

## REVIEW BY THE RESIDENTS' SERVICE SELECT COMMITTEE: *Homeless Prevention and the Customer Journey*

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<b>Cabinet Portfolio</b>	Cabinet Member for Planning, Housing & Growth
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<b>Papers with report</b>	Final review report

### HEADLINES

<b>Summary</b>	To receive the final report detailing the major review conducted by the Residents' Services Select Committee which considered Homeless Prevention and the Customer Journey. The review makes recommendations for Cabinet to consider.
<b>Putting our Residents First</b>  <b>Delivering on the Council Strategy 2022-2026</b>	This report supports our ambition for residents / the Council of: An efficient, well-run, digital-enabled council working with partners to deliver services to improve the lives of all our residents  This report supports our commitments to residents of: A Digital-Enabled, Modern, Well-Run Council
<b>Financial Cost</b>	The committee's review will support the services' savings target by enabling more efficient demand management through process improvements, performance monitoring, and staff development, all aimed at reducing costs without compromising the customer experience.
<b>Relevant Select Committee</b>	Residents' Services Select Committee.
<b>Relevant Wards</b>	All.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

**That the Select Committee's report, which focuses on enhancing the resident experience, ensuring process efficiency, staff support and training, and building on existing partnerships and collaboration in relation to homelessness prevention and the customer journey, be welcomed, and authority be delegated to the Cabinet Member for Planning, Housing & Growth to implement the Committee's recommendations, as set out below:**

## **SELECT COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **1. Enhancing Resident Experience**

- I. All staff to refer to those applicants who approach the service for help as ‘residents’ rather than ‘customers’ or ‘clients’.**
- II. Create a clearer Residents’ Charter: a more accessible guide explaining each stage of the homelessness support process for new applicants, from intake to case closure. This guide will set expectations, reduce confusion, and address common questions. Consider new technologies for instant translation requirements.**
- III. Reconfigure the Housing Reception Centre to provide a more welcoming and empathetic environment within existing budget plans.**
- IV. Continue unannounced random checks/management oversight of calls and correspondence ensure a high-quality, professional, empathetic, and resident-focused service.**
- V. Continue to gather feedback from residents regarding homelessness services using a simple anonymous feedback form.**
- VI. Actively promote the current suggestion box system to encourage staff to submit suggestions for improving service efficiency and resident interactions.**

### **2. Managing Expectations and Process Efficiency**

- I. Consider incorporating ways to help applicants check their eligibility online for assistance before applying formally. Preventative avoidance can stop unnecessary applications from those who are not entitled, saving time and resources for both the applicants and the Council.**
- II. For applicants in the process, to avoid processing delays, to explore the possibility of using automated text reminders for appointments and deadlines.**
- III. Explore the feasibility of introducing a self-check-in system for applicants at reception linked to service transformation.**
- IV. Continue to review and update current documentation, guides and resident facing processes in relation to eligibility, case preparation and action planning.**

### **3. Staff Support & Training**

- I. Ensure all Housing staff receive regular casework supervision and promote current Staff Welfare policies.**
- II. Consider implementing a comprehensive peer support and training programme in collaboration with a partner organisation. This programme should include access to peer mentors with lived experience of homelessness and offer refresher training to staff. The training should also incorporate 'walk-in-my-shoes' sessions to build understanding and connection with residents.**
- III. Create a learning set of resources for staff to encourage the sharing of good practice.**

### **4. Partnerships and Collaboration**

- I. Build on existing partnerships and further develop these with local organisations to create a wider support network for residents to access.**
- II. Assign named officers to be liaisons for relevant partner agencies for accountability and, to aid effective communications going forward, introduce a generic email as the primary contact and communication tool between them and the Council.**

## Reasons for the recommendations

The recommendations arising from this major review aim to support the Cabinet and Council in improving residents' satisfaction with the way in which they access advice and support to prevent homelessness.

## Alternative options considered/ risk management

The Cabinet could decide to reject some, or all, of the Committee's recommendations or pursue alternative routes by which to progress the outcomes of the review.

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

### Context

This comprehensive review, conducted by the Residents' Services Select Committee, was initiated to understand and improve the Council's Housing Advice and Homelessness Service, focusing on the residents' journey through the system and their experience with customer service.

As the Cabinet will be aware, the demand for affordable housing has risen sharply across England, placing significant pressure on local authorities. By June 2023, nearly 139,000 families with children were living in temporary accommodation. Reports indicated a 27% increase in rough sleeping across England, with significant rises in street homelessness among women. Turbulence in the capital's private rented sector has also been a critical factor behind the growing numbers of homeless Londoners. Research published in July 2023 revealed a 41% drop in private rental listings in the capital since 2020, while listed rental prices rose by 20%.

The London Borough of Hillingdon has experienced a significant increase in homelessness presentations in recent years, driven by factors such as evictions from private rental accommodations, the 'Heathrow' factor, and a reduction in affordable housing, despite the Council's substantial efforts to increase the supply of accommodation.

At the time of the review, the Council was receiving an average of 100 new approaches each week for housing advice and support. The main reason for homelessness remained the ending of private rented tenancies, while households leaving friends or family accommodation represented 24% of all approaches, and those requiring a move due to domestic abuse constituted just under 8%. This increase in presentations, coupled with the lack of affordable private rented accommodation, has resulted in considerable service pressure and significant cost pressures for Council budgets.

### The Review

Notwithstanding whom, why and from where people present themselves as homeless, through the review's terms of reference, the Committee's primary aims were to identify ways to improve their experience, better manage their expectations, enhance satisfaction, streamline processes and ultimately provide improved support to prevent homelessness.

In undertaking the review, the Committee held several formal in-depth witness sessions, which included representatives from voluntary sector organisations, and experts in homelessness and domestic abuse support, along with relevant Council officers. These are set out fuller in the attached review report.

Additionally, a range of other activity was undertaken by Members in relation to the review. This included unannounced visits to the Council's Housing Reception, which provided valuable insights into the resident experience and revealed areas for improvement, particularly in staff training and the Housing Reception environment. Councillors also visited the contact centre to listen to live housing-related calls, finding the dedication and professionalism of the staff impressive, though noting challenges and improvements that could be made. In collaboration with the Council's Counter Fraud Team, Members conducted unannounced visits to two B&Bs used for temporary housing, which they found extremely useful and informative.

Discussing its findings from the review, the Committee was mindful of the need to find cost-effective, workable solutions to improve performance going forward. Importantly, the finalisation of the Committee's review benefited from close collaboration between the Chair and Opposition Lead, along with Council officers, in formulating the recommendations presented in this report to ensure they could be consistent with and add value to the direction of travel of the service area.

## **Findings and recommendations**

Key findings included:

- The importance of prevention and early intervention in addressing homelessness.
- The need for improved communication and empathy from housing officers.
- The necessity for better systems and technology for case handovers.
- The challenges faced by victims of domestic abuse in accessing housing support.

The Committee has, therefore, recommended several measures to improve the experience of residents when accessing homelessness services at the Council.

Members recommended several initiatives aimed at enhancing the resident experience, including referring to applicants as 'residents', creating a clearer Residents' Charter, reconfiguring the housing contact arrangements, conducting random checks, gathering feedback, and promoting a suggestion box system.

In respect of managing expectations and process efficiency, the Committee has suggested incorporating online eligibility checks to prevent unnecessary applications and save time and resources for both applicants and the Council. It also recommended exploring automated text reminders for appointments, a self-check-in system at reception, and continuous updates to documentation and processes related to eligibility and case preparation.

With regard to staff support and training, the Committee has recommended regular casework supervision, peer support and training programmes, and the creation of learning resources to enhance staff support and training.

Finally, the Committee recommends that existing partnerships with local organisations be built on to create a wider support network for residents, assigning named officers as liaisons for partner agencies, and introducing a generic communication method between the Council and partners.

## Officer comments on the implementation of recommendations

In tandem with the Committee's review and since these recommendations were developed, several proactive actions have been undertaken by officers to improve the resident experience along the housing pathway. The following provides an update on progress and accordingly it is proposed the Cabinet Member, under delegated authority (recommendation 2), determines how to implement the Select Committee's recommendations further or in suitable alternate ways:

### Enhancing Resident Experience

- I. **All staff to refer to those applicants who approach the service for help as 'residents' rather than 'customers' or 'clients'.**

Teams have been reminded to use a consistent approach to engaging with our residents and to use the term 'residents'. This will be raised in one-to-one meetings with staff and managers as well as in team meetings as a reminder, to all staff.

- II. **Create a clearer Residents' Charter: a more accessible guide explaining each stage of the homelessness support process for new applicants, from intake to case closure. This guide will set expectations, reduce confusion, and address common questions. Consider new technologies for instant translation requirements.**

The Charter will be available in the Autumn 2025. A revised Residents' Charter for Housing Advice and Homelessness is being prepared with residents, which will set out what residents can expect from the Council when they ask for housing advice and / or ask for assistance with their housing situation.

- III. **Reconfigure the Housing Reception Centre to provide a more welcoming and empathetic environment within existing budget plans.**

Improvements to the first contact arrangements for the housing service are underway, including options to improve community-based access to housing advice and discussions with housing case workers and other council teams. The resident experience is being put at the heart of the information and support offer to residents.

- IV. **Continue unannounced random checks/management oversight of calls and correspondence to ensure a high-quality, professional, empathetic, and resident-focused service.**

To ensure that a consistent resident-focused approach is being taken to the provision of housing advice and support to residents, a performance and quality framework has been implemented across the service. This includes: the implementation of casework management sessions with all officers to complement individual supervision and staff welfare sessions with line managers; to use resident feedback to drive service improvement, such as learning from complaints; team leaders reviewing cases as part of casework oversight, including using performance data and case progress along the homelessness pathway – this includes reviewing correspondence, case file notes, and case progress; listening to calls with residents and supporting staff in face to face meetings with residents to coach and develop case workers.

V. **Continue to gather feedback from residents regarding homelessness services using a simple anonymous feedback form.**

A structured feedback form is in the process of being developed and is on track to be implemented by September 2025.

VI. **Actively promote the current suggestion box system to encourage staff to submit suggestions for improving service efficiency and resident interactions.**

Officers in the housing service are encouraged to provide ideas and feedback, with a number of officers having submitted suggestions to the senior management team. Updates will be shared with staff.

**Managing Expectations and Process Efficiency:**

I. **Consider incorporating ways to help applicants check their eligibility online for assistance before applying formally. Preventative avoidance can stop unnecessary applications from those who are not entitled, saving time and resources for both the applicants and the Council.**

An online tool to check eligibility for assistance is being considered to ensure that residents can be best informed about the options available to them for housing assistance.

II. **For applicants in the process, to avoid processing delays, to explore the possibility of using automated text reminders for appointments and deadlines.**

Options are being explored for automated text reminders for appointments and deadlines.

III. **Explore the feasibility of introducing a self-check-in system for applicants at reception linked to service transformation.**

Improvements to the first contact arrangements for the housing service are underway, which will include options for improving the resident experience when there is a need to meet with a case officer face to face.

IV. **Continue to review and update current documentation, guides and resident facing processes in relation to eligibility, case preparation and action planning.**

To date, the Social Housing Allocation Policy has been reviewed and updated, and the changes implemented, following a consultation process and approval at Cabinet. The changes agreed by Cabinet to the policy continue to ensure that resident need is prioritised for social housing and to bring transparency and simplicity to the priority banding for those registered for rehousing. A programme to review and continue to improve published information on the Council website is underway. The housing advice and homelessness pathway has been reviewed and options to improve the resident experience are being considered.

## **Staff Support & Training**

### **I. Ensure all Housing staff receive regular casework supervision and promote current Staff Welfare policies.**

A supervision policy is in place for all housing managers and their teams, drawing on tried and tested practice from social care services. This model includes case work supervision and professional / welfare supervision to ensure that case workers are supported to identify and manage risk and promote their welfare and duty of care. Housing staff have been reminded that if they have concerns they can speak to their manager, a colleague, or seek support via the Employee Assistance Programme.

### **II. Consider implementing a comprehensive peer support and training programme in collaboration with a partner organisation. This programme should include access to peer mentors with lived experience of homelessness and offer refresher training to staff. The training should also incorporate 'walk-in-my-shoes' sessions to build understanding and connection with residents.**

Discussions are being progressed with partner organisations about how this could work in practice, including access to mentors who can draw on lived experience of homelessness. A range of training has been arranged for staff, including trauma-informed training, conflict resolution and digital and data skills development.

### **III. Create a learning set of resources for staff to encourage the sharing of good practice.**

Officers who deliver great services to residents and effective case work practice and recording are praised and their work highlighted / shared with the wider staff group, through service wide and manager level sessions. Further work is underway to establish a 'learning set model' across the service and setting up workshops for casework discussion between officers, to engage in peer learning etc.

## **Partnerships and Collaboration**

### **I. Build on existing partnerships and further develop these with local organisations to create a wider support network for residents to access.**

A single homeless and rough sleeping partnership meeting is held quarterly. The membership is kept under review to ensure that key council staff and other public and voluntary sector partners involved in the single homelessness pathway are represented. Partners are asked to provide updates regarding their services and challenges and to share key data with partners. Work is ongoing to further build relationship with a wider range of partners to inform future strategy and service development. The group includes representation from:

- Crisis UK
- London Borough of Hillingdon
- NHS
- CNWL
- P3

- Salvation Army
- Thames Reach
- Trinity
- YMCA
- ARCH
- Heathrow Travel Care

**II. Assign named officers to be liaisons for relevant partner agencies for accountability and, to aid effective communications going forward, introduce a generic email as the primary contact and communication tool between them and the Council.**

To date a number of dedicated lead officers have been established across the service, to develop robust partnership working. These include:

- A dedicated Senior Housing Options and Homeless Prevention Officer is the housing hospital discharge contact
  - A named Housing Options and Homeless Prevention Officer and a named Housing Advice and Homeless Prevention Officer have been identified as lead contacts for the probation service and other partners concerned with offenders
  - A named Housing Options and Homeless Prevention Officer and a named Housing Advice and Homeless Prevention Officer have been identified as key housing contacts for matters concerning domestic abuse
  - The Housing Allocations Lettings and Register Team Leader is the key contact for Housing Associations operating in Hillingdon. Developing housing associations also have contacts with the New Business Officer and Head of Housing Strategy and Policy.
  - Landlords and Agents deal with the Head of Private Rented Sector and Temporary Accommodation Supply.
  - A dedicated officer is in place for partner agencies working with rough sleepers.
  - A named manager is in place for Home Office partnership working.
- [homelessprevention@hillington.gov.uk](mailto:homelessprevention@hillington.gov.uk) is the generic email address for contacts concerning homelessness and serves as the email for the Duty to Refer.
  - [homefinders@hillington.gov.uk](mailto:homefinders@hillington.gov.uk) provides a more specific email address for landlords and lettings agents
  - [lettings@hillington.gov.uk](mailto:lettings@hillington.gov.uk) provides a more specific address for housing associations concerning nominations to properties.

Officers will be extending this approach further with named officer(s) for housing voluntary sector partners before the end of June 2025.

## **Financial Implications**

This report relates to a total Homeless Prevention budget of £8.230m which includes a substantial savings target of £3.631m for 2025/26. This review will assist the service to achieve those savings as part of the strategic plan for the reducing the cost of Homeless Prevention through better management of demand. This review will help in demand management by enabling process mapping, aid process control, identify bottlenecks, enabling the undertaking of rationalisation without impacting on the customer experience. This review will help in allowing a critical view of

demand and allow robust monitoring and performance management to be implemented at the various stages of the customer journey. This coupled with staff training and case management systems will help in achieving these savings as it will improve the service leading to better staff output and service outcomes.

## RESIDENT BENEFIT & CONSULTATION

### **The benefit or impact upon Hillingdon residents, service users and communities**

The recommendations, if agreed, will improve the experience of residents when they approach the Council for help in relation to homelessness.

### **Consultation carried out or required**

The Committee sought a significant range of internal and external witness testimony and direct experiences of those presenting as homeless, as set out in the report.

## CORPORATE CONSIDERATIONS

### **Corporate Finance**

Corporate Finance have reviewed this report and note the Financial Implications set out above, noting the recommendations arising from the review in improving residents' satisfaction with the way in which they access advice and support to prevent homelessness, along with assisting in the delivery of the Temporary Accommodation Strategy and Action Plan to reduce the cost of homelessness. An update on the Council's Temporary Accommodation Action Plan is included on the same Cabinet Agenda as this report and includes further details on the progress against this plan.

### **Legal**

There are no specific legal implications directly arising from endorsing the Select Committee's recommendations set out in this report, which apply to the delivery of the Council's homelessness functions. The Council has various duties under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 towards applicants who are homeless or are threatened with homelessness. Under the Homeless Reduction Act 2017, the Council is further required to intervene and prevent homelessness. In carrying out these homelessness functions, the Council, pursuant to section 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998, must not act in a way that is contrary to any rights protected by the European Convention of Human Rights. The Council must also ensure it is acting in a manner compliant with the public sector equality duty under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. Alongside these recommendations, pursuant to sections 1-3 of the Homelessness Act 2002, the Council must also ensure that it publishes a new homelessness strategy every 5 years after a formal review. The Council's [current homelessness strategy](#) covers the period 2019 to 2024, thus a new strategy is due in 2025.

## BACKGROUND PAPERS

NIL.