

**BIRMINGHAM CITY COUNCIL****PUBLIC REPORT**

<b>Report to:</b>	<b>CABINET</b>
<b>Report of:</b>	<b>Strategic Director for People</b>
<b>Date of Decision:</b>	<b>19<sup>th</sup> April 2016</b>
<b>SUBJECT:</b>	<b>HOMELESS &amp; HOUSING ADVICE – ONE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE PROPOSAL</b>
<b>Key Decision: Yes</b>	<b>Relevant Forward Plan Ref: 001772</b>
<b>If not in the Forward Plan: (please "X" box)</b>	<b>Chief Executive approved</b> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>O&amp;S Chairman approved</b> <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Relevant Cabinet Member(s) or Relevant Executive Member</b>	<b>Councillor John Cotton, Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Management &amp; Homes</b>
<b>Relevant O&amp;S Chairman:</b>	<b>Councillor Zafar Iqbal, Chair of Neighbourhood and Community Services</b>
<b>Wards affected:</b>	<b>All</b>

<b>1. Purpose of report:</b>
1.1 To seek approval to re-configure the delivery of the statutory homeless and housing advice service.

<b>2. Decision(s) recommended:</b>
That Cabinet:-
2.1 Notes the proposal to move to the one Housing Advice Centre (HAC) Centre of Excellence model based at the Newtown Customer Service Centre.
2.2 Notes the concerns raised in the various consultations on the proposal and agree to the implementation of the mitigating factors to support the move.
2.3 Delegates to the Strategic Director of People in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Management & Homes the authority to implement the proposals contained in the report with an update progress report to Cabinet in July 2016.

<b>Lead Contact Officer(s):</b>	Jim Crawshaw Head of Homeless & Pre-Tenancy Service
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### **3. Consultation**

Consultation on the one HAC proposal has taken place with both internal and external stakeholders.

#### **3.1 Internal**

3.1.1 All Cabinet Members were consulted on the one HAC proposal alongside consultation on an Integrated Advice Strategy for the city.

3.1.2 The Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Management & Homes gave agreement to commence consultation on an outline operating model for Homelessness Services on the 2<sup>nd</sup> December 2015.

3.1.3 Additionally, the proposal to consult on the one HAC proposal was presented to Executive Members for Local Services on 26th November 2015.

3.1.4 Informal consultation commenced with trade unions and staff on the proposal in October 2015. Formal consultation with staff and Trade Unions commenced on the 4th January 2016. There are on-going discussions with staff, including a staff working group, and with Trade Union colleagues. There have been meetings with staff in October 2015 and January 2016. The key issues raised are:

- The suitability of Newtown as an office for a one HAC model and in particular regarding the size of the office and the anticipated footfall;
- Concerns regarding customers being able to access the service;
- Concerns relating specifically to the impact on the staff affected by this change including the health and safety of staff, car parking arrangements, building capacity and changing office location.

3.1.5 The proposals are likely to impact on existing staff. If they move from their current work location to be based at Newtown HAC, with the back office space being located in Lancaster Circus, it is proposed that mitigation will be provided in line with the Council's disturbance allowance, which is paid to eligible employees. Individual circumstances will be considered including working patterns and caring responsibilities as a result of individual meetings with affected employees. Appendix 2 sets out the staff consultation responses.

#### **3.2 External**

3.2.1. The public consultation on proposals to restructure the Housing Advice Service, including the statutory homeless service, from its present 4 location delivery model (excluding the Youth Hub); to a single centre model based at Newtown Customer Service Centre, opened on 4th December 2015 and ran for 7 weeks before closing on 21st January 2016. The consultation report, including an executive summary can be found at Appendix 1.

3.2.2 External consultation was undertaken utilising three different methods:

- A. Consultation A; A paper based questionnaire that was handed out to Housing Advice Centre (HAC) users (between 7th December 2015 and 15th January 2016). 495 responses were received from HAC customers.

- B. Consultation B; An online consultation through the Council's 'Be Heard' site. Respondents included citizens who may or may not have used the service and from those answering in a professional capacity. A total of 65 responses, excluding abandoned transactions were received.
- C. Consultation C; Four public meetings – one in each quadrant of the city – with an independent chair open to professionals and citizens. In total 21 people attended these sessions. Levels of attendance varied.

### 3.2.3 Key themes and Findings

Appendix 1 sets out, in detail, the responses to the consultation with a few key responses noted below:

- When asked if they felt they would still be able to get to the centre in Newtown more than 50% of respondents in Consultation A agreed that they would.
- Professionals were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the proposals to centralise the Housing Advice Service at Newtown. 27 responses were received to this question, all of whom disagreed with the proposal. In respect of this it should be noted that 46% of all responses from professionals came from staff within the Homelessness and Pre-Tenancy Service who are impacted in regards to this proposal by having to move work location.
- Consultation A shows Newtown has the highest proportion of people accessing the centre on foot, totalling 48% of all respondents accessing HACs on foot and equal to totals of the remaining 3 centres combined. 73% of all persons currently accessing Housing Advice centres do so by car, bus or rail. This figure is mirrored when this data is limited to Homeless Applicants only.

### 3.2.4 In summary, three clear themes emerged from the consultation:

1. Accessibility – Concerns that providing the service from a single location in Newtown would result in homeless households having to travel across the city to access the service. In particular, issues related to disabled customers and the cost of transport was raised. A perception is that this model would be less accessible than either the current 4 HAC model or a single HAC in a city centre location.
2. Safety – Concerns that some households – principally those experiencing Domestic Violence – would be at risk as a result of a perpetrator knowing which office a victim would attend or if the office is a risk area for a customer.
3. Capacity – Staff are concerned that the demand placed on a single location would be too great.

### 3.2.5 We will mitigate against the concerns expressed through the consultation by:

1. Enhancing access to phone advice and information on the Council's website to ensure households only travel to the HAC if necessary. Whilst the core service will be delivered from Newtown, other advice locations in the city will still provide initial contact and phone access to the specialist homeless team. The intention is to ensure that only those households who have to travel to Newtown do so and any

query that can be dealt with on the phone, the website or even by other partners prior to a household travelling to the HAC is done so.

2. Providing bus tickets available from key BCC offices and a limited number of Third Sector providers to aid citizens getting to the HAC. In exceptional circumstances, we will provide taxis (as we currently do) in order to facilitate access to the service.
3. Arranging travel for households where there are exceptional circumstances e.g. are housebound,
4. Undertaking home visits or interviews in a safe location for households unable to visit Newtown due to risks related to Domestic Violence or other vulnerabilities.
5. Contacting households to see if a service is still required where there are “no shows” for appointments (including when people have attended another centre and are expected to be making their way to the HAC).
6. Increasing the number of available appointments and ensuring that where possible we give choice to households to ensure the time/date are appropriate.
7. Developing a detailed staff training plan as part of the proposed move to a single HAC to improve the service delivered and resolve concerns promptly.
8. Providing training for key partners within the Council and in Third Sector organisations on Housing Advice to enhance the advice and support they currently give to their clients which may be able to resolve issues without needing to visit a HAC.

#### 3.2.4 Conclusions from Consultation

It has always been accepted that the proposed restructure of Housing Advice and Homelessness to a single centre based at Newtown is a contentious one. Robust mitigations have been developed to address the concerns raised during the consultation process. Analysis revealed several respondents misinterpreting the proposal as removal of front facing services in favour of just a call centre.

A comprehensive communications plan will be devised and implemented if the decision to move forward with this proposal is agreed.

#### **4. Compliance Issues:**

##### 4.1 Are the recommended decisions consistent with the Council’s policies, plans and strategies?

- 4.1.1 The provision of the statutory homeless and housing advice services supports the priorities of both a fair and prosperous city.

##### 4.2 Financial Implications

- 4.2.1 The only financial implication as a result of the proposal to move to one HAC is related to disturbance allowance being paid to the affected GR2 & GR3 officers due to changing work location; this is estimated to be £4k.

#### 4.3 Legal Implications

- 4.3.1 The Council provides the statutory homeless and housing advice service in line with the Housing Act 1996, as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002.

#### 4.4 Public Sector Equality Duty

- 4.4.1 An Equalities Analysis has been undertaken for the operating model, this is attached in Appendix 3.

### **5. Relevant background/chronology of key events:**

- 5.1 The Homeless and Pre Tenancy Service (H&PTS) is currently based in 4 Housing Advice Centres across the city – Erdington, Newtown, Northfield and Sparkbrook as well as at the Youth Hub based in Digbeth. Three of the current offices operate on both a drop-in and appointment system whilst Newtown has for over a year provided an appointment only system for homeless households. The proposed changes to service delivery do not impact on the Youth Hub. From the 1<sup>st</sup> May 2016 there will also be a specialist homeless prevention welfare service for single people and childless couples who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Prior to the current model being implemented in March 2011 the service was delivered across all of the Council's 32 neighbourhood offices.
- 5.2 Consistency of service is the key driver for this proposal alongside the desire to create a Centre of Excellence for Homelessness and Housing Advice in the city. As with all services within the Council the H&PTS is continually seeking to improve the service it provides to citizens. We are confident that the proposed changes to the service will bring about a number of improvements including allowing the service to increase the availability of appointments as well as improving the level of service for households threatened with homelessness by increasing our work on preventing homelessness when appropriate. By concentrating all staff in one building there is the opportunity to ensure consistency, increase appointment availability, undertake increased training and learning activities and to meet our statutory duties in the most effective way.
- 5.3 Legal advice recommends a move to a single point of delivery. The service has recently been subject to a significant and costly Judicial Review (Edwards v BCC). Fundamentally this challenge was about consistency in the application of policies and procedures in regards to homelessness and focussed on the accusation that we systemically failed to assist homeless people and therefore avoided our statutory duties. Whilst the council received a positive judgement in February 2016, our QC has given very clear advice to move to one centre for the delivery of the service in order to mitigate against any future challenges. This advice has been shared with the appropriate Cabinet Member and is supported by the Council's Legal Services. Although the service was successful in defending this JR there were of course some improvements that were highlighted through both the judgement and recognised by the management of the service who attended the trial. The implementation of these, to ensure consistency, would be easier and more effective through the one centre of excellence.

- 5.4 The development of the proposed one HAC model was crystallised following discussions regarding the new advice model for the city. The proposal to operate homeless services from Newtown, removes significant pressure from the wider Neighbourhood Advice & Information Service (NAIS) enabling it to focus on its core advice services. Due to the expertise of the NAIS staff it has been decided that there will be six NAIS staff located within the new model in order to provide advice and assistance on welfare benefits, debt etc. to households in housing need. It should be recognised that the principal benefit will be in terms of improvements to the homeless service, ensuring that the service is refocused to comprehensively support homeless households from one central location. The skills and expertise of the NAIS officers, alongside a voluntary sector presence in the HAC will enable us to move towards a centre of excellence that is comparable with the Youth Hub that the council runs in partnership with St. Basil's.
- 5.5 Whilst the core service will be delivered from Newtown, other advice locations in the city will still provide initial contact and phone access to the specialist homeless team and where necessary arrange appropriate transport to the Newtown office. The intention is to ensure that only those households who have to travel to Newtown do so and any query that can be dealt with on the phone, the website or even by other partners prior to a household travelling to the HAC is done so.
- 5.6 The service undertook a benchmarking exercise in relation to the core cities in England and how they provide their service. All the core cities, excluding Liverpool provide their service from one office. This includes Leeds and Sheffield - both cities with a greater geographical size than Birmingham and longer travelling times to access it. Additionally other Authorities in the West Midlands conurbation also provide their service through one location.
- 5.7 The Council already successfully operates a homeless service, since November 2010, to single young people (under 25) from a single point of delivery at the Youth Hub in Digbeth, in partnership with St Basil's. This is considered to be an example of national best practice. The current proposal extends this approach to all age groups and seeks to replicate, where appropriate, the excellent service that young people in housing need receive in the city.

## **6. Evaluation of alternative option(s):**

- 6.1 A model of four Housing Advice Centres (combining Neighbourhood Advice and Homeless) was considered, however the number of welfare advice appointments available in this model would be limited due to the high demand for drop-in homeless services. It would also not have delivered the improvements in service required.
- 6.2 A number of alternative solutions have been considered including whether or not the service could continue to run from four locations, two locations or whether it needed to be centralised into one location. The decision was made that in order to meet the key objectives a one centre model was appropriate. Options for a city centre location were extensively explored however there wasn't an office of a similar size and configuration to Newtown available from within the BCC portfolio or available from the Private Sector.

Signatures		<u>Date</u>
Cabinet Member	<p>.....</p> <p>Cllr John Cotton, Cabinet Member for Neighbourhood Management &amp; Homes</p>	<p>.....</p>
Chief Officer	<p>.....</p> <p>Peter Hay, Strategic Director for People</p>	<p>.....</p>

<b>List of Background Documents used to compile this Report:</b>

<b>List of Appendices accompanying this Report (if any):</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consultation Feedback Report</li> <li>2. Reports by external consultant on the face-to-face consultation meetings</li> <li>3. Equalities Analysis</li> </ol>

<b>Report Version</b>	<b>V18</b>	<b>Dated</b>	<b><u>8 April 2016</u></b>
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