

Residents' Services Select Committee – Review of Homelessness & the Customer Journey

SITE VISITS

As part of the review, site visits to the Contact Centre and to the Housing Reception Area at the Civic Centre were arranged for Committee Members. Some Members also participated in unannounced B&B visits alongside the Council's Counter Fraud Team.

Further to the visits, improvements to the Housing Reception Area were suggested to make it more welcoming - these included planting, a seating area and a children's play area.

MEETING MINUTES

WITNESS SESSION 1 – 13 MARCH 2024

Dan Kennedy (Corporate Director of Central Services), Melissa Blower (Housing Improvement Programme Manager), Debby Weller (Head of Housing Strategy and Policy) and Maggie Nelson (Head of Housing Needs) were in attendance to present the report and answer Members' questions.

The Corporate Director of Central Services acknowledged that the current situation in relation to homelessness was extremely challenging. There had been a 27% increase in demand with 100 people presenting as homeless each week. This was primarily being driven by evictions from private rental accommodation. It was noted that, over the last five years, there had been an increase in demand but a 41% reduction in affordable privately rented accommodation supply. The Council's strategy focussed on homelessness prevention and boosting of supply; 500 new homes were to be purchased and officers were also exploring ways in which they could increase supply in the private rental sector. The Council was also investing in improved systems and processes to improve the customer experience.

The Head of Housing Needs addressed the Committee Members and provided an overview of the customer pathway from start to finish. Members heard that customers usually approached the Council via the website in the first instance by completing an online form. The information provided was assessed and advice and guidance given if necessary. If appropriate, the enquiry was then passed to the triage team who assisted the customer in providing the information required and determined which additional documents needed to be provided. This enabled the team to establish whether the customer was eligible for assistance; some applicants had limited / no recourse to public funds. If eligibility was established, the case was assigned to a case officer.

Once assigned to a case officer, the first stage was prevention; officers tried to intervene as early as possible e.g. by negotiating with landlords in an attempt to enable the tenant to stay in their current accommodation. If prevention was unsuccessful, the

next stage was the relief stage at which point alternative accommodation was sought. A maximum of 56 days was allocated for both the prevention and relief stages of the process. During the relief stage, advice and guidance was provided to assist the client in securing accommodation. If they had a priority need for temporary accommodation, this would be provided. Temporary accommodation for larger families was difficult to source and very expensive, so these families were sometimes encouraged to remain in situ for as long as possible i.e. until a bailiff warrant was secured; however, they had the right to assist on temporary accommodation being provided if they did not wish to wait.

Once an individual or a family had been placed in temporary accommodation, officers then tried to secure private rented accommodation for them; affordability was a factor and the accommodation offered was sometimes out of borough. Once a property had been secured and the clients had moved in, the duty was discharged. If no accommodation had been organised by day 57 of the relief stage, officers would need to reach a decision within 15 days as to whether the Council had a longer-term duty to them.

It was acknowledged that the current situation was challenging with fewer houses becoming available. Many landlords were increasing their rents or choosing to sell their properties. Officers were aware that this was a very stressful situation for people and tried to be as empathetic as possible.

The Head of Housing Strategy and Policy was in attendance and provided an update on partnerships around homelessness. Members heard that the Council had a number of established partnerships with the voluntary sector, particularly with Trinity who assisted in meeting the needs of rough sleepers. Thames Reach also worked closely with the Council and helped with outreach projects to identify those who were sleeping rough at Heathrow and throughout the Borough. Heathrow presented a significant challenge - Thames Reach worked at the airport and a mental health worker also visited the airport to assist.

The Committee was informed that first stage accommodation was available at Olympic House which was managed by Trinity. There were other similar accommodation options across the borough which offered a lot of support including in relation to the health aspects associated with rough sleeping – this was mainly funded by CNWL. The funding was in place until the end of 2025, but it was hoped it would continue thereafter. Other support for those with drug or alcohol addiction was available through Arch – Hillingdon; grant funding was also available for this service.

Members heard that the Homelessness Strategy was a statutory 5-year document which ran until the end of 2024 and was in the process of being reviewed. It was anticipated that a draft of the new Strategy would be available in the autumn. There had been a number of key changes and 'Project Neptune' would feed into the new Strategy. There would be a focus on prevention and the issue of Autism / ADHD and the homeless would be explored which had not been included in the past. The current Strategy would be reviewed over the course of the next few months and the consultation process would be completed over the summer. Service users would be involved in this process to ensure their experience of the customer journey and how this fed into service provision was included.

Members sought further clarification regarding the current staff training programme noting that service users often presented with mental health issues, and some reported that officers were judgemental and lacked empathy. In response to this, it was confirmed that training was available for all staff. Trauma-informed issues training was to be introduced in the near future and was booked for 1 May 2024. New training was also to be introduced in response to new legislation which set out the duty of the Council in respect of domestic abuse.

In response to further questions from Councillors, it was confirmed that, in the past, customers often had the same case officer throughout the housing process. Unfortunately, this was no longer the case due to staff turnover and an increase in case numbers; there was a reliance on technology to ensure cases were effectively passed on to new officers.

Members sought further clarity regarding the 56-day relief stage of the process. It was confirmed that, if a suitable property were secured, it would be offered to the family in question. The family was not obliged to accept the property but, if they chose not to, the Council's duty would be discharged at that point. The customer could request an independent review and a decision would be taken independently – a further 56 days were allocated for this process. Should the Council's original decision be upheld, its duty would be discharged at that point. However, if the Council's decision were overturned, the family would be offered an alternative property in due course.

With regard to accountability, the Committee was advised that officers were responsible for ensuring all the necessary information was on file. Senior officers carried out quality assurance checks and met with officers once a month to review their caseload and address any concerns.

Members expressed concern regarding the mental health and wellbeing of officers who were often overloaded with work. It was acknowledged that it was a very stressful role - some officers had previously had up to 100 open cases which was unmanageable. 5 new officers had been recruited to assist and 150 cases had been transferred across to said officers. Staff wellbeing was taken seriously, and extra support was available if needed.

In response to further questions from Councillors, it was confirmed that an out of hours housing service was available. It was acknowledged that not all people wanted to / were able to apply for housing assistance online. If necessary, those who presented in person were directed to support services who could assist them in registering online. Information was also available in other languages. It was confirmed that those who were granted leave to remain were given 28 days' notice then received an eviction letter which only allowed them one week to vacate their premises. Housing officers were working with the Home Office and it had recently been agreed that the 28-day letter would be accepted as notice giving local authorities more time to find appropriate accommodation. It was acknowledged that the situation in relation to single people was particularly challenging as they often did not have a priority need for accommodation.

Councillors enquired whether the IT systems currently in place were fit for purpose and asked how the expectations of clients were managed. In response to this, the Head of Housing Needs recognised that some people thought it was better to present as homeless rather than waiting for a Council property. This was never a good idea. Officers always tried to manage the expectations of customers and ensured they fully understood the process. In terms of the IT systems, Members were informed that Locata was currently used for housing allocations and Jigsaw for homeless applications. From April 2024, the current Jigsaw system would be changing to a Locata-based system thereby enabling the two systems to work together more efficiently. It was confirmed that the new systems would enable officers to drill further into the data to establish patterns and take a more proactive approach. Complaints data would also be used to drive improvements, inform training and improve communication.

Members requested a presentation on the new systems as this would be beneficial.

In terms of acquiring new properties, the Corporate Director of Central Services confirmed that all options were being considered and speed was of the essence. During the first year of a 3-year programme, it would be necessary to purchase property directly, but it was important to ensure that this process did not end up triggering homelessness. If landlords had empty properties or a portfolio to sell, the Council may consider such purchases where appropriate. All options were being considered to boost supply including private rentals of reasonable quality. The social sector was also being explored. The Council would also ensure it achieved the maximum possible in terms of grant funding.

With regard to temporary accommodation, it was recognised that people were sometimes housed in an overcrowded situation for a while due to a lack of available accommodation. If the temporary accommodation provided was not acceptable, action would be taken and the customer would be removed.

Councillors noted that the standard of accommodation provided by private landlords was often unacceptable. A charter was proposed to ensure properties were fully and appropriately vetted. It was suggested that properties should be inspected by other parties to ensure they met the required standard.

At the request of Members, it was agreed that the Head of Housing Needs would prepare a step-by-step summary of the homelessness process which would be circulated to the Select Committee.

It was suggested that a visit to the contact centre would be beneficial to enable Members to better understand the process and see firsthand how officers interacted with other departments across the Council when handling housing-related calls.

RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services Select Committee noted the evidence heard at the witness session and sought clarification as necessary in the context of its review of homelessness and the customer journey in Hillingdon.

WITNESS SESSION 2 – 16 APRIL 2024

The Committee held its second witness session relating to its review of homelessness and the customer experience and heard from Dan Kennedy, Corporate Director of Central Services, and from Carys Hedley representing a partner organisation, Trinity.

The Corporate Director of Central Services began by discussing the challenges local authorities faced regarding homelessness, highlighting a reduction in private rental accommodation, and increasing unaffordability. He emphasised the difficulty for non-priority individuals, often single people, to access affordable housing and the Council's reliance on the voluntary sector i.e. organisations such as Trinity and Thames Reach for support. The Select Committee heard that the Council had been working successfully in partnership with Trinity for a number of years.

Carys Hedley, Director of Services at Trinity, addressed the Select Committee detailing Trinity's provision of 231 supported spaces and 41 long-term unsupported accommodation places in Hillingdon. She mentioned the support offered to families fleeing war and the reconnection service available to assist with tenancy sustainment.

Members heard that Trinity worked closely with the Council and most of the referrals they received came from the local authority. Trinity had been experiencing considerable challenges in recent years, particularly in relation to Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates. It was now cheaper for people to stay in Trinity accommodation than move into the private rental sector. This was having a significant impact, and the service was becoming stagnant; people were ready to move on but were unable to afford private rentals therefore had nowhere to go. At times, people were offered accommodation outside of the Borough, but they were often reluctant to move away from a familiar area and their support network in Hillingdon. Another concern raised related to the pressure from the number of families and single homeless individuals housed in hotels.

The Select Committee was informed that the current supported housing offered floating support but did not have staff on site full time. Many of the referrals received were from those with complex needs including drug, alcohol and mental health needs. Trinity therefore planned to create a new service offering a specialist housing programme with full-time live-in support, in addition to the supported housing currently provided. However, it was acknowledged that this was extremely challenging given the lack of housing stock in the Borough.

Councillors sought further clarification regarding the nature of the specialist housing offer. It was explained that the plan was for this housing to assist in addressing the need for supported housing with on-site support for individuals with complex needs, including drug, alcohol, and mental health issues.

Members enquired about the impact of other boroughs placing residents in Hillingdon and vice versa. It was confirmed that Trinity prioritised Hillingdon residents but sometimes accepted others due to lack of suitable referrals. The difficulty in encouraging residents to accept housing offers outside their familiar borough was also highlighted.

The Select Committee sought to understand the processes of working with the Council and how to improve them. The strong relationship between Trinity and the rough sleeper team was highlighted but it was noted that there were challenges such as perceived lack of empathy from housing officers, communication issues, and the intimidating environment of the Civic Centre. A rotating system for housing officers to avoid burnout, retraining on language used with clients, and creating a more welcoming environment at the Civic Centre were suggested. It was noted that a rota system to ensure housing officers were not always working in a client-facing role would be beneficial. It was also recommended that staff receive further training regarding the use of appropriate language when dealing with people seeking housing support; these individuals were often in a desperate situation, and it was very difficult for them to hear that they were not considered a priority.

Members acknowledged the need for better systems and technology for case handovers and welcomed suggestions for improving the Civic Centre environment. The Director of Services at Trinity recommended that security staff be trained to be more approachable and friendly when clients presented for support with housing matters. It was suggested that plants would make the environment appear more welcoming as would smiling friendly staff. A family-friendly environment with sofas and toys for the children was also suggested.

The Select Committee sought further information regarding the support for tenants to sustain tenancies. The importance of correct referrals in the first place and comprehensive support to assist clients to live independently and prevent a cycle of homelessness was affirmed.

In response to Members' concerns regarding safeguarding young people, it was confirmed that Trinity conducted individual risk assessments and worked closely with local services to ensure support and safety. If young people were considered too high risk, it was unfortunately not possible to provide housing for them.

Councillors enquired about the impact of asylum seekers in hotels on homelessness. Members heard that Trinity predicted worsening conditions due to quick eviction notices from hotels which was adding to the street homelessness problem. It was noted that the Home Office's strategy to accelerate asylum claims had led to a high number of single, non-priority individuals needing housing.

Members addressed the empathy factor and staff turnover in housing teams. To safeguard the mental health of staff, the Director of Services at Trinity recommended well-being measures, such as regular team meetings where staff could discuss difficult cases, flexible working hours, 'double up working' for challenging cases, away days, regular annual leave, and enforced rest periods to ensure staff members got the respite they needed.

The Corporate Director acknowledged the challenge for officers of not having immediate housing solutions for evicted individuals and emphasised the need for a strong prevention strategy and a healthy supply of affordable housing. The Council was working towards this, but it was proving very challenging. With regard to support for officers, Members were informed that the Council had invested more resources to create a wellbeing room for staff. Case work support supervision had also been

introduced. Improvements were being made but there was still a long way to go. It was confirmed that workforce planning and development was a key part of future plans, but it was acknowledged that recruiting and retaining staff was challenging.

Councillors discussed the mental health of housing staff and the “perfect storm” of reliance on affordable private rented accommodation. The Corporate Director agreed on the importance of good communication and outlined plans to improve customer experience and engagement. It was noted that residents often had to call up repeatedly to request an update on their housing case which was frustrating and upsetting. The Council was working to address this – one possible solution would be for housing officers to provide residents with a weekly update. It was acknowledged that there was room for improvement, but plans were in place to achieve this.

Members raised concerns regarding the lack of empathy and judgmental behaviour of housing staff towards clients, particularly those facing domestic abuse. It was suggested that training should include input from clients themselves to help staff understand and respect the experiences of those they served.

In response to this, Trinity highlighted the benefits of hiring staff with lived experiences to ensure non-judgmental treatment. Members were informed that Trinity gathered feedback from residents through annual surveys to improve services and training, stressing fair and respectful treatment for all.

Members sought further clarification regarding the selection process for social prescribers for the July witness session, noting an apparent unexpected choice in the scoping report. It was confirmed that Democratic Services would follow this up and respond on this matter outside of the meeting.

The Chair concluded the session by thanking the attendees, with the discussion underscoring the importance of empathy, understanding, and client feedback in addressing homelessness.

RESOLVED:

That the Residents’ Services Select Committee noted the evidence heard at the witness session and sought clarification as necessary in the context of its review of Homelessness and the Customer Journey in Hillingdon.

WITNESS SESSION 3 – 13 JUNE 2024

Dan Kennedy, Corporate Director of Central Services, introduced the item and invited colleagues from P3 and Thames Reach to share their experiences and perspectives on homelessness.

Thames Reach

Sophie Murray, Lead Manager of the Hillingdon Thames Reach Outreach Team, addressed the Committee Members confirming that Thames Reach worked closely with Council Housing officers.

Ms Murray outlined the team's work with the Rough Sleeper team within Hillingdon Council, their response to support rough sleepers, and their collaboration with agencies such as ARCH (Addiction, Recovery, Community Hillingdon Service), RAMP (Refugee Asylum and Migration Policy project) and mental health teams. The challenges faced, including a lack of options for accommodation and the high support needs of many rough sleepers, were highlighted.

P3

Zara Street (Operations Manager of the Hillingdon Thames Reach Outreach Team) Laura Lawson and Nicola Tallon were in attendance representing P3. Members heard that P3 provided support to young people and families. The Committee was informed that P3 ran four services from the Navigator Centre, including a housing advice service, a floating support service for looked after children and care experienced young people, a well-being project for early intervention prevention, and move-on properties. They also ran a family advice service for families with a child aged 5 and under. P3 highlighted their previous work with the Council and their current collaborations with various partners within the Borough. The challenges faced in moving young people on to appropriate accommodation were highlighted.

P3 discussed their supported accommodation services, which included four units for 16 to 25-year-olds who had previously been in care. They highlighted the challenges of moving young people on to appropriate accommodation due the limited supply of affordable move-on housing, making it difficult to find suitable accommodation for these individuals.

It was noted that everyone involved in providing accommodation was currently facing difficulties. The high cost of private sector rents and the Council's struggle to find private landlords willing to accept homeless individuals were identified as significant issues. The consensus was that all parties were currently stuck with limited resources and options in addressing homelessness.

Members sought further clarification regarding the improvements needed in the Housing Department to enhance the experience for both workers and clients. In response, the emphasis was placed on the importance of communication. It was noted that case work changes within the housing department sometimes occurred without the knowledge of partnership workers. The need for a platform where everyone could

communicate was highlighted, given the numerous services within the Borough and the housing linked to them.

The communication with the robust sleeper pathway was praised, but it was pointed out that some people P3 worked with ended up sleeping rough because their applications with the Council's Homelessness Prevention Team had found they were not in priority need for housing assistance.

Members heard that, when people approached the Housing Department at the Civic Centre, it was extremely challenging for officers due to the high level of homelessness demand presenting to the Council. P3 reported that, when they contacted homelessness prevention officers, they did not always receive a timely response. It was felt that more time and patience should be spent with people, especially those with language barriers, trauma, and PTSD, to help them understand their situation better. The hope was expressed that the risk of rough sleeping could be reduced or at least prevented differently. It was confirmed that P3 had previously provided the Housing Team at the Council with a list of suggestions as to how the service could be improved.

In respect of families with young children, Members enquired how a balance could be achieved between building trust with parents while addressing the needs of the young person. Members also sought clarity as to how officers worked with local residents to alleviate concerns about housing placements. In response to this, P3 emphasised the importance of communication, regular support visits, and ensuring appropriate accommodation for those transitioning from homelessness. They confirmed that their role primarily involved providing advice and guidance rather than directly offering housing.

In response to further questions from the Committee it was acknowledged that some homeless people did not want to be helped. In such cases it was important to be patient, build up trust and proceed very slowly. Asylum seekers and immigration cases were often reluctant to engage with services due to concerns regarding their immigration status. With this entrenched cohort of people, Thames Reach sometimes linked up with other charities such as St Mungo's.

In terms of communication, P3 confirmed that they had an excellent relationship with partners such as Thames Reach, and the YMCA but would like to receive a quicker response from the Council. Thames Reach could not make referrals to the YMCA but worked closely with P3 and Trinity. Communication with the Council was a lengthy process.

Members heard that, following a referral to the Council, P3 continued to work with individuals from start to finish especially if the case was complex. They kept cases open and checked in on a monthly basis to ensure individuals had everything they needed. Thames Reach advised Members that, once a referral had been made to the Council, they continued to assist individuals in maintaining their tenancies by offering support with finances, mental health, grants etc. Wrap around care was provided until the cases were ready to be closed.

It was confirmed that communication between the Council and P3 had been much easier when P3 had been co-located in the Civic Centre. This was no longer the case and all decisions in relation to offers of accommodation now had to be referred to the Head of Service. It was felt that there was sometimes a lack of consistency in information being given by officers.

Members enquired whether all partners had access to a central database system. It was reported that Thames Reach had their own database for rough sleepers but could not access Hillingdon's systems. It was commented by P3 that Hillingdon's previous case work database was not very user-friendly (the case work system changed on 1st April). Direct access to a central portal which linked all the records together would be welcomed by P3 but may not work for Thames Reach. P3 suggested that there should be one point of contact at the Council to deal with P3 and young people. There were a number of agency staff at present - improved structure and better communication was suggested. Thames Reach did not feel a central database was necessary provided that housing officers answered their requests for information in a timely way. It was reported that monthly catch-up meetings at the Civic Centre would be helpful.

In response to further questions from the Committee, it was confirmed that Trinity had low, medium and high-level support units. It was reported that Trinity struggled to purchase stock and the YMCA only had one low support block. Members heard that Thames Reach could refer to P3 and the Council but not to the YMCA. Most of the people Thames Reach worked with were high need, but the vast majority (approximately 90%) were deemed non-priority although they often had alcohol or drug issues.

Members sought further clarification regarding the suggestions sent to the Council by P3. It was confirmed that these related to caseload, supervision, holistic approach etc. Many of the suggestions had been taken on board within the current improvement plan for the service. P3's delivery model had changed to incorporate some of them e.g. floating support and partnership working.

Members sought the opinion of P3 regarding the banding systems used by the Council. In response to this, P3 confirmed that they did not use the Locata system. It was recognised that it was a constant battle for staff in lettings to keep abreast of all the current information. Each case had to be assessed carefully hence time frames were long.

In response to further questions, it was reported that many of the housing officers at the Council were good at their jobs but there was a lack of consistency. The use of agency staff was unsettling for both staff and residents. Young people found it somewhat of a lottery and reported that staff often failed to call them back. P3 confirmed that, when a staff member left the Council, they usually received a bounce back email providing an alternative contact. However, it was felt that partners should be informed of staff changes in advance rather than finding out this way. Councillors suggested that a Venn diagram of staff should be prepared for professional partners and updated regularly. There should be a quality handover of cases when staff members left the Council to ensure continuity.

The Corporate Director of Central Services acknowledged that the service needed to continue to improve. An improvement plan incorporating a workforce plan and recruitment campaign was being actively implemented and he would welcome the opportunity to present the plan and an update to Members at a future meeting of the Select Committee. It was recognised that some agency staff did an excellent job and where under performance was identified this was being addressed. The Corporate

Director of Central Services confirmed that he would spend some time in the contact centre on a regular basis to listen to residents' experience. He informed Members that the case work system for homeless case work had been changed in April. Demand on the service was relentless with 140 new cases received the previous week; an increase of approximately 30% on the previous year. Many of those approaching the Council for help had never been homeless before but had become homeless having been evicted from privately rental properties. Members heard that the infrastructure was in place but improvements were underway.

RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services Select Committee noted the evidence heard at the witness session and sought clarification as necessary in the context of its review of Homelessness and the Customer Journey in Hillingdon.

WITNESS SESSION 4 – 18 JULY 2024

Dan Kennedy, Corporate Director of Central Services, introduced the item. The Select Committee heard from Sonia Stewart, Independent Domestic Violence Manager, and from Sultana Ahmed, Independent Domestic Violence Adviser (IDVA).

Sonia Stewart and Sultana Ahmed addressed the Select Committee providing an overview of the Hillingdon domestic advocacy service and highlighting its evolution over the past two years from focusing solely on high-risk victims of domestic abuse to now supporting victims across all levels of risk.

Members heard that the service now included a floating support side, catering to low and medium-risk victims, in addition to the high-risk interventions provided by the Independent Domestic Violence Advocates (IDVAs). The team comprised 5 IDVAs and 3 floating support workers, offering both short-term crisis intervention and long-term support.

Officers raised concerns regarding the approach to housing for victims of domestic abuse. It was noted that victims presenting to housing were often asked about police involvement (which formed part of the enquiries the Council made when a victim approached the Council for assistance), which could influence the support they received. This was concerning as not all victims may involve the police for various reasons, including threats from the perpetrator.

The Committee heard that the requirement for documentation when seeking housing support posed a significant challenge for victims fleeing emergency situations. It was recognised that in such circumstances, victims may not have the ability to gather necessary identification documents, which were crucial for accessing housing support.

The challenges faced by victims of domestic abuse when seeking housing support were highlighted. Concerns were raised about the need to ask about police involvement, which may not always be present despite the occurrence of domestic abuse.

It was highlighted that victims fleeing domestic abuse were often offered accommodation far from their support systems, which could exacerbate their vulnerability. The Committee recognised the significant impact of relocating victims away from their jobs, families, communities, and children's schools, especially when they or their children had additional complex needs.

Members were informed that inconsistencies were reported by clients when approaching housing services for assistance, particularly concerning the advice given about the possibility of remaining within the Borough. The lack of clarity in policy or criteria used to determine why some victims stayed in Borough while others were relocated outside the Borough was highlighted as a matter needing further enquiry.

It was noted that while advising clients, there was a need to manage their expectations regarding potential housing outcomes. However, the inconsistency in the application of housing policies had led to confusion and the need for correct and effective guidance.

With regard to the Sanctuary Scheme, officers noted that the scheme assessed properties to implement additional security measures for victims of domestic abuse who wished to remain in their homes. There was a lack of clarity around time frames for referrals and responses. Automated messages to confirm receipt of referrals and inform clients of expected contact times would be welcomed.

In terms of staff turnover, the Committee was advised that there was a high turnover of staff within the housing team. Clients and advocates were not always informed about staff changes. The importance of consistent communication and updates for clients was highlighted. It was noted that some housing officers left their jobs without informing clients, leading to missed communications and unresolved issues.

In respect of appointments and Housing Reception, officers raised concerns about victims being turned away if they arrived without an appointment. There was a need for clear guidance on what reception staff should advise clients. Members heard that victims arriving at housing reception without an appointment were signposted to main reception where security could provide immediate assistance and an appointment made

Officers commented that it was vital to use professional interpreters for clients who did not speak English rather than relying on family members or children.

In respect of the Housing Reception environment, it was noted that this was not a welcoming place. Victims were at times obliged to spend the whole day there but there were no amenities for them and their children such as water, toys, and magazines to meet clients' needs. Clients were scared to leave for fear of missing their chance to speak to someone.

Members were informed that the working relationship with housing officers had improved since HDAAS had relocated to the Civic Centre. Officers worked proactively with housing colleagues and were able to communicate directly with housing officers to address concerns and discuss risks. However, the importance of consistent communication with housing officers, especially during staff changes was reiterated. Timely updates on case allocations were essential. At times, officers and clients received bounced back emails and notifications about staff changes when chasing up cases which was unhelpful.

With regards to Domestic Abuse training, Members heard that training had been offered to various departments within the Council but there had been a lack of response from housing managers. The importance of understanding victims' perceptions of risk and being supportive and believing their disclosures was highlighted - victims may be discouraged from seeking help if they felt disbelieved or unsupported.

Rachel Bulley, Social Prescribing Link Worker representing Colne Union PCN, NHS, addressed the Committee. Rachel began by explaining the concept of PCNs (Primary Care Networks), which were collections of GP surgeries that worked together within a network. Colne Union PCN represented the areas of West Drayton and Uxbridge. There were many social prescribers across the Borough of Hillingdon, each associated with different PCNs. The organisation they worked for was called Confederation Hillingdon, a CIC (Community Interest Company) based around healthcare.

Social prescribing was a relatively new role within the NHS, focusing on the social elements of a person's well-being. The NHS had traditionally focused on healthcare, but now there was a comprehensive approach to consider patients' social, practical, and well-being needs. Social prescribers received referrals from GPs, reception staff,

and even residents themselves. They assisted with a wide range of issues, including social isolation, housing problems, debt, finance issues, bereavement, and cancer care.

Rachel emphasised the importance of social prescribers understanding and being aware of local support and community services within Hillingdon. Integrated care was crucial, as gaps in services could lead to patients falling through the cracks and returning to primary care. Preventative support in primary care was essential to avoid escalation to secondary care. Social prescribers worked with local authorities, medical abuse charities, and other organisations to ensure residents were aware of and could access the services they needed.

Rachel expressed her support for the points raised by Sonia and Sultana regarding domestic abuse. Although social prescribers did not necessarily deal with domestic abuse directly, many of the issues raised were relevant to their work.

Members expressed concerns about the experience of victims of domestic abuse noting that some victims did not feel believed when they presented themselves to the housing department, which could lead them to return to their perpetrators. Councillors emphasised the importance of understanding the strength it took for a victim to disclose their situation and the negative impact of dismissive attitudes from housing staff. The ongoing effects of domestic abuse, including post-traumatic stress were highlighted; it was vital that support should not end once a victim left their home.

Officers echoed Members' concerns. The lack of empathy and understanding experienced by some patients in dire situations was noted. Examples of negative feedback included unsupportive questions about overcrowding. It was explained that social prescribers often found themselves stuck between patients and housing officers who did not connect with the humanistic side of patients. However, Rachel also mentioned that her organisation had been working with the transformation team in the housing department to bridge the gap between primary care and the local Housing Authority. Initiatives included Brightside Workshops for primary care staff, the potential creation of a new role within housing to act as a link between patients and housing, and the development of Q&A leaflets to address common patient questions. Training for housing staff to improve their understanding and handling of domestic abuse cases was of paramount importance.

Questions were invited from Members. One Councillor highlighted a concerning issue that had come to light during their visit to the housing reception / contact centre. They noted that the housing reception felt like a custody suite and questioned the process of directing individuals to the security desk. The Councillor expressed concern about the treatment of domestic abuse victims who presented at the housing reception without an appointment, questioning whether they were turned away or advised to go to the main reception to speak to security. They emphasised the need for clarity on this process and the training provided to security personnel, noting that interactions with security could be triggering for some victims.

Another Councillor enquired about integrated care within housing, particularly concerning homelessness caused by drug and alcohol abuse. They asked about the availability of detox facilities and mental health care services. Officers responded,

explaining that social prescribing in Hillingdon involved referring patients to ARCH, the main service for addiction support. They acknowledged capacity issues within ARCH and highlighted the role of mental health practitioners in triaging patients and providing support in primary or secondary care. They also mentioned ongoing neighbourhood projects addressing anxiety and depression.

The Committee thanked the officers for their presentation and acknowledged the concerns raised about communication and inconsistency of approach. They enquired about staff turnover and resource availability, asking how the Council could better support the officers' work. Officers explained that their service had grown stronger with additional staff and floating support workers. They shared statistics on high-risk referrals and emphasised the need for accessible counselling services for domestic abuse victims. They noted the challenges in finding counselling services due to long waiting lists.

The discussion continued with a focus on improving communication and coordination. Officers stressed the importance of having a single point of contact within the domestic abuse team to streamline communication and reduce the need for constant chasing. They highlighted the need for clear processes and better understanding of available schemes, such as the rent deposit scheme and local housing living allowance. Officers described the difficulties faced by patients in accessing these schemes and the vicious cycle of requirements and delays.

Councillors sought further clarity regarding the impact of housing issues on residents' mental health. Officers explained that housing crises significantly affected patients' mental health, often leading to resistance in accessing mental health services. They noted the gap between primary and secondary mental health services and the challenges in supporting patients with situational mental health issues. Officers emphasised the need for better communication and understanding of processes to support residents effectively.

Councillors and officers agreed on the importance of clear communication, accessible support services, and streamlined processes to better serve residents and address the challenges faced by those experiencing homelessness and related issues.

Councillors sought recommendations from officers regarding improvements to the service and emphasised the importance of understanding how the service could be improved.

Officers provided an update on the current progress. They mentioned that, slowly but surely, improvements were being made, particularly through collaboration with the transformation team and housing departments. Officers highlighted the involvement of key individuals, such as Fola and Reginald, in integrating services. They discussed the potential benefits of having a single point of contact to provide patient support and information. Officers emphasised the importance of a two-way relationship between housing officers and their team, where both parties supported each other. They also mentioned ongoing roadshows aimed at educating residents about housing expectations and processes. Officers stressed the need for clear communication and support for residents, avoiding confusing jargon.

Members thanked the officers for their hard work and acknowledged the importance of scrutinising the service's effectiveness. They sought further clarification regarding the experiences of counterparts in other boroughs and whether there were any best practices that could be adopted.

In response to Members' questions, it was confirmed that housing departments across different boroughs faced similar issues, particularly in supporting domestic abuse victims with empathy and without unnecessary scrutiny. They shared examples of gatekeeping and the challenges faced by victims in accessing support. Officers mentioned that colleagues from other boroughs, such as Hounslow, experienced similar issues. They highlighted the difficulties in signposting clients to other boroughs for emergency accommodation and the lack of communication and consistency in support. The Committee was advised of the challenges in accessing refuge spaces for victims and the need for better coordination.

A representative from the public health team offered to provide data on homelessness profiles against comparator sites via other boroughs. They mentioned that the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) held relevant data and could assist the Committee in understanding the broader context.

Councillors expressed interest in having sight of said data and emphasised the importance of understanding the current standing to effectively improve the service. They also enquired about support from other bodies, such as the Greater London Authority (GLA), and whether additional support had been requested. Officers acknowledged that they had not asked for additional support from other bodies but indicated that it might be beneficial.

The Committee enquired about the process of relocating clients out of the Borough and whether they remained with the service or were transferred to the local authority in the new area. It was confirmed that clients relocated out of the Borough were referred to the domestic abuse service in the new area. If children were involved, a transfer to the new area's children social care team would be arranged. Members heard that some clients returned to their original area due to familiarity and support networks.

Members raised concerns about the lack of communication when high-risk cases moved back to the Borough and the potential gaps in support. They also highlighted the need for an in-house counselling service for both victims and staff, given the emotional toll of their work.

In response to this, officers agreed with the need for clinical supervision and support for team members who regularly dealt with harrowing accounts of violence. They emphasised the importance of having someone independent to offload to and discuss their experiences.

Dan Kennedy, the Corporate Director of Central Services thanked the Chair and everyone for their contributions. He provided context on the current tough environment, noting that the number of housing needs approaches had increased by about 28% since 2019, with 120 to 140 approaches every week. He highlighted the compounded challenges due to rising mortgage interest rates, increasing rents, and

landlords exiting the market. Mr Kennedy emphasised the support from the Cabinet, which had invested in acquiring 300 extra properties and working with housing associations to increase housing supply by an additional 300 properties this year compared to last year, rising to 500 homes over the next three years.

The Corporate Director of Central Services also mentioned that the changes made over the last year had reduced the number of placements into temporary accommodation by 10% compared to the previous year. He stressed the importance of preventing homelessness to provide stable and secure housing for families, which lead to better outcomes for children. He noted a 7% drop in the number of households living in the highest cost temporary accommodation since mid-April, with no families in commercial hotels and no families with children living in shared accommodation for more than six weeks.

Mr Kennedy acknowledged the need for consistency and mentioned efforts to strengthen staff training. He discussed the challenges of handling referrals from other boroughs and the importance of asking the right questions with empathy. He expressed the intention to reinstate a model with dedicated officers for domestic abuse cases to build expertise and empathy. The importance of having champions for other services, such as hospital discharge, and the need for a triage function to handle cases effectively was highlighted.

The Committee was appraised of the importance of relationships with private landlords and the need to increase the supply of private rented sector accommodation. The Corporate Director recognised the pressure on staff and mentioned efforts to strengthen welfare arrangements and supervision policies. He discussed the need to improve communication with residents, including making letters more understandable and providing clear explanations from housing officers. Moreover, he addressed the appointment process for housing needs reception, noting the importance of safety for staff and the need to improve the system to provide a better customer experience. He mentioned ongoing work with the corporate management team to make further improvements.

Officers expressed concern about the low number of domestic abuse referrals from housing. They questioned whether housing officers were referring victims to domestic abuse services and children's social care in the new boroughs when victims moved out of the Borough. The need for better coordination and communication to ensure that victims received the necessary support was highlighted.

RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services Select Committee noted the evidence heard at the witness session and sought clarification as necessary in the context of its review of Homelessness and the Customer Journey in Hillingdon.

REVIEW OF HOMELESSNESS AND THE CUSTOMER JOURNEY: UPDATE FROM COUNCIL OFFICERS ON IMPROVEMENT ACTIVITY – 18 JULY 2024

Dan Kennedy, Corporate Director of Central Services, provided an update on the Housing Improvement Activity Plan to date. He emphasised that the plan addressed a wide range of issues related to homelessness and the customer journey. The plan included strategies and policies, workforce planning, and the importance of having more entry-level roles to build a permanent workforce. The challenges of recruiting

and retaining staff in this area and the need for a ladder of career progression within local government were highlighted. He also mentioned the importance of customer care and management supervision and providing support to staff dealing with traumatic casework.

Members were informed about the housing commissioning plan, which aimed to increase the number of properties and make the best use of existing housing stock. This included encouraging under-occupiers, both council tenants and housing association tenants, to downsize, acquiring more properties, and utilising the private rented sector. The plan set challenging but achievable targets to meet these goals.

The Select Committee heard that understanding the local housing market and its pressures was another key area of focus. It was believed that by understanding the market, the Council could predict and manage it more effectively. This included knowing which private sector landlords were evicting tenants and why and building relationships with them to prevent evictions. The importance of understanding the cost of temporary accommodation and prioritising the commissioning of new properties to help people move on or prevent homelessness were also emphasised.

The Corporate Director stressed the need for a proactive approach, building a plan and investment strategy to create a positive pipeline of housing supply. He also highlighted the value of strong working relationships within the Council and with other services, such as Children's Services and Adult Social Care. Good working relationships could help prevent homelessness and encourage families to accept accommodation offers.

Councillors were advised that the biggest challenge was responding to emergency accommodation needs, which often required finding immediate solutions. Preventing or avoiding on-the-day presentations was critical.

Councillors noted that since the review had started, every witness session had highlighted that some staff within the housing department lacked empathy. They enquired if any action was being taken to identify and address these staff members' communication issues. Members emphasised the importance of how questions were asked and sought clarity on the plan to address this issue.

In response to this, officers acknowledged the concern, agreeing that even one or two staff members lacking empathy could impact the level of customer care. They mentioned that communications with staff about expectations had been strengthened. Managers were shadowing staff during conversations with residents, and the officers themselves were listening to calls and attending contact centre calls regularly. The need for empathy and clarity in communication, even when solutions were not readily available was highlighted. Members heard that individuals who were less helpful had been identified and the concerns addressed. Training and conversations had been conducted.

Councillors commented that it would be beneficial for the Committee to hear about tangible changes over the next few months. They suggested adding a Key Performance Indicator (KPI) to track improvements in staff empathy and communication.

Members enquired as to the percentage of properties expected to be lost due to the right to buy scheme. It was confirmed that approximately 50 properties were lost each year through right to buy, and this number fluctuated with market conditions. Members heard that the programme aimed to outpace this loss by targeting family-sized properties and properties suitable for downsizers.

Councillors raised a case where a resident had to present themselves to the Civic Centre due to the out-of-hours team lacking correct homeless prevention training. They enquired about the training being offered to the out-of-hours team. In response to this, it was confirmed that the out-of-hours officers were very experienced officers, but the particular issue raised was acknowledged. Officers mentioned that they were reviewing the out-of-hours service ensure a resilient team was in place and ensure that staff were well-trained and knowledgeable about referral processes and thresholds.

The Select Committee sought further clarification as to whether the efforts being taken to reduce the number of homeless families in high-cost temporary accommodation included asylum seekers who had become homeless after being evicted from hotels. It was confirmed that Hillingdon had a high number of asylum seekers placed by the Home Office in the Borough and that officers were lobbying for more time to find solutions for those leaving hotels. Members were informed that single adults placed by the Home Office did not attract priority need unless they were vulnerable, but they were offered advice and support to secure their own accommodation. Officers emphasised the need for more funding to provide support for asylum seekers and mentioned that they were being proactive in managing expectations and finding solutions.

Councillors enquired whether the duration of temporary accommodation would decrease as more houses were bought. The Corporate Director acknowledged the challenge but stated that increasing the supply of private rented sector accommodation, social rented affordable housing, and stronger prevention and mediation efforts would help reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation. He emphasised the mission to reduce homelessness and move families out of temporary accommodation as quickly as possible.

In response to questions about outbound functions in workforce planning, it was explained that outbound functions involved training staff to undertake visits and engage with residents empathetically. Officers also highlighted the importance of supporting staff at all stages, providing strong supervision, and ensuring manageable caseloads to retain staff.

Members sought further clarification regarding the alleged lack of empathy among some staff members. They acknowledged that asking difficult questions was a challenging job and that some people may be more or less offended by these questions. They also noted that the process could be dehumanizing, given the repetitive exposure to terrible situations. However, Members emphasised the need for evidence-based retraining and enquired if all conversations were recorded so that managers could review them.

In response to this it was confirmed that not all conversations were recorded. Nevertheless, managers often supported staff by attending and coaching them before challenging conversations with residents. The Corporate Director mentioned that experienced housing officers were paired with less experienced ones to discuss scenarios and questions that might arise. Staff who needed extra help, due to complaints or concerns, were supported through training, conversations, and shadowing if necessary.

Members expressed agreement on the importance of seeing tangible results and noted that, while the plan contained many good elements, it was unclear what was already in place and what was planned. They mentioned that the language used in the plan was somewhat management-oriented and difficult to understand. Councillors sought clarity on how the plan was translating into tangible outcomes, given that similar themes were still being reported by witnesses. They also highlighted the importance of staff support, referencing witness testimony about the need for staff to have breaks from hearing harrowing stories. Councillors requested more specific details about staff welfare support in the plan, emphasising the need to encourage staff to remain with the Council and continue their valuable work.

RESOLVED: That the Select Committee reviewed and noted the ongoing improvement works and the improvement this would have on the resident experience when approaching for housing advice and support.

WITNESS SESSION 5 – 24 SEPTEMBER 2024

Dan Kennedy, Corporate Director of Central Services and Melissa Blower, Housing Programme Manager, introduced the report on the Select Committee's ongoing Review of Homelessness and the Customer Journey. Colleagues from the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) were also in attendance to provide information about the services provided by CAB and to answer Members' questions in relation to this.

Jas Nagra, Citizen's Advice Service Manager at CAB informed Members that she had been with the service for 12 years. Joanna Smith, Citizen's Advice Senior Adviser at CAB was also in attendance and mentioned that she had been working as an Adviser for over 20 years and had recently completed a housing advance project funded by Nationwide.

Members heard that Housing Advice currently sat within core services at CAB but a funder was being sought to enable CAB to provide bespoke housing advice. Ms Smith highlighted the high demand for housing advice and the challenges faced due to limited resources. She praised the Council's housing officers for their knowledge and ability to manage expectations but also pointed out issues with communication and responsiveness. An example was cited of one particular client who had submitted a housing application. It was reported that the local authority had closed the application because the client had allegedly not responded to an email within the 24 hours allocated to submit additional evidence. It was claimed that the additional evidence had been provided within the deadline. Concerns were raised regarding a lack of cooperation to resolve issues that arose.

Ms Smith shared her experience of submitting complaints to the housing service through the standard local authority complaint procedures; none of which had been successful. She emphasised the need for better cooperation and responsiveness when things went wrong. It was alleged that, the higher CAB went within the LBH complaints process, the less expert and knowledgeable were the responses. The Committee was informed that, if complaints were unresolved at stages 1 and 2, the next step was to contact the Housing Ombudsman, but this was a lengthy process – processing times could reach up to 12 months.

The Corporate Director of Central Services acknowledged the feedback and mentioned the need for a stronger relationship with partners like the Citizens Advice Bureau. He proposed regular meetings to address issues more effectively and improve communication. He also committed to checking on the complaints mentioned by the representatives of CAB.

In response to questions from Councillors regarding the need for a CAB base in Hayes, officers from CAB confirmed that they were in support of this suggestion and would appreciate any assistance in securing a permanent office base at the One Stop Shop in Hayes.

Members enquired about the primary barriers faced by the Citizens Advice Bureau and how the Council could revise its policies to remove these obstacles. In response to this, the CAB officers outlined the importance of managing expectations as many members of the public were unaware of the reality of the housing crisis. It was recognised that this would take time.

Councillors highlighted the need for better communication and empathy from housing officers. It was confirmed that some housing officers and Councillors were more responsive than others. CAB officers highlighted concerns with the new homelessness application process suggesting that it was not fit for purpose and noting that, if an application were closed through no fault of the client, it could not be reopened or reinstated. Clients needed to submit a new application which was a lengthy and complex process - this was particularly challenging for those clients who were not digitally capable. It was noted that the CAB then had to spend time helping these clients to submit a new form when they could be helping someone else.

Members noted that some clients tried to find ways around the housing system which could in the end be detrimental to their case, e.g. those who presented as homeless in order to get a different property or move band. Officers confirmed that CAB aimed to offer clients all the options open to them. It was acknowledged that the situation was sometimes complex, and the immigration status of some clients was particularly complicated.

The Select Committee suggested that it would be helpful if the Citizens Advice Bureau could be provided with the contact details of the chief whips to ensure Councillors responded appropriately to requests for information or assistance.

In response to further questions from Members, the CAB confirmed that better communication from housing services was crucial. Regular meetings with housing officers would also be beneficial.

With regard to the alleged unhelpful responses from some housing officers, further training was recommended, particularly for those at a higher level who were responsible for responding to complaints.

The need for better communication and cooperation between the Council and the Citizens Advice Bureau to improve the customer journey for those experiencing homelessness was emphasised. The Corporate Director of Central Services agreed to follow up on individual complaints identified by the CAB. He recognised the need for stronger relationships with partners and committed to regular meetings with the Citizens Advice Bureau and other partners to address issues more effectively and improve the working relationship. He also confirmed that he met with the housing team on a weekly basis to address any issues. It was noted that good customer care and good customer experience were extremely important.

RESOLVED: That the Residents' Services Select Committee noted the evidence heard at the witness session and sought clarification as necessary in the context of the review of Homelessness and the Customer Journey in Hillingdon.

Feedback further to Councillor site visits to the contact centre and main / housing reception areas as part of the Review

Main Reception

- The main reception area was found to be somewhat unwelcoming.
- To improve security, pass-swipes were suggested.
- Improved signposting was recommended. An electronic check in system was also suggested for those with appointments.
- An area for children would be beneficial.
- It was noted that toilets needed to be signposted better.
- The telephone area lacked privacy - screening would be welcomed.

Contact centre – housing calls

- The call handlers were found to be excellent, but contacting back-office staff was challenging at times.
- Call handlers sometimes contacted housing officers via Teams hence the conversation was not recorded.
- An improved handover plan when housing officers were on leave / had left the Council was required.

Housing Reception

- A staff dress code was suggested.
- The Housing Reception area did not appear welcoming or friendly.
- Security needed to be reviewed.
- Improved signposting was suggested.