

REVIEW BY THE SOCIAL SERVICES, HOUSING & PUBLIC HEALTH POLICY OVERVIEW COMMITTEE: The Impact of changes to Housing Benefits on residents and the Council

Cabinet Member(s)	Councillor Philip Corthorne / Councillor Jonathan Bianco
Cabinet Portfolio(s)	Social Services, Housing, Health and Wellbeing
Officer Contact(s)	Neil Fraser, Democratic Services
Papers with report	Final review report

HEADLINES

Summary	To receive the Social Services, Housing and Public Health Policy Overview Committee's review into Housing Benefit reforms and to give consideration to the recommendations of the review.
Putting our Residents First	This report supports the following Council objectives of: <i>Our People</i> .
Financial Cost	None directly from initial recommendations.
Relevant Policy Overview Committee	Social Services, Housing and Public Health.
Relevant Ward(s)	All.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Cabinet welcomes the Committee's findings from their review into Housing Benefits and supports the recommendations outlined below:

Policy Overview Committee Recommendations

- (1) That Cabinet notes the findings of the Social Services, Housing and Public Health Policy Overview Committee that show:
 - There is a wide-range of support available to those residents in receipt of benefits;

- Council Officers are providing the services and support required to assist residents through fundamental changes in benefits legislation; and
 - Efforts are also being made to transform services that assist residents on benefits to secure suitable accommodation.
- (2) With Universal Credit and other changes continuing to be rolled-out in coming years, that Cabinet welcomes a further review by the relevant Policy Overview Committee, during 2019/2020, on the systems and support in place to assist residents, given the forecasted increase in enquiries and caseloads.
- (3) That officers review available communication channels with a view to ensuring that Hillingdon residents are kept informed of the current and impending changes to housing benefits and, if affected, are sufficiently signposted towards the appropriate contactable service areas for support.

Reasons for recommendations

The recommendations of the review will enable the Council to continue to assess its role in the ongoing implementation of benefit reforms, in order to identify scope for further improvements.

Alternative options considered / risk management

The Cabinet could decide to reject some or all of the Committee's recommendations.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1. Housing Benefits have undergone considerable change, following the reforms mandated by Government through the Welfare Reform Act 2012, announcements made in the Summer Budget of July 2015, the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, and further reforms implemented in April 2016. These changes have impacted on how residents claim Housing Benefits, and how the Council must work to support its claimants.
2. The aim of the Committee's review was to examine the work which this Council carries out in supporting its residents through these changes and to investigate other ways in which the Council can improve its service to residents.
3. The Terms of Reference of the review were as follows:
 - *To understand what changes have been made, and why;*
 - *To examine the impact of these changes on Hillingdon residents and the work of the Council;*
 - *To look at options available, and the development of a strategy for Cabinet review, if appropriate.*

4. The Committee noted the significant work already undertaken by the Council to support residents and was satisfied that the changes mandated by national legislation were being implemented correctly.
5. Members welcomed the transformation of the way such benefit and housing services are being delivered, including new recruitment of specialist staff, to ensure consistency and quality of service.
6. However, the Committee recognised that many of the national reforms detailed, are in the process of being rolled out and that this, together with the further reforms as set out within the Homelessness Reduction Bill 2016/17, mean that the long-term impact on residents and the working practices of the Council are still to be determined. Therefore, it is recommended a further review of the effectiveness of the services provided to residents, together with an assessment of the impact on enquiries and officer casework, be undertaken at the appropriate time in the future, ideally by the relevant Policy Overview Committee.

Officer Comments on Recommendations where relevant

Whilst the attached report from the Committee sets out the review in more detail, officers advise Cabinet that they support the Committee's recommendation for a further review in 2019/20.

Financial Implications

Ongoing programmes exist within these service areas and appropriate budgets are available. The proposals put forward will be contained within the approved current budget allocations.

RESIDENT BENEFIT & CONSULTATION

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

The changes to Housing Benefit have had a major impact on the lives of those living and working in Hillingdon and ensuring that the Council continues to support its residents through these changes is critical. It is accepted that many of the changes required have been mandated by Government and are required nationally, and because of this, the scope to affect change at a local level is reduced.

The recommendations made in the report therefore focus on ensuring that the Council is continuing to ensure that residents are supported through these changes, that Hillingdon takes an active part in implementing and adopting future legislation, and that Hillingdon's processes and systems are robust and fit for purpose.

Consultation carried out or required

The Committee sought a wide range of internal witness testimony, as set out in the report.

CORPORATE CONSIDERATIONS

Corporate Finance

Corporate Finance have reviewed this report, confirming that there are no direct financial implications arising from the proposal that Cabinet support the recommendations of the Policy Overview Committee.

Legal

The Borough Solicitor confirms that there are no specific legal implications arising from this report.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

NIL