

Mind's response to the Mayor's Draft London Housing Strategy.

Mind is the mental health charity for England and Wales. We provide advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem. We campaign to improve services, raise awareness and promote understanding. We are currently developing our work on the impact of housing on people's mental health and have just released a new report, *Brick by brick*, looking at the existing evidence on this subject.

The Mayor's Draft London Housing Strategy is an important and welcome look at the issues in housing in London, and how to tackle them. Many of the issues in the strategy are key for a wide variety of people, and clearly the lack of housing is a problem impacting all Londoners. However, at Mind, we were disappointed by the lack of focus on the link between housing and mental health. Research has made it clear that our mental health is strongly impacted by our housing, as well as our wider environment.

Building homes for Londoners

There is little doubt that increasing the number of homes is the key to solving the housing crisis. At Mind, we agree that building houses, and working out the best strategy to do this, is a priority. Housing needs to be affordable to a wider range of people and the housing stock built should reflect this. The Mayor must also ensure that the affordable housing being built is of good quality and designed to be good for people's mental health.

Although we recognise that the higher density developments referenced in Policy 3.1 A ii are necessary, we are concerned that such developments often lead to housing which is too small and shared spaces which are overpopulated and bad for people's mental health. We ask the Mayor and developers to be mindful of this, and work with architects who are researching this area.

As lack of land is a huge issue facing London, it is positive that City Hall will be intervening to enable the release of land for more housing. With the high amount of land being held by developers but not being built on, we hope that the Mayor will go further to pursue Policy 3.1 B i.

We are pleased to see Policy 3.3 C, summarising that there will be more support for the Build to Rent sector, as the city is in need of a wider range of options for renters. For many people, owning a home is not desirable or realistic. In looking at diversifying housing stock, we urge the Mayor to ensure a variety of housing sizes are built, which better reflect the needs of the population. For example, there is currently a lack of one bedroom properties, causing a particular issue for people with mental health problems for whom living in shared accommodation is not realistic, and who cannot afford large homes.

London is severely lacking in social housing and so the Mayor's plans in Policy 3.3 to work closely with housing associations and councils is very important. We welcome the introduction of housing targets for every council and we hope that these will be enforced, and that councils will be resourced to meet these. With the current lack of funding, councils need more incentives and support to build housing which will benefit residents long-term. We agree that housing associations need to receive more support to build.

As the Mayor outlines, it is key that new homes are “built in partnership with Londoners themselves”. Communities must be given agency in this process. Local communities know what they need and should be given a real voice in the process of building. We do suggest caution in this area, however, as often people can be resistant to change in their areas and although they recognise the need for more housing, do not want it close to them.

Delivering genuinely affordable homes

We appreciate the Mayor’s focus on defining what affordable means for real people. As outlined in Policy 4.1 A ii, refusing to authorise further conversions of social rent homes is an excellent first step. Truly affordable housing is most needed in London and the UK, and we would like to see council housing targets allocate a significant percentage to be specifically at the social rent level. The same should be done in affordable housing requirements for land building.

We were disappointed to see Policy 4.2 C i, a target of half of new build homes on publically owned land to be affordable, as this is a low aim. We would recommend that this is a requirement, rather than target, especially in the current housing crisis. We do not want the Mayor to miss this opportunity to make bold steps with publically owned land.

Replacing Right to Buy and redevelopments like for like, as detailed in Policy 4.3 C, is an important way to ensure that affordable housing stock is protected, rather than reduced. We want to see the Mayor continue to push the government on this.

High quality homes and inclusive neighbourhoods

The importance of housing quality to a person’s mental health is well documented. The poor physical condition of a property is strongly predictive of people’s mental health problems, and people with mental health problems are more likely to live in poor quality housing¹. We therefore welcome an increased focus on the quality, safety, and sustainability of homes and neighbourhoods. We hope that the work of Mayoral Design Advocates and the ‘Public Practice’ initiative, outlined in Policy 5.1 A iii, will pay significant attention to the role of housing in mental health.

Our report ‘Brick by brick’ includes a case study of a woman we have referred to as ‘Crystal’. Crystal was allocated a social housing property because she was vulnerable due to her mental health problems. She was told that the home would meet the government’s Decent Homes standard, but when she moved in much of the work had not been completed. When she complained to her local authority, she was provided with B&Q vouchers and told: “fix it yourself”. Crystal told us: “One year on in a flat where the decorating wasn’t finished, that makes you feel a bit crap – it brings your mood down.”

We are pleased that the Mayor will work to improve the quality of London’s homes, but we would like to see some concrete plans, action and committed resource in this area. The quality and safety standards in Policy 5.1 B must be extended to include an understanding of the impact of housing on people’s mental health.

¹ Mind (2017) Brick by brick: A review of mental health and housing

It is crucial that the Mayor actively works to make sure that housing is accessible, as detailed in Policy 5.2. It is positive that the Mayor has recognised the need to need make sure services are LGBT+ inclusive, and we hope that he also recognises the significant stigma in the housing market towards people with mental health problems and people claiming benefits. People with mental health problems have identified stigma and discrimination as one of the biggest barriers to accessing safe and appropriate housing and the Mayor is in an excellent position to address and reduce this discrimination. We hope that he will look further at this, and would welcome a conversation with him on how to approach this and the opportunity to support him.

A fairer deal for private renters and leaseholders

We welcome the call for a system of property licensing and landlord registration in Policy 6.1 B. Resources for licensed landlords should include information on mental health problems, how landlords can support their tenants' mental health, as well as legal requirements of landlords to ensure they do not discriminate against people with mental health problems. 'Naming and shaming' landlords and letting agents who break the law is a good start, but consequences need to be more significant.

The London Model proposed in Policy 6.2 A, which offers greater stability and tenant rights, is much needed. As the housing crisis is more acute in London, more powerful and quick action is needed. Reforms to enhance security of tenure, improve the evictions process and reduce discrimination are necessary. People with mental health problems are more likely to be evicted for disproportionate anti-social behaviour enforcement and people who are evicted have worse physical and mental health outcomes.² This is a clear issue facing much of London's population, and we hope that the Mayor will look at reforms which will reduce the number of unfair and illegal evictions.

Tackling homelessness and helping rough sleepers

It is important that the Mayor both tackles the root causes of homelessness whilst increasing the resources available to homelessness services. As attention on the issue has been lost, it is positive that the Mayor will lobby the government to overturn changes to housing benefit for 18-21 year olds. As outlined in Policy 7.2, the Mayor must work closely with councils, private developers and housing associations to support more rough sleepers into accommodation. Approaches must be coordinated and have buy-in across the housing sector. It is also important that this focuses on long-term and stable accommodation: there's too often a reliance on short-term and temporary accommodation, which is damaging to people's mental health.

For Mind's Brick by brick report, we spoke to 'Jenny', who had spent time in hospital after trying to take her own life, when her mental health declined due to being homeless. After a few months in hospital, she was discharged into temporary accommodation, which was shared with ten other residents. The housing was supposed to come with regular support but this was never provided. She was initially told that she would be in the accommodation for a few months until permanent accommodation could be found. However, she ended up living there for three years. This is part of a wider issue in which people are not given the housing support needed when they are

² Mind (2017) Brick by brick: A review of mental health and housing



discharged from hospital, as well as the unacceptable delays to placements in permanent and appropriate accommodation.

Overall, Mind welcomes the Mayor's Housing Strategy and the well-rounded approach it takes to tackling London's housing crisis. But the policies and provision outlined need to go further to be able to make a significant difference to Londoners. We hope that the final strategy will give more consideration to the issues faced by people with mental health problems, and the role of housing in everyone's mental health.