

Review of Homelessness Management Report to Council



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Message from the T &F Chairman

“ On behalf of the Task and Finish Group, I would like to pass on our sincere thanks and appreciation to all the Councillors and Officers who gave up their valuable time to talk to us and provide evidence to allow us to gain a deeper insight into the management of homelessness. I would like to extend my personal thanks to the Members of the Task and Finish Group and Clare Gray for taking the time to address these important issues.

The Task and Finish Group recognises the work that has been undertaken already to make changes to the homelessness process and was impressed by the dedication shown by all those working within Housing, Finance and Revenue and Benefits and look forward to seeing further progress.

Whilst recognising there is no simple solution to homelessness, the Task and Finish Group hopes that this report will help to improve current ways of working”.



Philip Bastiman, Chairman of the Task and Finish Group

Members of the Inquiry Group

- Cllr Philip Bastiman (Chairman)
- Cllr Dev Dhillon
- Cllr Patrick Hogan
- Cllr Mrs Marlene Lewis
- Cllr John Read

The Task and Finish Group was supported by Bob Smith, Chief Executive, Jim Burness Director of Resources and Clare Gray, Scrutiny Officer.



Task and Finish Scope

The Inquiry was set up to review the function of assessing clients for temporary accommodation and the subsequent management of placements, including the interaction with the Benefits Service and Finance specifically looking at:-

- Process for homelessness assessment
- Process for actual placement and obligations on the client
- Process for housing benefit
- Management of placements
- Process between Housing and Finance for receiving client contributions

Out of scope – the Strategy and demand for temporary or affordable housing

Methodology

Evidence gathering meetings were held between 10 August and 7 September 2017 with the following people/teams:

- Martin Holt Head of Healthy Communities
- Michael Veryard Housing Manager
- Di Craft Senior Housing Options Officer
- Neil Berry, Service Development Manager, Revenue & Benefits
- Jean Cheeseman, Benefits, Perf and Policy Officer (R&B)
- Nicola Ellis Head of Customer Services
- Rodney Fincham Head of Finance
- Sue Watson Finance Manager
- Chris Harris, Internal Audit, TIAA
- Cabinet Members Trevor Egleton/Paul Kelly

Desk top research to provide national context alongside examples of homelessness process from other authorities

Recommendations - Assessment

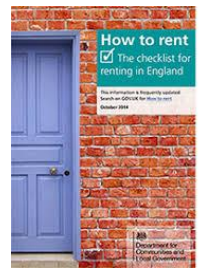
- 1) Whilst Members recognised the need for thorough checks there was a concern about the length of time for assessment and recommended that officers consider:-
 - That more robust procedures be introduced on the completion of application forms including quicker checks/provision of evidence to identify if people are intentionally homeless/not homeless. The onus to be put on the client to provide this information (e.g certain checks/evidence (such as Experian/fraud checks) before housing is allocated to determine whether the Council can refuse applicants who do not meet the key criteria.
 - That applicants are thoroughly scrutinised and officers establish clear proof of homelessness. Where applicants are unable to supply the correct documentation immediately, officers may place them in overnight accommodation only until the correct documents have been supplied.
 - Target times be implemented on the length of assessments and performance monitoring on a monthly basis

- 2) That more formalised processes be put in place to assess more complex cases such as domestic violence cases, out of district cases and cases where there is no duty to house. The policy on out of district cases be reviewed to show whether a case is valid and in particular whether an applicant could be redirected back to their home authority or moved to another part of their home district and be at less risk of harm. e.g someone who lives in Amersham could potentially move to Chesham or Chalfont St Giles and still be safe within Chiltern District.

[*Click here for the assessment appx*](#)

Recommendations - Placement

- 1) That when the client is placed that they sign a 'charter' which outlines the obligation of the client and of the Council, including payment of the flat rate charge by the client (This charter/agreement can apply to any provider of temporary accommodation as clients may be moved – internal audit have highlighted this as a current issue for declaration forms)
- 2) That a leaflet be produced (similar to that of “How to rent”) for the client stating their obligations
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-rent>
- 3) That the placement letter be revised to include a separately headed section making it clearer of the client’s obligation to contribute towards costs and the consequences of meeting those obligations
- 4) That consideration be given to whether spot checks should be undertaken to ensure that clients are living at the temporary accommodation and that they are asked to complete a daily register
- 5) Whether elements of the L&Q ‘KiT Scheme’ approach to debt management could be implemented, which officers described as speedier and more robust



Click here for the placement appx

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Recommendations – Housing and Finance

- 1) The Housing Service should be clearly accountable for the end to end process in the management of homelessness.
- 2) To implement a Service Level Agreement which outlines the responsibilities and performance targets of the Finance and Housing Benefits areas supporting the housing service, and particularly following up any arrears or failure to claim benefits
- 3) That consideration be given to charging the client straight away before the Housing Benefit is calculated so that the client does not get into arrears and gets into the routine of payment e.g. Clients could pay the £5 per night non benefit component on a weekly basis from day one.
- 4) That a risk assessment is undertaken to identify those who are not likely to pay, with investigations at an early stage into non-payment history with ongoing case management monitoring
- 5) Invoices are currently sent monthly and consideration should be given to invoices being sent weekly, particular at the start of the process to invoice the client straight away or where clients have a history of non payment of rent, unpaid debts or not receiving housing benefit.

Recommendations – Housing Benefit

- 1) Housing Benefit forms should be completed in first 24 hours before a placement is made.
- 2) That consideration is given to charging the full rent or similar measures where clients do not complete their housing benefit form.
- 3) That there is clear communication when there has been any client changes in Housing Benefit, or in the client's placement, and that this is covered in the Service Level Agreement, with triggers put in place under the new process to flag any changes which should be escalated to colleagues e.g. where benefits are removed and should subsequently be reinstated.
- 4) Processes and checks are put in place to ensure that housing benefits are correctly recorded in the Council's systems.

Recommendation - Management

- 1) To investigate the cost/benefits of purchasing a rent management system to ensure regular bills/statements were issued in a timely manner. It is essential that this system integrates with other Council systems and meets the requirements of the new Act (reference was made to the system run by Hammersmith and Fulham). If it is not cost effective to purchase a rent management system that other alternatives be investigated for managing debt such as an Access Database (e.g concerns over spreadsheet errors due to the large amount of information within the document) and also whether it would be cost effective for another organisation to manage rents on our behalf.
- 2) Further consideration be given to whether software systems being used e.g Locata are being fully utilised and that processes are automated as much as possible.
- 3) That strategic and operational risks should be consolidated with clear information on mitigating actions being presented to the Cabinet Member on a regular basis.
- 4) The internal audit report highlighted the need for guidance to be developed in relation to the eviction of SBDC clients with rent arrears to ensure that accommodation costs do not continue to escalate with little prospect of recovering contributions from clients. This is an area which should be addressed urgently and also be closely and regularly monitored.

[Click here for the management appx](#)

Recommendation - Processes

- 1) As it is not currently clear to Members that processes have been documented in writing nor are consistent (where relevant) across the shared service that the following governance actions are recommended:-
 - That standard end-to-end operating procedures/checklists/templates be drafted for officers when dealing with individual cases and their reviews to ensure that a consistent approach is being adopted
 - That controls are identified, documented, communicated, monitored and any exceptions are escalated to senior management and the cabinet member
 - That these procedures and checklists are regularly updated to embed any learning from new training/good practice identified
 - That internal training be undertaken, supported by written materials, so that officers are clear how the end-to-end processes operate in South Bucks Council which is supplemented by independent external training providers e.g. a third party may provide training on legislation (as they do now) but SBDC should have a clearly defined process that follows the legislation and train officers on the 'South Bucks way' of applying that legislation.
 - To challenge processes to ensure that the Council complies with legislation but does not provide services beyond their duty.
 - That the checklists are monitored by their supervisors.
 - That vulnerable clients are signposted to relevant organisations for support e.g. for Domestic Violence cases to be referred to an Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy Service/ DASH.

Recommendation - Debts

- 1) Members were surprised by the levels of outstanding amounts due from current and previous clients that are still being pursued and at risk of non payment. Collecting these amounts must be a high priority for the relevant departments.
- 2) That historic debt with a zero or very low probability of recovery (before the flat rate charge) be written off to start afresh with the new process
- 3) That a report showing the current debt position be circulated to Relevant PAGs and Overview & Scrutiny Committee and included in the minutes to Council so that members are aware of the potential for future write offs.
- 4) That the Cabinet Member be given early warning of any accrued debt so that this could be escalated as a matter of urgency. A monthly report showing the aged debtor list may assist with this process.
- 5) That the monthly meetings between the Heads of Service continue to review sundry debt and escalate debts over a pre-agreed period e.g. after 60 or 90 days a case automatically be escalated to the cabinet member together with an action plan to deal with it.
- 6) That the Debt Recovery Project for Council Tax (based in R&B Team, SBDC) be used for debt recovery for Homelessness arrears. Thereby, encouraging clients to address their debts sooner or ensuring that robust action is taken as a matter of urgency.

[Click here for the debt appx](#)

Recommendation – Budget/performance monitoring

- 1) More performance indicators to be added to Covalent as follows:-
 - High costs of temporary/nightly accommodation compared to average cost
 - Length of assessments monitored on a monthly basis. If targets have not been met after a give period e.g. 2 or 3 months are escalated to senior management/cabinet member.
 - No of clients applying in a specific time period & whether they have been accepted for housing
 - % of applicants with a local connection or out of district
 - % of applicants receiving housing benefit
 - % of applicants where a number of agencies are involved
 - No of clients who were in arrears
 - Length of time in temporary accommodation
- 2) With regard to the performance monitoring, there should be a dashboard with clear trigger points for escalation and this should be linked into clear accountability for each area in relation to the Service Level Agreement and Individual Performance Reviews.
- 3) That the dashboard indicators should be reported to the Cabinet Members and PAGs including benchmarking information from other similar authorities
- 4) That there should be clear budgetary information on the real costs of homelessness presented to the Healthy Communities and Resources PAGs to ensure that the policies and procedures adopted are fit for purpose e.g flat rate charge
- 5) Overview and Scrutiny Committee to agree upon which of the additional performance measures are reported to it at each meeting.
- 6) Members asked for the real costs of homelessness be presented to the Healthy Communities PAG giving clear information on the whole picture, including hidden costs, staff costs and the costs of accommodation to the Council above the flat rate charge.

[Click here for the performance data appx](#)

Recommendation – Homelessness Provision

Although out of scope, the homelessness provision is a critical part of the solution to many of the issues address in this report.

- 1) The lack of temporary accommodation and long term housing solutions be addressed so that homeless households can be moved on from B&B as quickly as possible to ensure there are no blockages in the system.
- 2) The O&S Committee will look at the supply of temporary accommodation and whether the Council has adequate resources, IT and controls to meet the new legislation. (A Strategy document is being submitted to the Healthy Communities PAG outlining how Section 106 payments agree delegations for the purchase of affordable housing and will also include how capital could be used to acquire properties outside the District.)
- 2) Working closely with CDC to learn lessons from the use of Paradigm accommodation and in particular Tom Scott House and the private sector.
- 3) Develop processes and controls to address the new legislation expanding the duty of the council to provide advice on housing and investigates the costs and benefits of automating the advice process where possible that may be accessible online.

[Click here for the appx on legislation & supply](#)

Recommendations – Next steps

NEXT STEPS

- 1) That Cabinet responds in writing to each of the recommendations made by the Task and Finish Group
- 2) Where recommendations are not to be implemented that a detailed written explanation be given to Overview and Scrutiny by the Cabinet on the reasons why.
- 3) The Council develops a Homeless Strategy Action Plan to manage and monitor the implementation of the recommendations of this report.

[Click here for peer action plan](#)