

23 September 2015

Environment & Housing Management Committee

Homeless Gold Standard Challenge – Peer Review

Report of: *Helen Gregory, Acting Head of Housing Services*

Wards Affected: *All*

This report is: *Public*

1. Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides an update on the DCLG Gold Standard challenge, as reported previously at Housing Committee on the 7th January 2015. The completion of this challenge is considered to be a key element for improving the homelessness/housing options team as part of the housing modernisation programme. We will use the recommendations from the review to help improve the service.

1.2 In June 2015 the Housing Needs team participated in a housing sector led Diagnostic Peer Review ('DPR') known as the Homeless Gold Standard Challenge which is designed to help local authorities deliver more efficient and cost effective homelessness prevention services. The challenge follows a 10 step continuous improvement approach that starts with a pledge for local authorities aspiring to 'strive for continuous improvement in front line housing services' and culminates in an application for the Gold Standard Challenge

1.3 We are pleased to report that Brentwood Council has successfully obtained 66% which exceeded the baseline pass rate of 60%. As such we qualify to be invited to participate in the first of ten challenges towards achieving DCLG Gold Standard.

1.4 By participating in this challenge we will have access to a number of free resources available which includes: 'Value for Money' Cost efficiency assessment tool, Comprehensive Benchmarking toolkit, Statistical compiler, access to verified Good Practice examples and other related toolkits, Diagnostic Peer Review Toolkit, Free one year Shelter Legal membership, free legal training, Bespoke Gold Standard training

2. Recommendation(s):

- 2.1 **That the contents of this report be noted and the participation in the Gold Standard Challenge be approved.**

3. Introduction and Background

- 3.1 The DPR was conducted over a four day period by a Lead Reviewer (Uttlesford District Council) and Second Reviewer (Chelmsford City Council).
- 3.2 The DPR included investigation of core housing options and homelessness services. The sub-categories which were assessed were: Homeless Prevention Strategy; Website; Reception & Interview Room Facilities; Customer Interview Observation; Housing Options File Reviews; Homelessness File Reviews; Staff; Managers; Partners; Visits (Temporary Accommodation); Quality of Housing Options.
- 3.3 Upon completion of the DPR a skeleton *Continuous Improvement Plan* ('CIP') was drafted by NPSS. The Continuous Improvement Plan will be a key document as part of the ongoing 'Getting Our House in Order' modernisation programme.

4. Issue, Options and Analysis of Options

- 4.1 Brentwood achieved an overall score of 66%, which represents a solid pass rate (60% being the threshold). Brentwood scored well amongst its peers (Chelmsford 62%; Brentwood; 66% Harlow; 69%; Uttlesford; 69%; Epping Forest un/k) and achieved the highest score amongst the consortia in 3 of the 11 DPR sub-categories.
- 4.2 There were a number of key recommendations within the 'Continuous Improvement Plan' relating to our existing ICT and data management systems, reception facilities and review of the Council's Homeless Strategy.
- 4.3 ICT & Data Management Systems: The continued use of paper-based and ICT systems in parallel was viewed as inefficient and impacts negatively on customer satisfaction. An integrated Data Management system with automated online housing registration should be considered. It was identified that this could be implemented within existing ICT systems.

4.4 Reception & Interview room facilities: These facilities were identified as sub-standard and subsequently were scored below the required benchmark. The interview rooms within the Reception area were deemed to be inaccessible, giving rise to disability and safety concerns. It was also noted that the lack of available ICT equipment within interview rooms were inefficient and could lead to delays in service provision. Confidentiality issues were raised in relation to the reception area (e.g. lack of screens/booths or private areas).

4.5 Homeless Prevention Strategy: Each of the Local Authorities within the Consortia were advised to revise their Homeless Prevention Strategies and to consider annual reviews to ensure the Strategy remained up-to-date and relevant to local issues. Particularly emphasis was placed on explicit corporate commitment and the development of suitable private rented sector offers for all client groups. Given the central importance of the Strategy to future service provision it is appropriate for this to be the first of the ten challenges undertaken.

4.6 There were also a number areas highlighted within the report highlighted as 'good practice which included;

- Visits (Temporary Accommodation): The specific role of the Officer responsible for Temporary Accommodations was noted as being particularly efficient and allowing for greater support of customers using this service.
- Homelessness File Reviews: The quality of decision-making and depth of investigations was noted within the CIP. The legal explanation contained within the statutory decision letters was also noted as at a consistently high-level.
- Customer Interview Observations: The quality and consistency of advice given was noted. The level of customer empathy by Officers was a key strength in this sub-category.
- Domestic Abuse Victim Impact Statement: Our use of a specific and targeted domestic violence impact questionnaire for applicants who were homeless due to domestic violence was highlighted as unique within the consortia and has been requested by NPSS as an example of National Good Practice which will be distributed nationally. All consortia members have requested a copy of the outline statement to introduce to their own services.

5. References to Corporate Plan

- 5.1 Improving service delivery will meet the Council's commitment to service improvements and will also enhance the efficiency of the service.

6. Implications

Financial Implications

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- 5.2 Resource costs met from existing general needs budget.

Legal Implications

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- 6.2 None.

Other Implications (where significant) – i.e. Health and Safety, Asset Management, Equality and Diversity, Risk Management, Section 17 – Crime & Disorder, Sustainability, ICT.

- 6.3 None.

7. Background Papers

- 7.1 None.

8. Appendices to this report

None.

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