

REVIEW FINDINGS: “A Review of Homelessness and the Customer Journey”

Committee name	Residents’ Services Select Committee
Officer reporting	Liz Penny – Democratic Services
Papers with report	Appendix 1 – Updated Scoping Report Appendix 2 – Guidance on Policy Reviews Appendix 3 – Minutes of previous meetings relating to the review
Ward	All Wards

HEADLINES

Background

As part of the review into Homelessness and the Customer Journey, Members are requested to consider findings, conclusions and early draft recommendations in relation to the review for broader discussion and stocktake of the review to-date. These will be with the intention of enhancing the current Council’s Housing Advice and Homelessness Service, with a particular focus on the residents’ journey through the system and customer service.

Summary

The Committee has, to date, held five witness sessions. The intention of these sessions was to obtain feedback from a range of stakeholders with a view to enhancing the Council’s Housing Advice and Homelessness Service.

At the first witness session Members heard from key officers representing the Council’s Housing Team – 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). Members heard about the challenging homelessness situation, noting a 27% increase in demand driven by evictions and a 41% reduction in affordable rental supply. The Council’s strategy included purchasing 500 new homes and improving systems. The customer pathway involved initial online contact, triage, and case officer assignment, with prevention and relief stages. Partnerships with Trinity and Thames Reach supported rough sleepers. The Homelessness Strategy was being reviewed with a focus on prevention and Autism/ADHD. Staff training was being enhanced, and new IT systems would improve efficiency. The Council was exploring property acquisitions and addressing temporary accommodation standards. Staff wellbeing and customer experience improvements were also priorities.

The second witness session was attended by Carys Hedley, Director of Services at Trinity. Challenges such as the reduction in private rental accommodation and increasing unaffordability, particularly for non-priority individuals were discussed. It was confirmed that Trinity provided 231 supported spaces and 41 long-term unsupported accommodation places, supporting families fleeing war and offering tenancy sustainment services. The strong partnership between the Council and Trinity was highlighted, though issues like stagnation due to Local Housing Allowance rates and reluctance to move outside the Borough were noted. Members heard that Trinity planned to create a specialist housing programme with full-time live-in support for individuals with complex needs. Improvements were needed in systems and technology for case handovers, and

a more welcoming environment at the Civic Centre was suggested. The importance of correct referrals, comprehensive support to prevent homelessness, and safeguarding young people was emphasised. Staff well-being measures and the Council's efforts to improve customer experience and engagement were highlighted, along with the need for empathy and appropriate training for housing staff.

At the third witness session, the Committee heard from representatives of P3 and Thames Reach. Sophie Murray from Thames Reach highlighted their collaboration with the Council and other agencies to support rough sleepers, despite challenges like high support needs and limited accommodation options. Representatives from P3 discussed their support services for young people and families, emphasising the difficulties in finding affordable move-on housing. Communication issues within the Housing Department and the need for better systems were noted. The importance of patience and trust-building with homeless individuals, especially asylum seekers, was stressed. P3 and Thames Reach highlighted the need for improved communication with the Council and suggested a central database for better coordination. The Corporate Director acknowledged the need for service improvements and outlined ongoing efforts, including a workforce plan and recruitment campaign, to address the increasing demand for homelessness services.

The fourth witness session afforded Members the opportunity to hear from IDVAs and Social Prescribers. Concerns were raised about the approach to housing for domestic abuse victims, particularly the requirement for police involvement and documentation, which could be challenging for those fleeing emergency situations. The Committee discussed the impact of relocating victims away from their support systems and inconsistencies in housing policies. The importance of clear communication, professional interpreters, and a welcoming environment at the Housing Reception was emphasised. The need for better communication and coordination between housing officers and support services was highlighted, along with the importance of empathy and understanding in handling domestic abuse cases. Rachel Bulley from Colne Union PCN discussed the role of social prescribers in addressing social and well-being needs, supporting the points raised about domestic abuse. The Committee acknowledged the challenges faced by housing officers and the need for improvements in communication, support services, and training. They also discussed the impact of housing issues on mental health and the importance of clear processes and accessible support services. Officers emphasised the need for clinical supervision and support for team members dealing with violence cases. The importance of preventing homelessness, strengthening staff training, and improving communication with residents was highlighted, as was the need for better coordination and communication to ensure domestic abuse victims received necessary support.

Finally, the fifth witness session was attended by colleagues from the Citizen's Advice Bureau. Jas Nagra and Joanna Smith from CAB highlighted the high demand for housing advice, challenges due to limited resources, and issues with communication and responsiveness from the Council's housing officers. They emphasised the need for better cooperation, regular meetings, and improved communication to address issues effectively. The importance of managing public expectations, providing empathy, and ensuring better training for housing officers was also discussed.

Members are now requested to start to consider their early collective findings so these can be worked up in more detail, and ultimately incorporated into the final report to Cabinet.

RECOMMENDATION

1. That the Select Committee consider possible conclusions, findings and early draft recommendations in relation to the review.
2. That the Select Committee agree to delegate the final wording of the review recommendations to Democratic Services in conjunction with the Chair and in consultation with the Labour Lead.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

In considering this item, Members should bear in mind the following:

1) Scoping report – looking at the original parameters of the review

The updated review scoping report is attached so Members can be reminded of the original Terms of Reference as set out below:

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) Policy review guidance

Members will recall the guidance issued in July 2022 on undertaking policy reviews. This guidance is attached to this report for reference again, and Members are asked to take into account Point 4 on Findings and draft recommendations and in particular whether they:

- Meet the initial aims / objectives of the review (as above)
- Be SMART, Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound
- Not be a short-term fix, but a lasting outcome
- Consider the financial aspect, e.g. cost neutral, provide savings or if at a cost, then affordable – and if possible, aligned with the MTFF (budget planning process)
- Are based on a broad evidence base as possible and 'user or resident' insight
- Not create additional bureaucracy, e.g. if it relates to a policy, then to seek to review or amend existing policies (unless there is an absolute imperative for a new policy)
- If publicity or wider engagement or education is recommended, to target such communications as best as possible rather than generally
- Consider 'conclusions' as well as any specific recommendations.

3) Minutes of previous meetings

Attached as Appendix 3 are the minutes of previous meetings relating to the review, which may assist in Members' considerations.

4) Possible areas for emerging recommendations

In discussion with the Chair, Members may wish to consider the following 'areas' to develop and refine draft recommendations:

- Improvements to communication between housing officers, partners and residents;
- Improved continuity during staff changes and periods of absence;
- Audits of calls and correspondence to ensure consistency and quality;
- Introducing a guide to ensure all new clients fully understand the process and know what to expect;
- Client experience feedback from residents to gain insight on homelessness services;
- Additional staff wellbeing support;
- Training for housing officers in relation to empathy and trauma-informed care;
- A review of documentation requirements and the introduction of standard templates where possible;
- Enhancing Housing Reception layout to make it more efficient, welcoming and child-friendly.

Committee Members may also wish to bring their own findings and thoughts based upon the witness testimony received.

Democratic Services will then "road-test" any draft recommendations from the Committee, looking at their feasibility with the relevant service area and report back to the Committee to a subsequent meeting, in preparation for shaping the final draft report for the Committee's approval.

Please note that, further to a recent meeting with the Chair, Labour Lead and officers, suggested draft recommendations will be tabled separately for consideration prior to the Select Committee meeting on 14 January 2025.

RESIDENT BENEFIT

The aim of the review into homelessness and the customer journey is to improve the customer experience of those who approach the Council for help with their housing situation.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

N/A.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

N/A.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Nil.