you are not on those mental health waiting lists or SEND waiting lists.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We do need to reduce B&Bs. We need it as part of the other plan because of the knock-on effects. There could be unintended consequences where people are still not accessing the right support they need because a lot of areas are choosing out of area over B&B. Those have their own consequences as well.

Matt Downie: It is totally doable, certainly when it is 50 households. I know of local authorities with many more than that. I completely echo what Christa said.

To take it up a level, the question to any local authority is: do you know how much stock, and of what type, you need to stop the scenario you have now and to prevent it in future? Normally that comes down to: do you actually know how many one-bedrooms or how large a family housing you need, and do you have a plan for it?

If the Housing Minister were here, I would say to him: "Is your housing plan that is coming through going to be a plan to have the housing to get people out of homelessness and temporary accommodation? Or is it simply a plan to hit a number?" The difference between those things is not just semantics; it really matters, because the funding is drawn down for the things that are based on real local need. Any local authority can get their B&B numbers down; they can call things that are a bit like B&B something else or they can do it in a way that is to do with sustainable, long-term solutions.

Joe Lane: I completely echo what everyone says. The only thing I would add is that it feels achievable, even at a national level. Some things nationally you look at and think, "What on earth are we going to do about that? It's so big, it's so global, and there are so many intractables." This is a conceivable amount of people, both nationally and at a constituency level, that we can do something about.

The Children's Commissioner is concerned about this category of council-owned B&Bs, so I really want that point to be captured. As an office, we will tell the story of those unintended consequences of where children are officially not in B&Bs but they are being picked up elsewhere. We will make sure that we try to hold the Government to account with yourselves and make sure that that is being captured. But this absolutely has to be thought of as achievable.

Q201 **Andrew Lewin:** We have just touched on the importance of new supply, and my question relates to that. The Government in their homelessness strategy say: "We cannot improve the quality of temporary accommodation without also increasing supply." Then they reference the local authority housing fund, which enables councils to acquire homes. The latest funding round is £950 million. I am interested in your reflections. Are you starting to see councils adopt acquisition strategies? Are you starting to see results? Is this something that you think needs to be an important part of the piece?



Christa Maciver: For me, the short answer is yes. We are seeing different things come through—different plans of local authorities saying we have placed people out of area but we are trying to now build or acquire new temporary accommodation to bring people back in area. Yes, I do think that is happening. There is a cautionary tale around whether, if it is not connected into some wider strategy around housing, we are building or acquiring housing that is just suitable for temporary accommodation. Ideally, we will not need that much temporary accommodation for a long time. Could that housing be eventually used as social housing? Are we planning for dealing with a crisis that we are in now, but not creating housing that we are going to have to figure out how to deal with at some point in the long term anyway?

Yes, it is coming through. I think sometimes the solutions do seem like stopgap, shorter-term solutions. That is not everywhere, but I am hearing about modular housing. I am not an expert in modular housing, but how long will that last? There is something important about it being connected into a wider housing strategy in the country, and around making sure that we are creating the right housing that we can use long term. Temporary accommodation often does not have the storage facilities that people need. They are built to a lesser standard than space standards. So I think, "Yes, but."

Joe Lane: The only caution against that is that there are always structural challenges. It is really important that when we have specific challenges we do not lay them at the foot of, "We need our child poverty strategy to work, we need our growth strategy to work, and we need our labour market strategy to work to have an impact on anything else." There has to be prioritisation, and discrete areas within which we can try to make things happen, but for everything else that is going on in the country and the economy.

We see massive variation between areas, and even within areas with similar fundamentals. A good example would be the way local authorities accommodate children who present as needing accommodation. When 16 and 17-year-olds say, "I have nowhere to live," in some local authorities all those children are accommodated, as they should be, as looked-after children. The local authority will find them a looked-after child place, supported accommodation, and give them the support that they need as a looked-after child, as a 16 and 17-year-old. In other local authorities it is none. They are all accommodated as homeless young people and then access none of that support that they should get as looked-after children.

Those local authorities will be facing similar fundamentals in terms of supply, housing pressures, cost pressures and funding pressures. It goes back to that point around senior level accountability and what we do. Yes, we want to increase supply, and yes, the big strategies matter, but we also need to do the medium-sized stuff while we pay attention to the big stuff.



Matt Downie: I suppose the honest answer is that the funding that is in the strategy for local authorities to do something about coping with the flow is a good thing, but it does not tackle the structural issues behind it. We are about to start out in our journey of being a housing provider for the first time in 60 years, because we cannot rely on housing from anywhere else any more, at the sharpest end.

It is just important to say that if the acknowledgement is we are in a dreadful situation where we cannot find the housing for people, and local authorities themselves are really struggling with that, you would pull every lever. You would say, "What can we do about the TA subsidy gap and local housing allowance?" You would require allocations of homeless households into the social housing that we already have, instead of having the system we have now. You would pull every lever. You would do something about empty homes—this, that and the other. I feel that if that was the energy we came at the situation with, and we said, "Look, the children in TA is the alarm bell that finally shifts the dial," you would say, "What are all the levers we could pull?" Certainly, there are many things in the strategy that are welcome but it is not a strategy to pull every lever of government to sort this out.

Chair: Thank you very much. You have given us some really interesting areas that we can definitely follow up on with Ministers and with our next panel with the local authorities.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Stephen Philpott, Councillor Grace Williams, Paul Kitson and Joseph Donohue.

Q202 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the second panel for our Committee inquiry on housing conditions in England, looking at temporary accommodation. Will colleagues on the panel please introduce themselves?

Joseph Donohue: Good morning, colleagues. I am Joe Donohue, the strategic lead for homelessness and migration at Greater Manchester Combined Authority.

Stephen Philpott: Good morning. I am Stephen Philpott, the director for housing solutions and support at Birmingham City Council.

Councillor Williams: Good morning. I am Councillor Grace Williams, the housing lead for London Councils and council leader in Waltham Forest.

Paul Kitson: Good morning. I am Paul Kitson, corporate director for inclusive economy, housing and culture at the London Borough of Newham.

Q203 **Chair:** Thank you for coming before the Committee this morning. We know about the challenges that local authorities are facing right across England, and TA continues to be a big challenge for many local



HOUSE OF COMMONS

authorities. For some time people thought it was just an isolated issue in London, but we learned that in 2024-25 the combined authorities across Greater Manchester spent £77.5 million on TA. Could each of you describe succinctly the crisis you are seeing in temporary accommodation and what that is causing your local authority?

Paul Kitson: Thank you for the question. Newham is facing probably the sharpest homelessness crisis in London and in the country. We currently have about 7,500 households in temporary accommodation, which is causing great distress to those 7,500 households and great financial challenge to the local authority.

The cost to local authority last year was around about £180 million gross, but net after subsidy about £80 million. We are grappling with one of the sharpest challenges in the country. However, the majority of our households are in self-contained accommodation. We have pretty much removed the need for B&B accommodation. We can talk about the details later on. We currently have eight households with families that are in excess of the six-week statutory limit, and 25 households in total in B&B at the moment.

Largely, we have people in self-contained accommodation through the private sector, or in accommodation that is council-owned housing stock or properties that we have built or acquired. We had a big focus over the past three years on improving the overall quality of the temporary accommodation, on improving the rates of prevention, which accords clearly with the homelessness plan, and on increasing the supply of good-quality new accommodation. Now we are turning our attention to making sure that we are doing all that plus ensuring that we are settling people from TA into long-term settled accommodation across the coming period.

Councillor Williams: To build on what Paul said about Newham, I think everyone knows that in London the housing emergency is the most acute. The point made in the previous panel about it being a normalised crisis or emergency definitely holds.

In London we have 210,000 families in temporary accommodation, which equates to one in 21 children in a classroom. Over the last year, London councils have been spending £5.5 million a day. To link back to Paul's point about the impact on councils' ability to do anything else, the other thing that is really important is that because of the TA subsidy gap, which I hope we will get into in more detail—we do not get as much money to provide temporary accommodation—we have a £740 million overspend across London. Newham's is the most acute. If you look at a borough like Waltham Forest, about half of our overspend is from TA—about £20 million. What that means is that boroughs like Newham, Waltham Forest and half of London boroughs will need to seek exceptional financial support for something that has become a very normal part of the challenge we are facing.

Q204 **Chair:** Do you think the national plan to end homelessness is going to



address some of the challenges you have just outlined?

Councillor Williams: I really welcome the homelessness strategy because it is focusing on the point that it is a system challenge, which has fundamental links to child poverty, jobs, as well as housing. I think it is a good start. It has some good things in it about how we set the standard, what improved regulation might look like, and how we focus on child poverty, but the last witness put it well: we need to use all levers we have. The basic issue for councils, who see this as their No. 1 challenge and completely want to focus on this, is that unless we have the right funding to build new homes, and unless we can address this problem of the TA subsidy, we will not be able to fundamentally change the system.

Q205 **Chair:** Many residents—I know this is an issue right across many councils—stuck in a TA would ask why councils should be allowed to build new homes when they cannot keep up with the rate of homes they currently have, when they do not have an adequate list of some of their homes, and when they are not up to date with some of the repairs and maintenance needed in some of their homes. What would you say to those residents?

Councillor Williams: I completely accept that there is more that we have to do. We have to be held to account and the Government need to be held to account for the work we are doing to address this emergency. I think the steps the Government have taken, and the last Government, towards better regulation on all kinds of things, including Awaab's law and the regulation of social homes, is vital.

In London Councils we have been working together for many years on something called Setting the Standard, which focuses on how we can remove the highest-risk properties. We have been able to improve 700 homes and, more importantly, take out 90% of the repeat offender properties. We do need to do more on regulation and data. That obviously does need investment as well.

The point is that unless we address the supply of affordable homes—I don't blame residents for being sceptical about the failure of Governments to address this over the last 50 years—then we cannot change the system. We have to do both. The reason why councils place families in B&Bs, outside London or in temporary accommodation is because we do not have enough homes.

Stephen Philpott: At Birmingham it feels like I am managing a medium-sized housing association of stock. It would be wonderful if it was all mine and I could manage it all very directly, but I am managing it with a whole range of outfits, from big providers through to almost individual landlords, plus my own stock as well. That challenge of consistency, that challenge of having assurance that I am safe that we are managing the risk, is massive.



We are a landlord of 58,000. We can do one thing there: we can manage our own stock. But when it comes to managing that whole proliferation of different types, different landlords, different arrangements, different contracts, it becomes quite stressful and quite challenging for the authority to have that assurance, that financial overview of it, and make sure we are making the best use of that stock as well. Somebody mentioned whack-a-mole earlier and it feels like that sometimes in that portfolio, seeking to meet the need, and trying to get ahead of it rather than being reactive to the need that is coming through.

In terms of numbers, Birmingham has about 5,500 households in temporary accommodation, almost all being families. That is about 11,000 children. We are the local authority with the largest number of children in bed and breakfasts over six weeks. We have seen that come down: 12 months ago it was about 700, and it is around about 470 today. We are on target to hit the zero that we had set out with our colleagues at MHCLG to reduce it to, but it is not going to be a quick run. It is step by step. It is hard-earned miles every week that we look at—

Chair: What is the deadline to hit that?

Stephen Philpott: July 2027. When I look at the picture and we think about how much we are going to put into temporary accommodation and concentrate on it—which I welcome, because it has been missed—I also have to think about the prevention and the outcomes in terms of discharge of duty. I have limited resources, and if we want to increase standards, do more inspections and spend more time on the quality of what is in the middle of the sandwich—the TA—I cannot have prevention suffer, because then more people end up in TA. I have to get the discharge of duty, I have to get people moved on at the same time, so it is that balance that I have to juggle with my set resources as they stand at the moment.

Q206 **Chair:** With your set resources, are you carrying out your basic statutory duties now?

Stephen Philpott: In terms of standards, yes. About half of our temporary accommodation is our own housing stock, so we are able to manage that in line with our own housing stock. We are investing large amounts of money in things like decency as far as that is concerned. In terms of a hotel we would use, we will inspect that every quarter and use the HHSRS standards as far as that is concerned. We will inspect every property before we let it.

What becomes harder is whether you can keep up with those. For instance, I lease 1,200 properties from private landlords. Do I have the capacity to go out every quarter and inspect each one of those? No, I do not. It would take an additional army of staff to be able to do that well. That is where those hard choices come in. No, I do not have a dashboard that gives me full assurance across the whole range of temporary accommodation.



Joseph Donohue: I should start by recognising that combined authorities have a curious place in this policy area. Greater Manchester has done a huge amount of work on homelessness and rough sleeping over the course of the last seven or eight years. Over the last two years, our focus has shifted on the temporary accommodation emergency that we find ourselves in. That is one of rapidly increasing pressure and demands on our local authorities. As we do not hold the statutory duty under the Housing Act or Homeless Reduction Act, we feel that we have a unique opportunity to foster some creativity and collaboration and perhaps surface some of the ideas that you heard about in the first panel.

The position is as stark in Greater Manchester as many areas of the country. Tonight we will have around 6,000 households in temporary accommodation across the region, with about 8,500 children—a number that seems to go up by between 500 and 1,000 every quarter. What is striking about the crisis we find ourselves in is the rapidity of the change over the course of the last five years.

All that pressure, as the Chair mentioned, is incredibly expensive. Some of the data work that my colleagues have brought to bear on temporary accommodation placements and spend has been really informative in terms of that £77.5 million growth spend on temporary accommodation across Greater Manchester, but there is also some real intelligence on the placement and households that sit beneath that, and the subsidy loss that we incur as a result of the prevailing housing benefit guidance.

Last year, local authorities were able to recoup 42% of £75 million spend. This year, local authorities were only able to recoup 37% of £77.5 million spend. The growth spend is going up; the recovery rate is going down. That makes it hard to do the prevention work that we want to do across the whole of Greater Manchester, as more and more resources are sucked up into crisis. There have been some good green shoots in recent years, particularly with respect to bed and breakfast reductions and reductions in families in B&B, with Manchester being a good example of where progress can be made.

We also know that the challenges we have on temporary accommodation are not just an issue of demand; they are also an issue of throughput and length of stay. In our latest analysis, we found that the overall length of stay for placements into temporary accommodation across Greater Manchester increased by 11%. Although pressures are notably significantly higher than they were years ago, the ability to move people through temporary accommodation and into social and private housing is being inhibited by a lack of supply of social housing and freezes to the local housing allowance rates over the course of the last few years.

Q207 **Mr Lee Dillon:** If temporary accommodation is increasing and you are not using B&Bs, you only have so many properties to be able to source from. Are you finding that you are having to source higher-quality properties to house people in because you have already used all the low-



hanging fruit, so to speak?

Joseph Donohue: That is a very good question. This is a difficult issue to tackle: how do you get the right procurement? How do you procure the right properties in the right places for the right households? We are about to embark on a programme of bringing empty homes back into use for the purpose of providing settled and temporary accommodation for households who would otherwise be in a bed and breakfast. One of the potential risks of reducing bed and breakfast use and procuring more dispersed accommodation, either nightly paid or leased, is that we end up cannibalising housing supply in other bits of the market that could be going to meet a form of housing need, be that private sector or social housing.

There is a risk that, in driving behaviours that promote the procurement of more dispersed housing, we end up being part of the cause of the problem we are trying to solve. The work we are doing on empty homes is seeking to unlock assets that are not currently on the market and not meeting a housing need. We are building on good precedent. Colleagues in boroughs like Wigan, Rochdale and, more recently, Manchester have invested in empty homes, offices and capacity to get properties online that are not currently available to them. It is slow work, but we think it can provide a supply line that is much better than B&B and does not create other downstream effects.

Q208 **Andrew Cooper:** Over the course of this inquiry, we have heard directly from people who have experienced temporary accommodation themselves, and some of them are still in it. Some of them have given evidence on being moved a long way out of their home borough, which has caused problems for their children accessing education. We have heard a lot of stories around things like damp and mould, infestations, lack of locks on doors and various hazards in properties they have been put up in.

As we heard earlier, local authorities have a duty under the Housing Act to assess the suitability of the accommodation they are placing people in. Councillor Williams, how effectively are the local authorities that you work with discharging the duty to ensure the suitability of properties used for temporary accommodation? Can you give us some examples in London?

Councillor Williams: First, in the last panel and in your question, the issue of out of borough placements came up. In general, to provide reassurance on that, London councils only place people out of borough as a last resort. It is important to say that only 15% of placements are out of London. Of those, 85% are in neighbouring counties. We all want to make sure that we can keep our families close to their support networks.

The framework on suitable accommodation is good. You heard earlier from the panel and other witnesses that a lot of the regulation that is there is good. It is about enforcing it and how we focus on it in systems leadership. London boroughs conform, as far as they can, to suitable



accommodation. If they are found to not be meeting that duty, they will need to provide alternative accommodation. There is an incentive for local authorities to do that, which they take incredibly seriously.

The broader issue is that the system now encourages low-quality accommodation because local authorities do not have the buying power to be able to provide the very best-quality accommodation. That is a big issue. We have heard that the local authority housing fund is beginning to address that with innovation, but it is not touching the sides in terms of our ability to procure that better and higher-quality accommodation.

Q209 Andrew Cooper: Are there any specific examples of good practice where any of the London councils are proactively looking at this accommodation to make sure that it is suitable?

Councillor Williams: Yes. I mentioned the Setting the Standard framework. To be clear, that is London Councils working with London boroughs to examine and inspect high-risk accommodation and take that out of the market. That is quite important. If I turn to my own borough, as we have heard from others, we do not place families in B&Bs for over six weeks. We have done that by changing the accommodation that we are procuring. We have been able to turn to longer-lease accommodation and refit some accommodation so that it meets the support standards we heard about earlier, including on wi-fi, laundry, cooking. We can only do that for a small amount of our accommodations.

There is good practice all over London and more widely, but it is piecemeal. The important thing is that the way we can most effect our ability to procure suitable accommodation is to have the funds to procure the higher-quality, suitable accommodation.

Q210 Andrew Cooper: Joseph, what about for the Greater Manchester authorities that make up the GMCA?

Joseph Donohue: Stephen's characterisation of the resource challenges in proactive inspection were well put in terms of your ability to manage a growing portfolio of stock. I will touch on the out-of-area aspect of all this. We are trying to be more collaborative across our own constituent boroughs to try to make sure that placements are being made across Greater Manchester boroughs in a way that is as suitable as possible and gives due regard to the welfare and wellbeing of the family and the education of any children within that household. We have an agreed out-of-borough protocol that sets out the expectations of one another, which we have had for the first time. That has been helpful in driving behaviours.

One of the things that is interesting in some of the work that we have done on out-of-area placements has been that we now know that the entirety of Greater Manchester's temporary accommodation demand is contained within Greater Manchester. The challenge is that that does not manifest equally across different broad rental market areas and LHA



HOUSE OF COMMONS

rates. That results in councils that are experiencing the highest pressure having to place further away from their borders, despite their best efforts and good work in that arena.

Part of the suitability challenge, away from the property, is about better collaboration between local authorities on the facilities that the household needs in that area. We feel that we have made some good first steps in that direction, notwithstanding some of the housing challenges, especially as that portfolio of temporary accommodation shifts from something that is quite contained, such as B&B and family hostels, to something that is a bit more diffused.

We should also recognise that for a long period of time housing standards teams have been significantly hollowed out in terms of their resource to proactively inspect properties. There are further changes and challenges for them to respond to in the Renters' Rights Act and the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act. We recognise the challenge that our local authorities are under. We are trying to collaborate in the way that is within our gift to tackle the challenges as effectively as possible, but it is not easy.

Q211 Andrew Cooper: Stephen, what process do you have in Birmingham to ensure the safety and suitability of the properties you are using for temporary accommodation?

Stephen Philpott: Obviously, it is about the match to the household as well. We would assess suitability in terms of the household understanding their requirements and the characteristics and needs of that household. As I said earlier, we are always trying to be ahead of the curve in terms of the availability of properties. What you do not want to be doing is, on that day, trying to find a property in a vacuum. It is about having that supply chain in place. Ideally, it is our own stock and it is stock that we know well; we know the nature of it, we are managing it, some of our homeless centres where we have 24-hour staff we know intimately, and we can be all over everything that is going on.

If it is using another landlord's accommodation, any letting will always be accompanied and will always take place with an assessment of the property. In terms of temporary accommodation with a third-party landlord, we would only go ahead with the letting if it is suitable and we have checked the property based on the standards in terms of that letting. The challenge we have is about scale. If something declines with the property over time, we do become somewhat dependent on the households who tell us to make sure that we are able to hear that and are able to respond to it and make sure that we work with the landlord we are leasing from in order to do that. That is where a bit of challenge lies. In terms of suitability and having a regime of inspection, yes, both are there.

Q212 Andrew Cooper: You make an interesting point about relying on feedback from the people who have been placed in temporary



HOUSE OF COMMONS

accommodation. We have heard evidence—indeed, we have heard a bit of it today—about reprisal evictions. When we did the roundtables before Christmas, we heard one example of somebody where it was made pretty clear to her that if she did make a complaint, the landlord would complain to the council directly about her and then she would be out on her ear straight away. What processes do you have in place to guard against that, to protect the dignity of people who want to live in suitable accommodation?

Stephen Philpott: We are very up front and straightforward with people when we are placing: this is what we are placing; you are the customer in this; this landlord has a duty to supply you these services at this standard; this is the nature of the property because we, and you, are funding this to happen. It is about making sure that the customer, the citizen, is aware of their rights and opportunities.

In terms of the landlord, it is about that power ratio of who holds the cards. It is largely working with landlords that we have built up a relationship with. They are on a framework. They have gone through a process of onboarding, and rather than them feeling they are going to give this one family a hard time, they will be thinking about their portfolio with hundreds of families, potentially. They need to look at the bigger picture and make sure that they are treating us well as the procurer of their services.

I would hope that that example would not take place in our authority. Clearly, we would investigate it and look at the individual circumstances. I cannot think of an occasion where it has been a case of ending a duty or of us ending temporary accommodation based on the scenario you just described.

Q213 **Andrew Cooper:** Paul, could you answer with respect to Newham?

Paul Kitson: Similar to Joe and Stephen, we assess all our properties before we let them. We make two concessions to two agencies showing consistently higher standards of property before letting. We will assess the suitability and condition of those properties before we let them.

Something that has not been raised so far is that, in addition to that, Newham operates a selective licensing scheme for private landlords as well. We are currently in a particular five-year cycle of that selective licensing scheme and have issued about 32 licences through that rolling programme. In some cases, private landlords will be subject to the licensing requirements in one regard and, if we then use that accommodation for temporary accommodation, they would also be assessed for suitability of that property for temporary accommodation.

You have raised a really important point about complaints. I would hope that we are encouraging a transparent and accessible way that residents could complain to us. We use that feedback to improve our own performance, but also, to Stephen's point, to monitor and manage



HOUSE OF COMMONS

providers' performance. I would echo Stephen's comment that the secret to this around procurement and thinking about the supply chain is making sure that everybody understands the mutual benefits of a very long-term arrangement, both from a quality perspective but also from a value-for-money perspective.

Councillor Williams: The only thing I would add on that is that the third sector is very important in this. Every local authority has a duty to make sure it is working with the third sector, which can provide that efficacy and advice. There has been an improvement in the way third sector bodies work in London, not only with us in each borough; we have an accelerated ending homelessness programme that is focused on temporary accommodation and the challenges we are talking about. The third sector are at the table and influencing our approach to that.

Q214 **Andrew Cooper:** I am conscious of the time, so can I have a one-sentence answer from each of you? The Committee has previously recommended that the Government require councils to carry out mandatory inspections prior to a property first being used as temporary accommodation. Do you think that is a reasonable requirement for the Government to place on local authorities?

Paul Kitson: We do, because we do it already.

Councillor Williams: Yes, with funding.

Stephen Philpott: On first use, yes.

Joseph Donohue: Yes, with funding.

Q215 **Mr Lee Dillon:** On the other things that could impact local authorities, the Government are considering how to apply the decent homes standard and Awaab's law to temporary accommodation. What risks do those requirements pose to you in securing more affordable accommodation?

Paul Kitson: It is right that we should consider those aspects. The HHSRS assessment of compliance that we undertake before letting includes those dimensions, and it is important. At the moment, we have rejected around 23% of properties that come forward to us, as they were just unsuitable. We think that level is improving, meaning that there may be some correlation—it is difficult to prove—between compliance testing and the overall quality of provision that is being put forward.

There is obviously a connection between the ongoing cost of accommodation and raising standards. As I said earlier, from Newham's perspective, we set out our homelessness prevention programme saying that improving the overall quality was an important objective for us. I have no doubt that it has come at some financial cost, but that is probably the right thing to do.

Councillor Williams: I will add that one of the unintended consequences of further regulation—which we are all committed to and agree is a good



HOUSE OF COMMONS

thing—is what it has meant for the rental sector. How do we move to a higher-quality rental sector where there is more choice, and landlords are fulfilling their duties, but we do not have a shortage of landlords? That is the challenge we have.

Stephen Philpott: My plea would be to lift the whole market rather than think you can do it at TA. The unintended consequences would be devastating for the market for that and for the local authorities and our ability to operate in that. It is a live market. Those providers who are not individual landlords are big providers with multiple landlords sat under them. They will move much more quickly than we can to shift the lowest common denominator in terms of how much they can get for what quality.

The Home Office was mentioned earlier in terms of asylum and CAS3 for offenders, and in Birmingham we have 32,000 units of supported exempt accommodation and are still waiting for licensing powers over that, which would mean we could increase the quality there. Then there is the general private rented sector market. Our greatest desire in terms of the private rental sector is to better discharge duties so that somebody has a tenancy and they can live in it. We do things here that undermine that opportunity for people to move into a home and have it as a home with a private landlord, rather than it being yet another asylum, offender or temporary accommodation unit home.

Joseph Donohue: I agree, Stephen. The challenge of raising standards within the rental sector more broadly is big enough. We know that in Greater Manchester around 16% of homes are not decent, and when you look at the private sector that goes up to 25%, depending on how you estimate that. The challenges of raising standards universally are difficult and worthy. We have a lot of resource challenges coming our way in housing and homeless teams in terms of enforcing that and making sure that local authorities can assure themselves of that decency across the board. As Stephen said, if we end up focusing too narrowly on temporary accommodation, we miss a bigger opportunity.

Q216 **Mr Lee Dillon:** Do you think the Government should adopt a phased approach for the implementation of Awaab's law, like the one that has been taken for social housing, or should the law just come in and set those standards for temporary accommodation from the off?

Joseph Donohue: There are a lot of moving parts as the Renters' Rights Act comes into force, and the supported housing regulation kicks into gear, that will draw on the time of not just housing standards teams but other local authority officers who will have to contribute towards making those enforcement regimes stick. In that context, throwing a huge raft of changes at the sector at once feels like it might be a little over-ambitious, but I am keen to hear colleagues' thoughts.

Mr Lee Dillon: I am seeing a lot of nods, so I do not think there is any dissenting opinion.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q217 Mr Forster: I want to ask about the Government target to eliminate the unlawful use of B&Bs by the end of this Parliament. I will not ask whether you will meet that, or whether it is achievable, because it is a requirement. How are you going to deliver that? What steps are you going to have to take locally to meet that? Let us work on the assumption that it is a five-year Parliament.

Councillor Williams: To get started, obviously it is a requirement, so we are working towards that. It is achievable. The way that it is achievable is going to matter. It feels as though it is a choice between managing TA or working to end TA. As we heard earlier, we can reduce B&B use, and London has done very well. We have reduced it by 54%, which is good. The question is: how do we do that at the same time as increasing supply and at the same time as we end the subsidy gap? The subsidy gap means that for the last 15 years we only get paid a certain amount for temporary accommodation. That means we cannot discharge our duties as much as we would want to higher-quality accommodation without affecting our bottom line and becoming effectively bankrupt.

The question is: we can achieve it, but can we do it with local authorities that are functional, able to continue their duties, and able to not do what we heard earlier in terms of dispersing families somewhere else to discharge duties? To do that, we will need investment for prevention support services. We are talking about an investment in affordable housing supply.

Stephen Philpott: Yes, we can. We have to maintain or improve prevention, and increasingly what that means is you are paying over and over again for people to stay somewhere. You are making up the difference between what their household can afford and what the rent, bills and everything else is. We are preventing, but it is not a one-off: it is month after month of money being spent into a household to prevent. We have to be able to keep up with that.

We will acquire and open two more homeless centres this year. We have already purchased around 500 units, much of which has been used for temporary accommodation. We have spent £138 million so far, and we have a pipeline. We then look at local authority housing funds, section 106s, and right-to-buy receipts that are going to come through the door, and we have to work out how much that means by way of supply. We would ask for flexibility in terms of being able to use that grant to keep that supply coming through, to have a consistency and be able to look beyond this Parliament and know the supply is coming through for private rented, for temporary accommodation and for discharge of duty.

Paul Kitson: We will achieve that. As I said, we have relatively low numbers at the moment. How have we done that? It is largely about the prevention story you just heard from Stephen. It is partly about increasing our supply chain for nightly paid accommodation as well. Somewhere like Newham and London other boroughs have both advantages and disadvantages. Obviously, the borough boundaries are



HOUSE OF COMMONS

quite permeable, so we have a broader range of opportunities, so out of borough might not be very far at all. We have a greater range of opportunities

I completely agree that the point about acquisition and new build is important for local authorities. Obviously, we have to ask ourselves how sustainable that is. Newham is in a similar position to Birmingham, acquiring around 750 properties. We have built around 1,000 over the past four or five years. We have quite good levels of house building and acquisition. That sits on the council's balance sheet, and the reason we can do that, certainly the new build and the acquisition, is because of the high net cost of TA. For value-for-money reasons it works for us.

We have been able to build less recently and we have been more cautious about it, because our ability on new builds has become much harder, largely as a function of interest rates and some other issues. That continued support from Government, both capacity of revenue and capacity of capital, is going to be important to maintain and increase housing stock. We have not even spoken yet about the impact of right to buy, for example, on the stock available to us.

Joseph Donohue: There are a few aspects to this. Supply is key, as colleagues have said. GMCA has invested its own £11.5 million in the next year to try to procure more effectively and bring new properties online. Some of the challenges faced by our local authorities that maybe have not historically had enormous temporary accommodation pressures include not having the resources or flexibility in their pipelines to respond to the demand pressures they are facing. They have had a large portfolio of stock that has largely worked for most of its history, and the moment that breaks and it does not work, the only option they have is bed and breakfast.

There is something in diversifying the accommodation offer that our local authorities have that will help to give them a bit more buying power to avoid the use of bed and breakfast in the first place. There are also acquisition models that we and our local authorities are exploring to see whether there is any potential there. It is not all about supply. Where we have seen some of our best practice across the local authorities and in the voluntary sector, particularly from a local authority perspective, is that there is some real strength in rigorous case management, having a grip over your temporary accommodation placements overall, and investing in prevention services as much as you possibly can within the restrained financial envelope that local authorities are operating in.

We see massive opportunity in upstream homelessness prevention, particularly for families, and we are seeking to identify opportunities to embed homeless prevention far beyond the statutory duty to try to identify families earlier and prevent the need for temporary accommodation downstream as well.

Q218 **Mr Forster:** This is possibly more for Grace, because she said something



about there being a way for councils to stop using B&Bs as much as they do, but I welcome thoughts from others as well. This is about the risk of unintended consequences of the Government target. Do you think that for your councils, or maybe other councils, the way to tackle B&Bs being used as much is to stop people who are currently on the housing register applying to fill vacant properties? Are councils going to keep vacant properties empty to cover up and move people from B&Bs? Is that going to be one of the ways that your councils, or others, will clear the backlog?

Councillor Williams: London does not have that luxury. We do not have voids. Our void level is too low to move people into. No, I do not think that is the main risk. The main risk is that we will be in a position where we need to discharge our duties and that will increasingly mean that when we look at what available property there is, it is increasing the outside housing market. If you think back to why families are in this position, they are in this position because they cannot afford housing in our local housing market. For me, that is the main risk.

Chair: That goes back to the TA subsidy being frozen at 2011 rates.

Councillor Williams: Or to the affordability of housing, to keep the focus on the affordability of housing. One bit is the TA subsidy, but one bit is realising that even in London prevention is important. We are doing prevention with so many people already in the system. We did some brilliant prevention work in our council where we looked at improving people's economic power and their take-home pay, and improving work, but it was still unable to match the unaffordability of the local housing market. The key risk is that councils will have no choice but to discharge their duties further and further away, to where housing is affordable.

Stephen Philpott: Undermining the general private rented sector—even if it is not night rates, even through leasing—undermines the opportunity for regular people to be able to rent from a private landlord at a reasonable rate. If social housing is just for homeless people, you almost create a perverse incentive: if you want a social home, you are going to have to be homeless. There is a trajectory with that, and we have to guard against that and give people better options earlier on.

Q219 **Andrew Lewin:** We have covered a lot of ground today and it has been an excellent session, so thank you. We have talked about closing the subsidy gap, and I asked the previous panel about new supply and the Government's local authority housing fund. Obviously, the Government operate in a world with finite resources, but there is a moral imperative to get this right. If you were given the hypothetical choice between more resource to close the subsidy gap—that is, more housing benefit—versus more subsidy to buy new homes, which of those would be your preference? As it is the final question, if there is one other thing that you think the Government could do that would make a real difference, please let us know.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Paul Kitson: I would love to sit on the fence on that one. Probably the subsidy gap is the biggest issue that the local authorities are facing across the country. On new supply, there might be other models available through cross-subsidy, should the particular financial and economic conditions apply, where you could also increase supply. On balance, if I had to choose one, it would be that.

I have one thing to ask on the homelessness plan, which is excellent—it mirrors much of the stuff we have been trying to do and includes lot of stuff we should, and will, be doing. I urge there to be some flexibility, because many places are very different and it is sometimes difficult to put blanket rules across places that fundamentally operate in different ways in terms of market conditions or the availability of stock and so on.

Councillor Williams: We do need to do both, but I would start with the TA subsidy gap. Local authorities, and London councils in particular, are driving the housing mission. We are up for private-public partnership for finding capital. One of the disappointments recently was a new borrowing fund was created so that landlords can borrow to build housing, and local authorities were left out of that for Treasury or legal reasons. We need to find a way of local authorities borrowing money, working with the private sector to get that capital pipeline going.

Stephen Philpott: My first plea in terms of where the subsidy should sit would be to reinstate local housing allowance for the general market, so that people do not have to become homeless to be able to get into the private renter steps. It feels like there is quite a lot of capital out there, with Homes England and others, so that is not the problem right now. For Birmingham, the licensing of the supported exempt sector is desperately needed. We are losing people and properties, and it is doing devastation to the market in the area. That would be the plea right now.

Joseph Donohue: The subsidy gap is becoming existential for many local authorities, as we have seen in recent years up and down the country, and needs immediate attention. I would also echo the point about reinstating local housing allowance to the appropriate rates. I would also add a broader view of welfare reform that looks at the benefit cap, particularly for large families in temporary accommodation, who can find themselves structurally stuck in temporary housing because the right property for them is completely unaffordable in the private sector and does not exist in the social housing sector as well.

On the either/or question, it is quite difficult to decouple those two things, because the ability of local authorities to truly invest to save relies on having a healthy balance sheet, which is currently being undermined by the subsidy gap.

Chair: Thank you very much. We have some interesting points on how we raise the standards in temporary accommodation, but equally looking at the financial challenges. Thank you for coming before the Committee this morning.