

<b>Report title:</b>	Response to Shelter Report: "Policy vs. People": The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules
<b>Meeting:</b>	Living in Hackney Scrutiny Commission.
<b>Date:</b>	10th March 2026
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## 1. Executive Summary

This briefing note provides the Scrutiny Commission with operational context and assurance regarding the Benefits and Homeless Prevention (BHP) Services management of visitors in temporary accommodation (TA) hostels, following the publication of Shelter's report, "Policy vs. People: The Hidden Harms of Hostel Visitor Rules". The report asserts that the current policy is excessively restrictive and highlights the challenges faced by families, particularly lone mothers.

We welcome Shelter's advocacy and share their commitment to trauma-informed care. We wish to assure the Commission that Hackney does not operate a blanket "no visitors" policy. Rather, we operate a managed access framework. This approach is essential to safeguard vulnerable residents—many of whom are fleeing domestic abuse—while ensuring that critical support networks remain accessible under supervised and safe conditions.

## 2. Context, Scale, and Data Proportionality

To ensure the Commission has a complete picture, it is helpful to contextualise Shelter's findings against the scale of BHP's housing operations:

- As of January 2026, there are 3,748 households in TA, which includes 3,982 children.
- Hackney processes around 4,000 homeless approaches annually and has nearly 8,000 households on the housing register. Our specific hostel portfolio consists of 38 buildings comprising over 900 units. Shelter's data does not isolate how many of their 753 contacts pertained specifically to these units, nor how many solely concerned the visitor policy.
- Shelter reports advising 244 Hackney households locally last year, alongside 509 households contacting their National Helpline. While every resident's experience is important, these 753 contacts encompass all housing queries

across the borough and many of these would be single people where our legal duty to support them is more limited.

- We absolutely do not wish to minimise the genuine difficulties and impact that these restrictions have on some households. However, it is important to highlight that, proportionally, this negative impact is not widespread across our TA population. Conversely, we must also highlight that it is highly likely that many households—particularly those who have fled domestic abuse or experienced severe vulnerability—feel significantly safer and more secure as a direct result of the visitors policy.

### **3. Benchmarking and Sector Context: The Hackney Model**

When evaluating our visitor policies, it is helpful to benchmark Hackney's temporary accommodation model against the wider sector.

- Across London, temporary accommodation that utilises shared communal areas routinely enforces strict "no unauthorised visitor" rules to maintain the safety and security of all residents. It is the industry standard in these specific environments to require explicit, advance management permission for *any* visitor. This ensures unvetted adults cannot freely roam corridors or use shared facilities alongside vulnerable children and survivors of domestic abuse.
- The Shelter report cites Camden Council as a useful model because they manage hostel provision separately for single adults and families. We agree that this is an effective safeguarding approach. Currently, out of our 38 hostel buildings, we have successfully designated 11 buildings solely for families and 1 building solely for single adults. While the remaining 26 buildings are mixed-use (housing both families and singles), we must assure the Commission that we strictly vet all placements; we do not place single adults with complex needs, or those who pose a risk to children, within mixed hostel provisions. However, because these environments do still house mixed cohorts, our robust, managed access framework remains an absolute operational necessity to mitigate any residual risks and ensure the safety of all residents.
- Many Local Authorities rely heavily on placing homeless families in out-of-borough bed and breakfasts or unmanaged accommodation miles away from their communities and support networks.. While some of those facilities may have looser visitor rules, families placed there suffer profound geographical isolation. Hackney takes a different approach. We invest heavily in keeping our residents within or very close to the borough in predominantly self-contained units. The necessary trade-off for operating these high-density sites safely within the borough is a robust framework where visits do not occur without prior permission.

#### 4. We Operate Managed Access, Not a Blanket Ban

The report frequently describes the policy as a visitor "ban". We want to clarify the mechanisms currently in place that facilitate access:

- Professional Visitors: Health and social care professionals (midwives, GPs, community nurses, social workers) are explicitly exempt from restrictions and are permitted access with advance notice during working hours.
- Personal Support & Postnatal Care: Shelter highlights the isolation of new mothers. Support is absolutely available; residents can complete a visitor request form allowing at least one designated visitor for essential support for up to three months (e.g., following childbirth or surgery).
- Clear Procedures: We have a formal request procedure with a clear escalation and appeals process (reviewed by a Team Manager, and subsequently a Strategic Lead if required).

#### 5. Shelter's Proposed Solutions

While Shelter has proposed several alternative solutions, some carry significant legal and practical barriers that would compromise resident safety or create undue burdens.

Shelter's Proposal	Hackney's Operational Reality & Assurance
<p><b>Introduce mandatory DBS checks for personal visitors</b> to filter out those with harmful intentions.</p>	<p><b>Legal and Practical Barrier:</b> It is not legally permissible for the Council to run Standard or Enhanced DBS checks on members of the public visiting friends or family, as this is not a "regulated activity." Relying on Basic DBS checks would force visitors to pay an £18 fee and wait up to 14 days for processing. This would place an unethical financial burden on low-income families and delay immediate, critical support.</p>
<p><b>Allow visitors for routine childcare</b> while the resident is out at work.</p>	<p><b>Safeguarding Barrier:</b> Allowing unsupervised visitors to remain in the hostel to provide childcare while the licensee is at work poses a severe safeguarding risk to all other residents and children in the building. Routine childcare must be arranged outside the hostel environment.</p>

<p><b>Provide translated induction packs</b> so residents fully understand their rights and options.</p>	<p><b>Continuous Improvement:</b> Since early 2025, a digital link to the TA Guide has been provided for all new placements. Because we utilise three distinct TA property types, static website publishing is complex. However, we are taking this feedback on board and will produce accessible QR codes for display in hostels, and we are exploring the cost versus impact of enhanced translation services.</p>
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## 6. Staff Conduct, Training, and Resident Voice

Shelter notes that residents fear retaliatory action or being asked to leave if they raise concerns. We take any perception of intimidation extremely seriously and are committed to ensuring every resident feels safe raising grievances. Our formal data provides strong assurance regarding staff conduct and the complaints process:

- Since 2022, out of 71 Stage 1 complaints regarding staff conduct in TA, only 6 (8.5%) were upheld. Over the last 3 years, only 10 Stage 1 complaints specifically concerned visitor access (4 regarding dissatisfaction with a decision, and only 1 regarding staff conduct). This demonstrates that while grievances are rare, they are investigated fairly when raised.
- Trauma-Informed Training: Shelter recommends implementing trauma-informed and anti-racism training. We have been proactive in this area: the Benefits and Homeless Prevention Service delivered in-person trauma-informed training to all frontline officers in 2021. Furthermore, the London Mayor's commissioned 'Aneemo' training was made mandatory in 2024, with 220 staff currently enrolled. Hackney's security company (CIS) is scheduled to make this training a mandatory requirement for security personnel in 2026.

## 7. Conclusion

The managed access of visitors is a complex balancing act between facilitating personal support and maintaining a highly secure environment for families and survivors of abuse. We do not operate a blanket ban, and we are continually reviewing our communication to ensure residents fully understand the support avenues available to them. We welcome the Scrutiny Commission's ongoing engagement on this matter and are committed to reviewing our TA Visitors Guide in 2026 to ensure our processes remain as transparent and supportive as possible.

# Appendix: Case Studies – Resident Support & Reasonable Adjustments

This appendix details management decisions regarding temporary visitor agreements. These cases illustrate the scheme's commitment to providing person-centred support, particularly concerning the Equality Act 2010 and maternity-related care.

## Case Study 1: Disability and Physical Mobility

Date: January 2026

- Resident Profile: A resident registered blind with additional mobility issues following a knee injury, necessitating the use of crutches.
- Request: Support from two friends to assist with essential daily tasks, including shopping, cleaning, meal preparation, and the administration of weekly service charge payments.
- Outcome: The Hostel Manager authorised a visiting agreement allowing two designated friends to attend on a rota basis.
- Terms: Access granted 7 days per week between 16:00 and 21:00. This personal caller agreement is scheduled for a formal review in three months.

## Case Study 2: Antenatal Support and Wellbeing

Date: November 2025

- Resident Profile: A resident at 35 weeks gestation experiencing back pain and mental health challenges, including anxiety and isolation. The narrow staircases within the building presented a physical barrier to managing shopping and chores.
- Request: Assistance from a friend and the child's father to help with domestic tasks and emotional support.
- Outcome: The Hostel Manager approved a visiting schedule to mitigate the risks associated with the resident's physical strain and mental wellbeing.
- Terms: Authorised visits on Fridays and Saturdays, with a formal review scheduled after 12 weeks.

## Case Study 3: Postnatal Care and Mental Health

Date: November 2025

- Resident Profile: A new mother suffering from depression and anxiety. Physical health needs also made navigating the stairs with a buggy and newborn particularly challenging.

- Request: Paternal support to assist with newborn care and help with the physical demands of the building layout.
- Outcome: To support the mother's recovery and ensure the infant's wellbeing, the Hostel Manager approved a structured visitation plan for the father.
- Terms: Access granted for one weekday and the duration of the weekend (Friday to Sunday) for five hours per day.

#### **Case Study 4: Parental Support and Infant Welfare**

Date: November 2025

- Resident Profile: A mother requiring consistent parental support to assist in the daily care of her newborn.
- Request: Daily visitation for the child's father to provide essential childcare support.
- Outcome: Recognising the importance of shared parental responsibility for the child's development, the Hostel Manager approved a daily visiting agreement.
- Terms: The father is permitted to visit 7 days per week for five hours per day. This agreement is monitored closely and reviewed at four-week intervals.