



Residents' Services Select Committee Review Scoping Report - 2023/2024

A Review of Homeless Prevention & the Customer Journey

1. OBJECTIVES

Aim of the review

At its meeting on 16 January 2024, the Residents' Services Select Committee agreed to undertake a major review of the Council's Housing Advice and Homelessness Service, with a particular focus on the residents' journey through the system and customer service.

This review aims to consider ways in which the customer journey could potentially be improved to better support residents during this process and improve residents' satisfaction with the way in which they access advice and support, to prevent homelessness. It is advised that the scope of any Select Committee's review is limited to the customer journey and how residents access the services and how advice is given as the homelessness process is set out in legislation. This will ensure any review can remain focussed.

Terms of Reference

The following Terms of Reference are suggested for the review, subject to any changes agreed by the Committee:

1. To gain a thorough understanding of the Council's Homeless Prevention Service and the resident's journey through this process.
2. To scrutinise the service delivery and review its effectiveness.

3. To review service users' feedback to explore the challenges faced by residents accessing the service.
4. To look at other local authorities that may have different models of service delivery for best practice, including research and findings from charities, housing bodies, regional bodies and organisations, e.g. GLA.
5. Subject to the Committee's findings, to make any conclusions, propose practical and deliverable actions, service and policy recommendations to the decision-making Cabinet.

2. BACKGROUND

National Context

The quarterly data published by the Department for Levelling Up, Homes and Communities (DLUHC) shows that nationally demand for affordable housing has risen sharply, with homelessness presentations to local authorities a particular pressure. At the end of June 2023, nearly 139,000 families with children were living in temporary accommodation – 7,430 more than at the end of March. 68,070 families with children were living in temporary accommodation (TA) at the end of June, 7,510 in B&Bs; a 93% increase over one year.

Nationally, there were circa 21,000 homeless acceptances in the second quarter of the year, an increase of 19% on a year ago.

There has been an 18% increase in the number of households who were homeless and helped by councils as a result of no-fault evictions.

London Councils has urged the Government to end the freeze on Local Housing Allowance (LHA) to prevent almost 60,000 Londoners in the private rented sector from becoming homeless over the next six years.

Research, which was commissioned by a cross-party group and carried out by Alma Economics, has estimated that an additional 16,500 to 22,000 London households will become homeless by 2030 unless the LHA is raised. London Councils stated that 22,000 households equate to 58,740 individuals, including 28,000 children. One in seven private renters in London are reliant on LHA to meet their housing costs.

The research suggested that restoring LHA to cover at least 30 per cent of local market rents would save the public finances in London more than £100m each year. The majority of these savings would come from reduced pressure on London boroughs' homelessness services, but also from lower costs to other parts of the public sector such as the NHS and social care. London accounts for more than half (57 per cent) of England's total number of homeless households in temporary accommodation.

In August, London Councils found that almost 170,000 Londoners were homeless and living in temporary accommodation arranged by their local authority. This is equivalent to around one in 50 Londoners overall and one in 23 children in the capital.

Turbulence in the capital's private rented sector is a "critical factor" behind the growing numbers of homeless Londoners. Research from the group and partners, published in July 2023, revealed a 41 per cent drop in private rental listings in the capital since 2020, while listed rental prices rose by 20 per cent.

The Autumn statement 2023 has announced that LHA is to be restored to 30% percentile local market rents for 2024/25 and then held at that level in cash terms.

Local Context

In Hillingdon we have seen a 27% increase in Homeless Presentations since the same period last year. We are receiving on average 100 new approaches each week for housing advice and support. The main reason for homelessness remains the ending of private rented tenancies with 27% of approaches being for this reason.

Households leaving friends or family accommodation represent 24% of all approaches and those requiring a move due to domestic abuse is just under 8%. The Council has also seen a considerable increase this year in households leaving asylum accommodation following receipt of their status and this represents 10% of all approaches.

The increase in presentations coupled with the lack of affordable private rented accommodation has placed considerable pressure on the service with the use of temporary accommodation now at 1,126 which is an increase of 492 since 2022/23.

Legislative Context

Any homeless decisions must be made in line with the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 and the Housing Act 1996 Part VII amended in 2002.

Anyone who is eligible can access advice on how they are able to resolve their situation or where to look for alternative accommodation but to be entitled to a full homeless duty, residents must meet the below five criteria.

- **Homeless or threatened with homelessness** - within 56 days. This can be due to notice being served or because the property is unsafe for the person to continue to reside within.
- **Eligible** – this relates to a person's immigration status, persons without recourse to public funds or those that are not considered habitually resident are not eligible.
- **Priority need** – this can be granted due to a number of reasons; for example, the person may have dependent children, be at risk of domestic abuse or be vulnerable as a result of a health condition or disability.
- **Not be intentionally homeless** – this is when a person has deliberately done something to cause them to lose their home for example caused anti-social behaviour or did not pay the rent when they could afford to do so.

- **Have a Local Connection** – the person has resided within the area or have close family living within the area for a prescribed period of time.

Continuous Service Improvement

The Council has a homeless service improvement programme (Project Neptune) in place that is implementing change and improvement across twelve workstreams. These are:

1. Strategy
2. Leadership
3. Performance
4. People
5. Systems
6. Resources
7. Entice (web & messaging)
8. Engage (accessing the service)
9. Experience (case management)
10. Exit (access to accommodation)
11. Embed (develop learning from the latest trends or demands)
12. Broader Issues

Since the project began in July 2023 there have been several changes delivered within the service and work remains ongoing to make the relevant service improvements.

One of the ways in which the Council has improved the customer journey is through the reinstatement of the triage function. This means that following submission of an application for housing advice and assistance, residents receive contact within 48 hours from an officer who can advise them on the supporting information they need for their application. This not only means that the Council remains in close contact with the resident but also ensures their case is allocated to a caseworker as soon as possible. Upon the case being allocated the resident is then sent an update on who their caseworker is, along with their caseworker's direct contact details and a link to be able to book an appointment with their caseworker at a mutually agreeable time.

Work is currently ongoing to review the website and the information available to residents to ensure that the Council's website offers support to those looking for advice, whilst also ensuring that the Council is setting expectations from the first point of contact about the type of support on offer.

Work also continues to review our ICT systems to reduce the administrative burden on staff to create further capacity for officers to support residents with their housing situations.

We have also developed a fresh training offer for staff new into the service and have been delivering a programme of development for our existing staff to ensure officers

have the relevant skills and knowledge to support our residents in need of housing advice.

Connected work

The internal audit progress review report dated 31 January 2024 indicates that limited assurance was given on homeless housing applications and states that:

“To avoid duplicating the wider housing transformation project this review focused on the operational management of homeless housing applications.

Testing identified weaknesses with the completion of documentation, including insufficient evidence of any segregation of duties with regards to approving decisions. We found no evidence to suggest the applications tested were not eligible for the support they received, however the gaps in the controls may have allowed other fraudulent applications.

Demand pressures and ongoing changes within the service also contributed to our findings in relation to the wider governance arrangements within the Service. However, these are being addressed as part of the wider housing transformation project.

Internal Audit was also able to see evidence of proactive preventative action being taken to reduce demand on the service. Key performance indicators in relation to these preventative measures are in place to help ensure appropriate action is taken.”

Executive Responsibilities

The portfolio Cabinet Member responsible is Councillor Eddie Lavery.

3. EVIDENCE & ENQUIRY

Potential witnesses (including service users)

- Dan Kennedy – Corporate Director of Central Services
- Maggie Nelson – Head of Housing Needs
- Debby Weller – Head of Strategy & Policy
- Melissa Blower – Housing Project Manager
- Representatives from other local authorities / housing organisations / charities, e.g. Citizens Advice Bureau, P3, Trinity, Thames Reach and Bell Farm Christian Centre
- service users (local residents who have required housing assistance)
- social prescribers

Lines of Enquiry

Lines of enquiry can be expanded as the review progresses or included in relevant witness session reports. However, lines of enquiry may include:

- establishing how effectively the housing advice service is being delivered.
- focus on the end user and how they have found the service in practice.
- exploring what support functions are in place and whether these can be improved.
- experiences from other local authorities and housing related organisations

Potential Witnesses

Witnesses will be identified by the Committee in consultation with relevant officers.

Surveys, site-visits or other fact-finding events

Such opportunities will be identified as the review progresses and could include a site visit to Housing Services Reception or a particular advice surgery.

Performance data and future information that may be required

To undertake this review the following data sources could be examined and provided:

- Anonymous summary details of Members' Enquiries, Service Requests and Customer complaints or suggestions received relating to residents' housing experiences.
- Satisfaction surveys or other feedback methods of eliciting customer feedback on their journey and experience e.g. mystery shopping.
- Case studies.
- Ombudsman decisions.
- Further information may also be identified as the review progresses.

4. REVIEW PLANNING & TIMETABLE

Proposed timeframe & milestones for the review:

Meeting Date	Action	Purpose / theme	Witnesses / officers attending
16 January 2024	Agree Review Topic	Information and analysis	Dan Kennedy Melissa Blower Debby Weller Maggie Nelson
13 February 2024	Agree Scoping Report	Information and analysis	Melissa Blower
13 March 2024	Witness Session 1	Information and analysis	Dan Kennedy Melissa Blower

			Maggie Nelson
16 April 2024	Witness Session 2	Information and analysis	Dan Kennedy Trinity
13 June 2024	Witness Session 3	Information and analysis	Dan Kennedy Hamid Khan (Interim Head of Housing Needs) Thames Reach P3 Written Submissions from service users
18 July 2024	Witness Session 4	Information and analysis	Melissa Blower Dan Kennedy Local support services / representatives of local charities (CAB, Bell Farm Christian Centre) IDVAs Social Prescribers
Outside the Committee – Survey, networking session, consultation, informal meeting with users, site visit, mystery shopper etc...			
24 September 2024	De-brief and emerging findings	To discuss key findings and identify potential recommendations	
27 November 2024	Approval of draft final report	Proposals – agree recommendations and final draft report to Cabinet	

Resource requirements

None.

Equalities impact

The 2010 Equality Act outlines the provisions of the Public Sector Equalities Duty which requires Public Bodies to have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010.
- advance equality of opportunity between people from different groups.
- foster good relations between people from different groups.

The broad purpose of this duty is to integrate considerations of equality into day-to-day business and keep them under review in decision making, the design of policies and the delivery of services. There are no equality impact issues relating to the matters set out in this report.

Background Papers / further reading

[Housing advice - Hillingdon Council](#)