

Housing Advice: Consultation on future proposals



Overview:

The City Council is continuing to strive to improve its services for homeless households in Birmingham.

Housing Advice Centres are presently co-located in four Customer Service Centres and we are therefore consulting on changes to this service. The service provided by the Youth Hub (provision for single young people aged 16-25 is not affected by this proposal.)

The Housing Advice Service provides assistance with joining the Council Housing list, discussing housing options, seeking temporary accommodation and assistance with Homelessness or Homelessness Prevention.

Why We Are Consulting:

In the current climate the Council is reviewing all services to ensure they best meet the needs of the citizens of Birmingham. Historically, Housing Advice and Homelessness has been delivered alongside the Council's Neighbourhood Advice Service. We recognise that the current approach has not always led to a consistent service for customers and a small number have experienced delays and frustrations with the service they receive.

In seeking to develop an improved service, consideration has also been given to the significant savings required within the Neighbourhood Advice Service for 2015-16.

We are confident that the proposed changes to the service will bring about improvements such as allowing the service to increase the availability of appointments as well as improving the level of service for Households threatened with homelessness.

However, we also acknowledge that such changes can bring with them concerns from citizens and we may not have identified all of the potential impacts upon our customers. We also recognise that customers are well placed to suggest other improvements that we may not have thought of.

Therefore we are undertaking public consultation to get as much feedback on our proposals as we can to inform our decision making as we move forward.

The proposals on which we are seeking your views:

The Housing Advice Service

The Housing Advice service is presently based in 4 Customer Service Centres at Sparkbrook, Newtown, and Erdington & Northfield. It is proposed to reorganise the service to be delivered, from a single location at Newtown Customer Service Centre, Birmingham. This new single Housing Advice Centre will have more advisors on duty and additional available interviews. There is no planned reduction in accessibility to specialist Housing & Homelessness advisors via the telephone and long term we anticipate improved access to housing advice available via phone and web.

This proposal is not based on the Homeless and Pre-Tenancy Service saving money and we are not looking to reduce resources available to the service at this present moment. We believe that one centre will be able to deliver a more consistent service through centralising our staff and expertise. This will take place alongside improvements to our phone service and further enhancement of online services. This approach is in line with that being taken by other similar authorities.

The Newtown location is proposed for its central location and because it sits in an area of the highest demand for Housing Advice Services. It is the most evenly accessible of the four present locations for people across the city to get to and meets the space requirements to accommodate the service. This proposal follows exploration of alternate options; these have been considered however none have been found to be viable. Alternate options which we considered included:

1) *Do nothing and stay as we are:*

After consideration, it was concluded that if the Neighbourhood Advice staff are to be reduced, it would be necessary to balance this with an enhanced ability on the part of the Housing Advice Service to offer more appointments, ensure that the most consistent service is available and secure the high quality decisions which are needed, particularly in the area of homelessness, all of which objectives are in any event desirable in their own right. This option was therefore not found to be viable.

2) *Move Housing Advice Delivery to a two centre model:*

Upon further exploration it was concluded that this option would still require more Neighbourhood Advice Service staff in support than those actually available or would require additional resources for the Homeless and Pre-Tenancy service. It wouldn't create sufficient increased capacity and would not fully resolve issues around consistency or flexibility of staff cover. This option was not considered viable in view of this.

3) *Relocate the Housing Advice Service to a single site in Birmingham City Centre:*

This was explored however the Council has no suitable building currently available to use and an evaluation of renting a private building recognised that we would incur significant yearly costs as well as one off set up costs which are unlikely to be sustainable and thus this option was not considered viable.

As part of these proposals we are consulting with and seeking the views of citizens of Birmingham and users of our services along with professionals delivering advice in these areas of work. If you would like to provide more detailed feedback, or see more information please visit our consultation webpage at:

www.birminghambeheard.org.uk/people-1/housingadvice-service