



## *Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

### **Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules**

The Hackney Visitors Policy for hostel accommodation is in urgent need of review. Our report highlights the damaging effects of the policy on age people living in hostels, illustrated through case studies and feedback from residents. We list the reasons why the policy is particularly harmful and illustrate these with examples. We conclude by proposing practical solutions that would mitigate the harm experienced by both adults and children affected by homelessness and the Visitor Policy, whilst retaining the priority to safeguard residents.



*Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

<b>Contents</b>	
Summary of the Visitor Policy	3
Context & Research	4
Hackney Equality Plan	6
Shelter's Method & Findings	7
Case Studies	10
Recommendations for Policy Review	14
Conclusion	18
References	19



## *Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

### **Summary of the Visitors Policy**

The London Borough of Hackney operates hostels to provide temporary accommodation for homeless individuals and families. To protect residents—many of whom are vulnerable or have young children—the Council enforces a strict visitors policy that prohibits visitors without prior approval from the Hostel Manager. Exceptions may be made for limited, short-term visits to provide necessary support, such as after childbirth or for care needs, with arrangements subject to regular review. Child access visits from non-resident parents must occur outside the hostel. Professional care visits are allowed with advance notice and within working hours. Visitors must show identification and behave appropriately, as residents are responsible for their conduct. Hackney says the policy balances residents' safety with their need for support and appeals or complaints can be addressed through the Hostel Manager or Temporary Accommodation Duty Line. This report concludes however, that the policy is excessively restrictive and causes harm to children and families who are facing an already traumatic and difficult situation. It should also be noted that, due to the housing emergency, families who once stayed in hostel accommodation for months now routinely live in these conditions for many years. Far from being temporary, families are banned from having visitors in their temporary accommodation for considerable periods of their lives.



## ***Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules***

### **Context & Research**

We know that Hackney is far from the only borough using hostel-type accommodation to accommodate families owed a duty under homelessness provisions. Much research highlights the particularly harmful impact of temporary accommodation on children, with detrimental effects on their physical and mental health, education, and social development.

Our own report, *Still Living in Limbo* finds that for children, living in temporary accommodation leads to profound and lasting harm. The instability, overcrowding, and often poor conditions damage their physical and mental health, disrupt their education, and limit opportunities for social development. Many children are forced to change schools, miss classes, and struggle to keep up academically due to long commutes, exhaustion, and lack of space or internet access. Emotional wellbeing suffers too, with increased rates of anxiety and depression. A lack of safe play space and social interaction further isolates them. The longer families remain in temporary accommodation, the greater the damage—undermining children’s development, resilience, and long-term life chances. Restrictive rules in temporary accommodation, such as visitor bans and restrictions, further undermine wellbeing. These policies isolate individuals and families from essential support networks, cutting off access to emotional, practical, and childcare support. The resulting loneliness and lack of autonomy worsen existing mental health conditions and increase stress. For parents, particularly those with young children, such rules can hinder early development by limiting opportunities for social interaction. They also create barriers to employment, especially for shift workers who rely on in-home childcare. Overall, these restrictions erode dignity, compound trauma, and obstruct pathways out of homelessness.



## *Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

It's not just Shelter research identifying these trends. A recent report by the Shared Health Foundation is unequivocal in its findings on the impact of temporary accommodation on children and they have done specific work looking at the impact of visitor restrictions for families in TA.

The report concludes that restrictions on visitors in temporary accommodation, such as Hackney's hostels, undermine the essential social support families need during the perinatal period. This lack of support increases the risk of mental health issues, including depression and post-traumatic stress. It may also limit a baby's early social experiences, reducing opportunities to interact with other infants and adults—interactions that are important for developing communication and social skills. As a result, families are often forced to choose between staying isolated indoors or taking their babies into public spaces to maintain vital social connections.

The Foundation's report goes further, and states that placing families and single adults together in temporary accommodation during times of vulnerability is unsafe and unsuitable for children. They say that Authorities must ensure placements are specifically designated for either families or single adults to reduce the risk of safeguarding breaches across these distinct groups. Separating provision in this way may also remove the perceived need for visitor bans, helping to alleviate some of the challenges faced by parents during the perinatal period, as well as supporting other families living in temporary accommodation.



## *Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

### **Hackney Equality Plan 2024-2026**

Hackney Council published its Equality Plan in 2024, and in it agreed to prioritise, among others: lone parents, domestic abuse survivors and people in temporary accommodation.

The plan also acknowledges that the borough's policies can have the greatest impact on "life chances in early years" and proposes to continue the existing support in place to support children with emotional wellbeing and early childhood development.

According to the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government's statutory homelessness data, collected by councils under the Homelessness Case Level Information Collection (or H-CLIC) HCLIC data 64% of households in Temporary Accommodation (TA), in Hackney, in December 2024 were families with children. Of these families, 67% are lone parent households. That includes 3,506 households and 4,161 children. It is clear that these families are exactly the cohort of people the Equality Plan addresses in seeking to prioritise, but those who are losing out due to the no visitors policy.



## *Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

### **Shelter's Method & Findings**

We provide housing advice and support to residents of Hackney. Last year, we advised and supported 244 Hackney households with housing issues, with a further 509 households contacting our National Helpline from the borough. As part of our housing casework, we track common trends and issues experienced by residents who seek help from us. Looking at our data, the effect of the Visitors Policy is a major reason why households approach us for advice and assistance claiming that it severely effects their life.

Further to that, we have surveyed people who live in the borough and have sought advice from us, with the majority of respondents citing the visitors policy as a problem for them. We have also held listening events in the borough to obtain a deeper understanding of the challenges residents face. Again, the Visitors Policy emerged as a key theme and frustration, with residents describing the policy as “unjust and unfair”.

Lastly, we have raised the issue in local forums, such as the Hackney Temporary Accommodation Action Group, and with agencies supporting families in temporary accommodation across the borough. There is a clear consensus amongst those agencies that the policy is harmful and requires urgent review, with a fresh direction needed.



*Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

By using the approach outlined above, we have captured the following challenges faced by residents of hostel accommodation because of the Visitor's Policy:

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Detail</b>
<b>Postnatal recovery and mental health</b>	New mothers are denied essential support, delaying physical recovery, worsening mental health, and increasing isolation for the parent, with a further effect on the baby due to lack of socialisation hindering development.
<b>Childcare pressures</b>	Lone parents are unable to access help from friends or family, leaving them without respite and preventing them from pursuing work appointments and a social life.
<b>Barriers to parent-child contact</b>	Non-resident parents cannot visit their children in the hostel, reducing contact and damaging family relationships. Children of separated parents miss out on vital time with both parents, as visits must take place outside the hostel.



*Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

<b>Blocked access to health, social care and support services</b>	Residents struggle to receive visits from health, social care and support services as well as midwives, community nurses and GPs due to the policy's restrictions.
<b>Language barriers and bureaucracy</b>	The application process for visitors is complex and especially difficult for those with limited English.
<b>Fear of retaliatory action or being asked to leave</b>	Residents avoid requesting visitors due to threats or fear of being told to leave by hostel management. The implications are severe: having to leave the borough or face street homelessness
<b>Help with caring for household members with ill-health</b>	The ban on regular visitors leaves parents without help for everyday tasks like attending appointments, working, or even showering and laundry—especially those with young children or children with additional needs. Many residents tell us they rely on support from residents within the hostel because of the visitor restrictions, however we have two examples of room to room visits being banned at two separate hostels, so even this option may not be available to them depending on where they live.



## *Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

<b>Overly rigid permission rules</b>	Even when permission is granted, visits are limited to pre-approved dates and expire after three months—making it unworkable for families who need flexible, ongoing support.
--------------------------------------	---

### **Case studies**

The following case studies demonstrate the real and damaging impact the Policy has on the lives of people & families living in hostel accommodation. We have chosen these cases studies to the variety of barriers and challenges the policy creates and sustains. We have spoken to many other people who have faced similar challenges due to the policy.

#### **Young children left alone**

A mother living in a Hackney hostel with her two young children was told she was not permitted any visitors to assist with childcare. She was warned that allowing someone into her room without prior consent could result in losing her accommodation. This strict rule left her struggling to manage everyday tasks.

The hostel's washing facilities were located in a shared communal area outside her room. With no support allowed, she found it impossible to carry laundry and look after both children simultaneously. On several occasions, she was forced to leave one of her young children alone in the room while she used the washing machine—an impossible choice between neglecting her child's safety or risking homelessness.



## *Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

She explained that if a trusted family member had been allowed to visit regularly, she would have had the support needed to manage basic domestic tasks.

### **New mother without access to support**

After giving birth while living in a hostel, a new mother was initially told she could not have any visitors to support her. Left completely alone to recover, she described feeling frightened, overwhelmed, and in significant pain.

She was eventually permitted to have a family member visit for a temporary period, and only after a period of delay due to the initial refusal. During this critical phase of recovery and adjustment to life as a new mother, she was denied the basic emotional and practical support that new mothers expect.

She later reflected that much of her distress and isolation could have been avoided if she had been allowed visitors from the beginning. The visitor she was allowed eventually was time limited to a few weeks.

### **Child denied access to their father**

A hostel resident who had recently given birth was initially permitted to have the baby's father visit for the first six weeks after the birth. However, after that period, she was informed by the hostel manager that no further visitors would be allowed.

Concerned about the impact of this sudden restriction, she sought support from her Health Visitor, who agreed that the policy was unreasonable and helped her challenge the decision. Despite this, the appeal was denied, and she was not allowed the father to visit beyond 6 weeks.



## *Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

She was left confused and distressed, questioning why she was allowed visitors only during the initial six weeks and denied them thereafter—precisely when she felt she needed support most. She expressed feeling punished simply for being homeless, and said the decision had a serious impact on her wellbeing and ability to care for her child and would have undermined the father’s ability to bond with his child.

### **Mother with cancer and a child with autism**

The mother lives in a Hackney hostel and is currently undergoing treatment for a brain tumour. While her oncologist reports that she is responding well, she is likely to require chemotherapy soon and is deeply concerned about her recovery and care needs if external visitors continue to be restricted.

Although she receives visits from a carer, the resident wishes to have more support from her family, particularly during and after chemotherapy. She fears that without this additional help, managing her treatment and recovery will be extremely difficult.

The women’s son is autistic and non-verbal, and due to her current health challenges, she is unable to care for him full time. He lives with a foster family during the week but stays with her on weekends. However, during this time, the resident finds it very difficult to care for her son due to her illness.



## *Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

### **Resident forced out of work due to lack of childcare options**

A hostel resident was forced to leave two full-time permanent jobs in the past two years, including one in her dream career, because she was not allowed visitors to help with childcare. She believes she could have quite quickly been able to afford private rented accommodation if she had been able to keep working. Now, she feels trapped—unable to work due to lack of childcare, and unable to move on because she cannot afford the rent on a family home.



## *Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

### **Recommendations for Policy Review**

Whilst we understand the need for a safeguarding process which may limit visitor access to hostel accommodation in some form, the current situation creates far too much hardship to continue and must be reviewed. It is highly discriminatory – disproportionately impacting lone mothers and their young children. People with physical and mental health problems and disabilities are also severely impacted. We offer the following proposed solutions to alleviate the effects of the policy set out in this report.

<b>Proposed Solution</b>	<b>Detail</b>
Provide residents with a right to visitors on the basis of childcare, employment commitments, social care and disability and familial and social support	Providing residents with access to visitors would address many of the concerns and case studies outlined in this report. It would enable lone parent families to receive vital support, allow disabled residents to access care in their own home, and make it easier for people to take up or maintain employment. We propose an application process that clearly distinguishes between professional and personal visitors. Professional visitors would be required to provide identification and a valid reason for attending, such as delivering care or support services. Personal visitors, such as friends or family members, would



***Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules***

	<p>follow a separate application route, with an added safeguard that they may be subject to a DBS check as a condition of access. While we recognise the need to safeguard all hostel residents from unwanted or unsafe visitors, a structured and transparent process would filter out those with harmful intentions, while ensuring that residents are not unnecessarily cut off from essential social contact and support.</p>
<p>Provide an induction pack to all hostel residents so people understand their situation, their rights generally and specifically in relation to the Visitors Policy.</p> <p>Translate the pack into five of the most common first languages so that residents fully understand their rights, options and responsibilities. Hackney could host this on their website so that updates can be applied easily and residents can access the most up to date information at any time.</p>	<p>As we have set out above, there is a measure of misunderstanding around the Council’s approach to visitors. The process was not understood by many residents, and they say if they were provided with the application form or a copy of the policy itself. We therefore propose that Hackney provide a guide to hostel accommodation which includes a summary of the policy, a copy of the form, and explanation of the appeals process. We also ask that this guidance be translated into the most common first languages residents of accommodation present with.</p>
<p>Implement trauma informed and person-centred training for all hostel staff</p>	<p>We propose the implementation of trauma informed training for all staff and security working at the hostels. We often hear from residents that they haven’t felt listened to or understood by hostel</p>



*Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

	staff. We feel training is necessary to mitigate this. We also propose anti-racism and cultural competence training to ensure staff are equipped to support residents from diverse backgrounds with empathy, respect, and an awareness of the structural inequalities many have faced.
--	--

**Long term solution: Separate single applicants and families**

The primary justification for the current restrictive visitor policy is the safeguarding challenge posed by housing single homeless applicants—many of whom have complex needs—alongside families with children. Visitors are perceived as a potential risk factor within this mixed environment, particularly by Hackney Council staff, who expressed concern that single people are more likely to invite guests with histories of substance use, crime, or anti-social behaviour. While we acknowledge that families may also request visitors with similar risk factors, we believe the strict visitor restrictions currently in place are a blunt instrument. Rather than solving the problem, they often create new harms—many of which are severe, long-lasting or permanent—such as disrupted child development, mental health deterioration, and barriers to employment and recovery.

We believe a stronger, more sustainable solution lies in the longer-term separation of hostel provision for families and single people. Separate accommodation would enable each setting to be tailored to the distinct needs of its residents, with bespoke rules, staffing structures, facilities and



## *Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

visitor policies. Camden Council offers a useful model here, managing hostel provision separately for single adults and families and allowing visitor access within a family-sensitive framework.

Family-only accommodation could be better equipped for parenting and child development, with indoor playrooms, safe outdoor areas, and communal spaces that allow children to socialise and parents to build peer support networks. It would also create space for activities like childcare or family visits that simply cannot happen in mixed hostels. However, such facilities must be staffed appropriately to avoid the risk of harm to children from accidents, peer conflict, or in some cases, other adults.

A family-focused hostel environment may also feel safer for many women and children, especially those recovering from domestic abuse or sexual violence, as these spaces are likely to have fewer adult men. That said, careful consideration would be needed in designing single-person hostels, particularly around gender balance, safety, and how to ensure they are not environments where vulnerability and violence escalate unchecked.

Finally, while much of this section has focused on families, it is essential that single residents also have a clear, fair, and regulated route to access visitors. The isolation experienced by people without family support can be acute, and a blanket ban on visitors risks worsening mental health and recovery outcomes. As such, the proposals we set out above—including a transparent visitor application process and safeguards such as DBS checks—must be designed with both single adults and families in mind.



## *Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

### **Conclusion**

Hackney's hostel visitor policy, while intended to safeguard residents, is causing avoidable harm to those it is meant to protect. Shelter's evidence, built from direct casework, community engagement, and partner feedback, clearly shows that the current policy disproportionately punishes families, isolates new mothers, undermines child welfare, and places unnecessary strain on people at a vulnerable point in their lives. It also undermines the efforts to find and sustain employment which perversely keeps people homeless for longer.

The case studies presented in this report illustrate the real-world consequences: children left alone, mothers denied essential support, and families forced further apart during times of need. These are not isolated incidents but symptoms of a policy that is unfit for purpose.

We do not dispute the importance of safeguarding, nor the complexity of managing shared accommodation. But the balance has tipped too far. The current policy fails to respect the dignity, rights, and basic needs of residents—particularly women, children, and those with health, care or support requirements.

Our proposed solutions offer a way forward that protects all residents while restoring the humanity and flexibility needed in hostel accommodation. Hackney must act urgently to reform its policy, to show that it values the safety, wellbeing, and family life of those experiencing homelessness.



*Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules*

**References**

**Shelter report: Still Living in Limbo**

[https://downloads.ctfassets.net/6sxvmndnnpn0s/2tH1VaV0nD4E1yfkNVgZpd/18a40c539d3d6b8771c55c318f4c0a74/Still\\_Living\\_in\\_Limbo.pdf](https://downloads.ctfassets.net/6sxvmndnnpn0s/2tH1VaV0nD4E1yfkNVgZpd/18a40c539d3d6b8771c55c318f4c0a74/Still_Living_in_Limbo.pdf)

**Shared Health Foundation report: An Absolute Scandal** [https://sharedhealthfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/SHF\\_absolute\\_scandal\\_report.pdf](https://sharedhealthfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/SHF_absolute_scandal_report.pdf)

**Hackney Equality Plan 24-26:** <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZrdQ05gE0pUR-y33K39GEmGLgubPVv7M0XWtEwmNHqc/edit?pli=1&tab=t.0>