

Birmingham City Council

Consultation on Birmingham Housing Advice Service

Report on East Birmingham Consultation Meeting

Introduction

Birmingham City Council has been consulting upon the proposal to move the delivery of Housing and Homelessness Advice to a single location at the Newtown Customer Service Centre in Aston, Birmingham. A component of this consultation process involves four public meetings called to provide an opportunity for residents and organisations to have a face-to-face dialogue with relevant Council staff about their concerns on the impact of the proposal and any ideas for improving the service including the potential for collaborative action.¹ A meeting has been scheduled for each quadrant of Birmingham.

The meetings had been advertised via the Be Heard consultation portal, accessed directly or through the Council's website and through emails and telephone calls to agencies and voluntary and community groups in Birmingham that worked with people who had become homeless or were at greatest risk of becoming homeless, and all of the cities registered social landlords/housing associations.

These sessions were advertised and promoted as widely as practicable with a view to maximising public and partnership attendance. A variety of promotional methods were engaged. These are listed below:

1. A press release was issued by the Birmingham City Council Press Office detailing the times, dates and locations of the proposed events.
2. Emails were sent to MP's, Local Councillors and Partner Agencies detailing times and dates of the events and encouraging attendance.
3. Posters for all four events were displayed prominently in Housing Advice Centres (and events were timed so many customers may have knowledge of the proposals as the paper based survey in HAC's had been taking place for some weeks).
4. Flyers were handed out at Housing Advice Centres
5. Posters were displayed by partner agencies including displays at Citizen's Advice Bureau's and Police Stations (including Steelhouse Lane as the only remaining 24hr station).
6. Details of the events were loaded onto the Housing Advice Service's 'Be Heard' online consultation page.
7. Posters were displayed In BCC Temporary 'Accommodation Centres' for Homeless Persons.
8. Details of the events were 'Tweeted' by Birmingham Newsroom and Cllr Stacey.

¹ Other components of the consultation involve an online questionnaire hosted on the Be Heard website (which can be accessed via the Council's website) and a face-to-face survey of users of the Advice Service.

9. Details of the events were included in internal publications 'Weekly Staff News' and the fortnightly 'Leadership Bulletin'.
10. Emails and telephone calls to agencies and voluntary and community groups in Birmingham that worked with people who had become homeless or were at greatest risk of becoming homeless.
11. Emails to all of the cities registered social landlords/housing associations

The first meeting was scheduled to take place at Sparkbrook Community Centre (in the East Quadrant of Birmingham) on Monday, 11th January 2016 between 10am and 12 noon. Unfortunately, there were no attendees and was closed at 10:30am.

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The meetings had been advertised via the Be Heard consultation portal, accessed directly or through the Council's website and through emails and telephone calls to agencies and voluntary and community groups in Birmingham that worked with people who had become homeless or were at greatest risk of becoming homeless, and all of the cities registered social landlords/housing associations.

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Birmingham City Council

Consultation on Birmingham Housing Advice Service

Report on South Birmingham Consultation Meeting

Introduction

Birmingham City Council has been consulting upon the proposal to move the delivery of Housing and Homelessness Advice to a single location at the Newtown Customer Service Centre in Aston, Birmingham. A component of this consultation process involves four public meetings called to provide an opportunity for residents and organisations to have a face-to-face dialogue with relevant Council staff about their concerns on the impact of the proposal and any ideas for improving the service including the potential for collaborative action.¹ A meeting has been scheduled for each quadrant of Birmingham.

These sessions were advertised and promoted as widely as practicable with a view to maximising public and partnership attendance. A variety of promotional methods were engaged. These are listed below:

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10. Emails and telephone calls to agencies and voluntary and community groups in Birmingham that worked with people who had become homeless or were at greatest risk of becoming homeless.
11. Emails to all of the cities registered social landlords/housing associations

This is a report on the second of these public meetings held in the south quadrant at Northfield Baptist Church on Monday, 11th January 2016 between 2pm to 4pm. The report has been written by the independent chair of the meeting based upon detailed notes taken by him and Council staff who were present.

It was attended by 7 people, as well as Council staff, including staff or volunteers from the Northfield Community Partnership, Northfield Baptist Church, a local Methodist Church, the Northfield Town Centre Manager, Freshwinds, the Northfield Constituency's MP's office, and a local City Council Councillor.

The purposes of the meeting were:

1. To inform Birmingham citizens and organisations about the proposal to move the delivery of Housing and Homelessness Advice to a single location at Newtown Customer Service Centre, Birmingham and alternatives that have been considered. The proposal involves more advisors on duty, additional interview appointments and improved advice available via phone and the web.
2. To obtain greater insights into the likely impact of this proposal.
3. To explore ways that any potential negative impacts could be avoided or mitigated and new ways of working that could improve the service to people seeking housing and homelessness advice.

Following a presentation by the Council's Integrated Service Head of Homeless & Pre-Tenancy Services, the meeting opened out for questions of clarification and then discussions about likely impacts and what could be done to either mitigate any negative impacts or improve the service including ideas for collaborative working. Key points made at the meeting are summarised next, followed by an outline of the presentation. The bulk of the report provides a more detailed account of questions (heading in red), responses by Council staff (heading in blue) and the discussion on collaborative action and how such action could be made to happen.

Summary

The key concerns, responses and ideas for improving the Service were:

- The possibility that many people from Northfield and the rest of the south of the city would **not have the confidence or ability to travel the distance required** to attend appointments in Newtown, Aston. This did not apply just to the most vulnerable but also too many residents who were not used to travelling across Birmingham or were worried about child care responsibilities. To mitigate this concern, the Service would: provide an enhanced phone service to avoid unnecessary face-to-face appointments; clear advice and information on how to get to the consolidated office; free bus tickets if there was an affordability issue; appointments at times which fitted in with child care responsibilities; and, when there was a real need, a free taxi service or an appointment with a visiting officer in the applicant's locality. The Service would also look at ways of extending the follow-up calls and texts system currently operated by the Youth Hub to adults with appointments at the Aston office.

- Another concern was that people in need would **not be able to afford phone calls**. While there would be free phones available in neighbourhood Offices, the Service committed to exploring the introduction of a free phone service and extending the availability of free phones through a wider network of local organisations. There would also be more people available to answer phones in the Aston office, allocated officers for homelessness applications (as was the case currently) and an IT system that allowed all frontline staff to answer questions on specific cases.
- A further concern was the **ability of the consolidated office to deal with emergency cases and to provide referrals to other local support needed** such as food banks. The Service would continue to have an out-of-hours service to deal with emergencies across the city and would keep extensive, updated information and connections with local services that provide additional support.
- There was a real appetite in the area for **greater collaborative action with local third sector organisations** on preventative work and on supporting the Council's statutory homelessness duty. The Service was keen to do this, as was the Cabinet Member responsible for the Service, and was committed to develop collaborative working further.
- Meeting participants were keen to see that **the consolidated service was monitored and reviewed**, with action taken if things weren't right. The Service explained that, if the proposal was approved, it would monitor and review the new service model from day one of its implementation in June 2016.

Presentation

First, the proposal was explained, involving the consolidation of all front-facing staff from the current four Advice Centres at Erdington, Northfield, Sparkbrook and Newtown into the Newtown location which would therefore be the venue for all face-to-face interviews. There would be increased phone access to ensure that travel is only undertaken when necessary. The Youth Hub would not be affected and would continue to operate from and in partnership with St. Basil's.

The proposal would deliver:

- greater consistency in advice and decision making across the service;
- a centre of excellence with all staff trained to the same standards, better able to share expertise and owning the whole 'customer journey';
- the ability to have some dedicated specialist staff in areas often associated with homelessness such as benefits advice and debt;
- increased numbers of appointments and shorter waiting times;
- greater flexibility to cover for staff absences; and
- a greater focus in the future on early intervention and prevention.

Homelessness services often attract legal challenges because providing these services is a statutory duty of local authorities. BCC therefore took legal advice on whether the proposal would conflict with this statutory duty and was informed by a barrister that it would not and was legally more robust than the other options considered.

Currently there are around 1,000 enquiries per month and 100 face-to-face appointments. The waiting time for an appointment can be up to 6 weeks (emergencies are handled on the same day) and about one third do not turn up. The target for the new model will be a waiting time of one week as all staff being at one venue will allow greater flexibility and the ability to overbook so that non-attendees don't lead to unnecessary staff 'down time'. There will be 15 to 20 interviewing officers at Newtown on a normal day.

The proposal is not driven directly by the need to make financial savings as the cost of the service would remain the same. However, significant cuts proposed in neighbourhood advice staff and neighbourhood offices (down to two, one in Erdington and the other in Northfield) which have been supporting the Housing Advice Service, would have an effect on the Service. That is why the 'do nothing, leave things as they are' alternative option was rejected.

Two other alternatives of a two centre model and of one base in the city centre were also rejected on grounds of cost, the risk of lowering the consistency and quality of the service and inadequacy of the size and/or shape of the alternative premises researched. The Citizens Advice Bureau had also contacted the Council offering assistance and suggesting sharing office space. However, the space it has available is not large enough for the number of Advice Service staff and people attending the centre.

In drawing up this proposal, the Service had conducted a detailed Equality Impact Assessment, considering possible impacts and what could be done to lessen or avoid negative impacts. These included:

- for people not able to travel or able to afford the cost of travelling:
 - Bus tickets could be provided following appropriate checks on need, and taxis in certain very difficult situations;
 - an enhanced phone service which would identify whether those seeking advice needed to travel for a face-to-face interview; and
 - an officer to visit where someone was definitely unable to travel. (There are three visiting officers in the team.)
- for the few who might have genuine fears of travelling to Newtown for reasons such as the perpetrator of domestic violence living in that area or gang rivalries:
 - taxis or visiting officers would be deployed in these circumstances. (The bill last year for taxis was over £5,000.)
- for people becoming homeless late in the day without the time to travel before the office closed:
 - in these circumstances the out of hours service would find accommodation for the night and then they would be able to visit the Newtown centre the next day.

We have also benchmarked our service against other large cities in England, the so called Core Cities such as Manchester, Bristol, Nottingham, Liverpool, Newcastle, Sheffield and Leeds. Only one core city (Liverpool) provides homelessness advice from more than one site; Liverpool have five offices but last year had just under 300 homeless applications compared with BCC's over 5,000. We do have a larger population than any of the other Core Cities but Sheffield and Leeds cover a larger geographical area.

The 7 week consultation process would close on 21st January after which responses would be analysed and a publically-available report produced. The proposal would be put before the Council's Cabinet in March 2016 with any amendments arising from the consultation. If approved, there would be a transition period with the new model being in place by June 2016.

Questions and Discussion

Q1: What will happen to the staff at the other three centres?

Response: They will all move to Aston or, if they are back-office staff, to Lancaster Circus. This is not about staff reductions. As a service, we will have to make savings but this proposal is not part of these.

Q2: Customers have complained in the past about not having an allocated worker and not being able to contact the Housing Advice Centre and access the information they require. This is also important for Councillors and MPs who may be contacted by constituents and often ring the Integrated Service Head rather than an allocated officer.

Response: We will have an enhanced phone service with all staff being able to answer the phone and provide advice, thereby reducing the number of trips to the Advice Centre. Homelessness applicants will have an allocated officer who will also call the applicant back if their phone credit is running out. If they are not in when the applicant phones, other staff will be able to look at the case on the IT systems and answer most queries.

Q3: Who pays for the first phone call? Some people in need will also have no phone or no credit on their phone. Will there be a free phone call service available?

Response: We will look into the possibility of having a free phone call service. Would need to make sure that this applies to mobile phone calls too as some services are only free from landlines.

Q4: Could some community facilities act as contact points, creating a network with free phone access to the Housing Advice Centre?

Response: Current plans are that the Northfield and Erdington Neighbourhood Offices will remain and there will be free phones to use there. Customers tend to gravitate towards Neighbourhood Offices first where they will be put in touch with the Housing Advice Service. However, we can look into providing free phone access at other venues.

Q5: How will referrals to community services such as food banks and extra support needs be managed?

Response: Referrals will continue as officers in Newtown will have a comprehensive, updated knowledge of facilities local to where the person seeking advice and support is from. Currently 60% of enquirers tend to go home after advice rather than into temporary accommodation. We do ask enquirers about their money situation and organise food parcels for those who need to go into temporary accommodation. We are establishing additional emergency accommodation of our own and therefore further reduce our emergency use of Bed and Breakfasts. We currently place on average two people per night into emergency accommodation through our out of hours service.

Q6: How long until the Northfield Centre is closed? How will the closure be advertised?

Response: If the proposal is approved, the Northfield Housing Advice Service will close in June. Closure will be advertised as early and as widely as possible. However, we realise that some people will still turn up at the Northfield Office after closure and we will ensure that the neighbourhood Office is able to advise these people what to do. Experience from when we reduced from 32 centres to four is that the numbers turning up at a closed centre will decrease over time.

Q7: Are there financial reasons for this proposal?

Response: The reductions in the budget for Neighbourhood Advice Centres will have an impact on the Housing Advice Service but the proposal is not about staff savings for the Service itself and is centred on improvements to the current service.

Q8: Thirty voluntary and community groups in Northfield work together. There is a lot of experience there and they want to work with the Council but they have not really been given the opportunity to do so. Is there a plan to utilise third sector expertise? We need to

encourage the Council to find out what services are out there to support it and the Council needs to be pro-active in finding things out and seeking support. You may need to organise meetings with local organisations to discuss through the details of how we could work together. Also, don't forget to link in with the growing networks of local Councillors and MPs.

Response: We are keen to work with agencies to support prevention while meeting our statutory duties on homelessness, but I do not think that we have any new money to support this. We are also happy to develop this joint working to avoid customers having to make unnecessary trips to Aston. We would rather that a person received good advice locally and did not have to travel to us in Aston. Councillor Cotton, the Cabinet Member responsible for this Service, is very keen that we work collaboratively and there appears to be a real appetite for this in Northfield. We need to think about how we do this better and how we do it in other parts of the city as well, particularly where Neighbourhood Offices are closing down.

Q9: The most vulnerable people will not be able to make the trip to Aston. In addition, Northfield residents in general do not travel into Birmingham City Centre, never mind further to Aston. Asking residents in shock, not just the most vulnerable, to travel that far is concerning as they won't know how to get there and fear of the journey may prevent them from getting to their interviews. This is also linked to mental health issues.

Response: Detailed travel advice will be provided including which bus to get, where the stop is, where to get off and where any connecting bus stop is. In extreme circumstances, those unable to travel will be catered for via taxi provision and visiting staff. We will investigate addressing vulnerability by adopting the Youth Hub's model of phoning up or texting applicants who have missed an appointment to check whether they need further support.

Q10: Parents dropping off their children at school may be unable to attend as they will worry about getting back to pick them up. Or they will take their children out of school to attend an interview. Will the proposal discriminate against families?

Response: We will ensure that appointments for families fit in with school times, allowing plenty of time to travel between dropping off and picking up children. We will also advise them that they will have time to return for their children before pick-up time.

Q11: Do visiting officers currently have a backlog and are there any plans to increase their numbers? What are the criteria for a visit from a visiting officer?

Response: There is no backlog at present. However, we have not discounted increasing the number of visiting officers if we need to which is possible to do relatively quickly as all front-facing officers have generic job descriptions. Visits are related to vulnerability and ability to travel and visiting officers will negotiate this. They use their own vehicles and travel anywhere in Birmingham and to surrounding areas as some applicants are from outside Birmingham.

Q12: You said that you looked at other Core Cities and all but one had a single Housing Advice Centre. However, Birmingham is a bigger city than these others and also has the largest number of homelessness applicants, so is it fair to make this comparison?

Response: Birmingham also has far more staff than these other Core Cities. Many authorities with large rural areas also expect their residents to travel further, Solihull for example.

Q13: Have you looked at how far people have to travel to get to Newtown?

Response: Yes, we did an analysis of how many buses and how much time it would take from the centre of each of the city's 40 Wards to reach the Newtown office. All but two required 2 buses and 45 minutes or less. The other two required just over an hour. (It was clarified that this applied to normal traffic conditions.) All this information will be in the published Equality Impact Assessment. In addition, we were surprised to find from a customer survey that about 50% of applicants arrive in a car.

Q14: Is there sufficient parking provision at the Newtown, Aston office?

Response: Yes, there is a car park which allows 2 hours parking and there is also plenty of street parking available in the vicinity.

Q15: Is there scope for increasing the size of the Newtown office?

Response: We will be the only service in there. It has space for all our current front-facing staff, sufficient numbers of interview rooms and space for people to wait. Newtown is used to dealing with large volumes of people. It is a fairly newly renovated building which has a natural flow for customers and has been well kitted out for the provision of advice services.

Q16: People whose benefits have been sanctioned may not have enough money to ring. We need a free phone system or phones in third sector organisations. At the moment there is a free phone for repairs so perhaps you could tag onto that. We also need more information on bus tickets.

Response: Phones for contacting us will continue to be available in Neighbourhood Offices but we will seek to develop their availability. We need to avoid frustrations of people queuing to use the free phone in an office. The free phone also needs to be available out of hours. We do not promote the availability of bus tickets but we do ask applicants if they need them and do not refuse to hand out bus tickets unnecessarily. However, we do need to ask some questions to confirm that the applicant really needs them and to prevent abuse of the system. The Council House also has bus tickets to hand out in appropriate cases.

Q17: How many of the homeless applicants are repeat applicants? They will know where to go.

Response: We only keep records of those representing within two years and they are about 5% of applicants. We also have a website that provides information, has the phone number to ring for further advice and a link to the very helpful Shelter website. We are finding that nowadays most people, including the vulnerable, do have internet access or a smartphone.

Q18: Can a customer request a call back through the website?

Response: Not at present but it is a consideration for the future. We are looking to improve the website and look at the possibility of other IT tools such as Skype for interviews. We will also explore ways of developing third sector organisations and our collaborative working with them to assist in delivering our statutory duty and to reduce demand on the Housing Advice Centre.

Q19: Why will people have to go to Newtown for an interview?

Response: It's mainly because we need to see their documentation. It is easier to assess vulnerability face-to-face. In addition, we have to check for fraud and we have a passport/identity documentation checker in that office. However, we are doing more and more on line so there is increasing scope for local organisations to work with and support the Service.

Q20: If all goes wrong after implementation of this proposal, what is the timescale for review?

Response: If the proposal is agreed, we will be monitoring and reviewing from day one including the numbers who don't turn up for interview and reasons for this. Developing the proposal has been an ongoing process over the past 12 months Councillor Cotton, the responsible Cabinet Member, has been very challenging to make sure we get it right. Ultimately, as we are a statutory service, we will end up in court if we don't get it right. But we will get it right!

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Report: West & Central Birmingham Consultation Meeting

Introduction

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11. Emails to all of the cities registered social landlords/housing associations

This is a report on the fourth of these public meetings held in the West and Central Quadrant at St. Luke's Church Centre in Lee Bank on Monday, 18th January 2016 between 2pm and 4pm. The report has been written by the independent chair of the meeting based upon detailed notes taken by him and Council staff who were present.

It was attended by 11 people, as well as Council staff, including staff and volunteers from Shelter, the Longhurst Group, Midland Heart, the police, Catalysts Mutual CIC, Ashram Moseley and the Northfield Baptist Church.

The purposes of the meeting were:

1. To inform Birmingham citizens and organisations about the proposal to move the delivery of Housing and Homelessness Advice to a single location at Newtown Customer Service Centre, Birmingham and alternatives that have been considered. The proposal involves more advisors on duty, additional interview appointments and improved advice available via phone and the web.
2. To obtain greater insights into the likely impact of this proposal.
3. To explore ways that any potential negative impacts could be avoided or mitigated and new ways of working that could improve the service to people seeking housing and homelessness advice.

Following a presentation by the Council's Integrated Service Head of Homeless & Pre-Tenancy Services, the meeting opened out for questions of clarification and then discussions about likely impacts and what could be done to either mitigate any negative impacts or improve the service including ideas for collaborative working. Key points made at the meeting are summarised next, followed by an outline of the presentation. The bulk of the report provides a more detailed account of questions (heading in red), responses by Council staff (heading in blue) and the discussion on collaborative action and how such action could be made to happen.

Summary

The key issues raised about the proposal to consolidate the Housing and Homelessness service at one centre in Newtown, Aston were:

- Would the centre be the **first point of contact** wherever you were in the city? It was explained that it would be but that the expectation would be that contact could be made via telephone from a Neighbourhood Office, partner agency or directly by the individual.
- Some time was spent discussing: **how the centre at Newtown would operate**; the number of staff, footfall and the flexibility and capacity to reduce waiting time for appointments; the co-location of advice workers on benefits and money management/debt but that staff would have the knowledge to refer clients on to specialist services on mental health, drug, alcohol and other issues often connected with homelessness.
- Questions were asked about **the point at which evidence of homelessness and identity would need to be presented**. It was explained that while as much as possible would be dealt with over the phone, homeless applicants would need to present original identity documents early on and that original identity and other

needed documents would need to be presented at the lettings point or else the lettings couldn't go ahead.

- The **potential for undertaking telephone applications for homelessness** was supported as a way of reducing the need to travel and as a way of speeding up application procedures although face-to-face interviews were seen as being better for eliciting the right information from vulnerable people. It was agreed that telephone applications should be tested out and that training staff and providing a good script would be important for the quality of the procedure. **Skype and similar video-telephony** should be investigated as well. Support workers would be encouraged for telephone interviews.
- The impact of the **Universal Credit** roll out and the increase in **rough sleeping** were also topics discussed.
- There was a real appetite for **greater collaborative action with third sector and other organisations** on preventative work, on providing advice in general and on supporting the Council's statutory homelessness duty. The Service was keen to do this and the National Homeless Advice Service, run by Shelter, could provide training for third sector organisations as well.

Presentation

First², the proposal was explained, involving the consolidation of all front-facing staff from the current four Advice Centres at Erdington, Northfield, Sparkbrook and Newtown into the Newtown location which would therefore be the venue for all face-to-face interviews. There would be increased phone access to ensure that travel is only undertaken when necessary. The Youth Hub would not be affected and would continue to operate from and in partnership with St. Basil's.

The proposal would deliver:

- greater consistency in advice and decision making across the service;
- a centre of excellence with all staff trained to the same standards, better able to share expertise and owning the whole 'customer journey';
- the ability to have some dedicated specialist staff in areas often associated with homelessness such as benefits advice and debt;
- increased numbers of appointments and shorter waiting times;
- greater flexibility to cover for staff absences; and
- a greater focus in the future on early intervention and prevention.

Homelessness services often attract legal challenges because providing these services is a statutory duty of local authorities. BCC therefore took legal advice on whether the proposal would conflict with this statutory duty and was informed by a barrister that it would not and was legally more robust than the other options considered.

Currently there are around 1,000 enquiries per month and 100 face-to-face appointments. The waiting time for an appointment can be up to 6 weeks (emergencies are handled on the same day) and about one third do not turn up. The target for the new model will be a waiting time of one week as all staff being at one venue will allow greater flexibility and the ability to overbook so that non-attendees don't lead to unnecessary staff 'down time'. There will be 15 to 20 interviewing officers at Newtown on a normal day.

² While attendees asked questions during the presentation, this meeting report places the questions and responses in the next section for ease of reading. For the same reason, some questions and some responses have been merged.

The proposal is not driven directly by the need to make financial savings as the cost of the service would remain the same. However, significant cuts proposed in neighbourhood advice staff and neighbourhood offices (down to two, one in Erdington and the other in Northfield) which have been supporting the Housing Advice Service, would have an effect on the Service. That is why the 'do nothing, leave things as they are' alternative option was rejected.

Two other alternatives of a two centre model and of one base in the city centre were also rejected on grounds of cost, the risk of lowering the consistency and quality of the service and inadequacy of the size and/or shape of the alternative premises researched. The Citizens Advice Bureau had also contacted the Council offering assistance and suggesting sharing office space. However, the space it has available is not large enough for the number of Advice Service staff and people attending the centre.

In drawing up this proposal, the Service had conducted a detailed Equality Impact Assessment, considering possible impacts and what could be done to lessen or avoid negative impacts. These included:

- for people not able to travel or able to afford the cost of travelling:
 - Bus tickets could be provided following appropriate checks on need, and taxis in certain very difficult situations;
 - an enhanced phone service which would identify whether those seeking advice needed to travel for a face-to-face interview; and
 - an officer to visit where someone was definitely unable to travel. (There are three visiting officers in the team.)
- for the few who might have genuine fears of travelling to Newtown for reasons such as the perpetrator of domestic violence living in that area or gang rivalries:
 - taxis or visiting officers would be deployed in these circumstances. (The bill last year for taxis was over £5,000.)
- for people becoming homeless late in the day without the time to travel before the office closed:
 - in these circumstances the out of hours service would find accommodation for the night and then they would be able to visit the Newtown centre the next day.

We have also benchmarked our service against other large cities in England, the so called Core Cities such as Manchester, Bristol, Nottingham, Liverpool, Newcastle, Sheffield and Leeds. Only one core city (Liverpool) provides homelessness advice from more than one site; Liverpool have five offices but last year had just under 300 homeless applications compared with BCC's over 5,000. We do have a larger population than any of the other Core Cities but Sheffield and Leeds cover a larger geographical area.

The 7 week consultation process would close on 21st January after which responses would be analysed and a publically-available report produced. The proposal would be put before the Council's Cabinet in March 2016 with any amendments arising from the consultation. If approved, there would be a transition period with the new model being in place by June 2016.

Questions and Discussion

Q1: Does the consultation include Housing Advice and the Homelessness Service or just Homelessness?

Response: The consultation relates to both services. If the proposed model goes through both of these functions will be delivered through the Newtown centre.

Q2: First point of contact – will this be Newtown regardless of where they are? For example, if I met someone at Bournville College who wants to be housed, where do I take them?

Response: They could either travel to Newtown direct or phone the Newtown office to secure advice on the phone. You may take them to the Northfield Neighbourhood Office or to a partner agency who would help them contact Newtown. However, there will be increased provision of phone and web access to Newtown so we could assist many people who are not under immediate threat of homelessness avoid the need to travel.

Q3: What kind of numbers do you expect to be coming through the service?

Response: We take about 5,000 homeless applications per year and expect that to continue. There are also about 10,000 preventions and we expect this to go up. However we hope to decrease the footfall due to better phone and web access.

Q4: Do you think you can handle that level of footfall?

Response: We think so. Newtown currently sees over 200 people per day and the centre can handle this. With more people on reception or ready to conduct interviews (around 25) in a one-centre model, we believe we can handle it. However, regardless of numbers of staff there will be people waiting to be seen. There is space for 25 people with their children in a reasonably comfortable waiting area. We will use floor walkers to reduce queues by dealing with issues quickly while people wait.

Q5: How many staff will there be at Newtown? How many will be front-line and how many back office?

Response: There are about 60 staff who will provide a service at Newtown but not on each and every day as there would be a rota. There will be around 20 to 25 on front-line duty at Newtown on any given day with 10 more in the back office working on investigations and documenting decisions who can be called on to interview if the overbooking system means that more people turn up than the front-facing staff can deal with. The rest of the staff will be at Lancaster Circus or, in some instances, may be working from home.

Q6: Is there a case for surgeries at Erdington as Welfare advice will continue to be provided from there? Or will there be other advice provided at Newtown?

Response: Six Neighbourhood Advice and Information Service staff will be based at Newtown to continue to provide welfare/benefit advice related to housing need as part of the new Housing Advice and Homelessness Service

Q7: Homelessness is often linked with other issues such as mental health, drugs and alcohol. Will you have specialist advisers on these issues in the Service?

Response: Staff will have the knowledge to refer clients onto specialist support and advice in these areas. We won't have the specialist provision ourselves.

Q8: How will people provide their evidence of homelessness in the new model if they're speaking over the phone?

Response: We're currently considering taking homeless applications over the phone. This will still involve people making a trip to Newtown to provide original identification documents and sign forms at some point. However there is nothing preventing us from doing the assessments via telephone. Visiting officers are being provided with mobile scanners to assist in their role where verification is required. We are looking at ways to do these checks as conveniently as possible.

Discussion 1: the facilitator asked how attendees felt about taking homeless applications over the phone. Homeless applications via web will not be offered yet as this is felt to be a step too far and prevents effective investigation. It was agreed that you obtained more information face-to-face as you see how they respond and this can prompt your next question. However it can be useful if a telephone interview is scripted well and in emergency situations where time constraints prevent a face-to-face interview. It needs to be planned and extensively tested to ensure it is working.

Discussion 2: One participant said that he had previously done interviews with camcorders at other local authorities with limited success. Are there any similar plans for Homelessness?

Response: We are looking at this as part of the future fully-developed service. The Council is corporately looking at Skype as are we in our specific Service. However we are not in a position to offer this at the moment. The purpose of face-to-face interviews is not to catch people out but to ensure that vulnerable people are able to answer properly.

Q9: Have you tested out the phone application process yet? And at what point in a telephone conversation would you decide to move into a full-blown homeless application?

Response: Not tested yet but perhaps we should. We seem to have all agreed that it would be worth testing out a telephone application system out. Face-to –face is best but Skype etc. will be worth testing out as well. It will limit wasting people's time with unneeded trips to Newtown. Ensuring the quality of our staff and developing scripted interview models will be important in making it work. We can also record calls as a form of quality control.

Q10: Will the new one-centre system reduce Bed and Breakfast usage?

Response: Possibly but this isn't the aim of the proposal.

Q11: You mentioned safety issues around gangs. Could you elaborate? It's not threatening gangs hanging around corners, is it?

Response: No. Some individuals may be unable to go to Newtown because of previous gang activity/affiliations which are rivals to gangs active in Aston, and we will ensure that they are able to access the Advice Service.

Q12: Will this include partner organisations directing people to where they can be assisted by support workers with telephone Interviews.

Response: Yes. It does make sense to involve support workers. We already do now and this will extend into any provision of telephone interviews.

Q13: Where information is not provided correctly during a telephone interview, will they be asked to come in for a face to face interview?

Response: Yes, in most cases (save for cases where refusal to provide information is intentional and will not change through face to face), customers will be invited in for an interview and facilitated to attend where necessary.

Q14: Will Universal Credit make temporary accommodation more unaffordable

Response: Yes, it is a big risk for temporary accommodation. . However in cases where it is unaffordable due to specific circumstances we can write off some costs. This does happen already however we do expect Universal Credit to negatively impact our rental income.

Universal Credit is already with us for single people aged over 21. It will eventually be rolled out to people with families.

Q15: Will the Newtown office need refurbishing?

Response: No except for upgrading the CCTV. Everything else is in there. The neighbourhood staff move out and we move in.

Q16: Has there been an increase in rough sleepers?

Response: (Partly from Midlands Heart rough sleepers team.) The Rough Sleepers Team does see a number of people sleeping rough but also people involved with them drinking, begging etc. who do not sleep rough. The numbers do fluctuate over the year but the official figure has gone up from 20 to 36 although Birmingham has been proud of its record of reducing the numbers in earlier years. It is an issue which has risen up the political agenda and a priority for the new Council Leader.

Q17: Birmingham Social Housing Partnership (BSHP) would like to enter into conversation with BCC to see what further assistance it can provide to contribute to stabilising homelessness and assisting BCC in tackling it. Issues of debt and growing difficulties for young people necessitate closer working. Birmingham CAB also confirmed that they were beginning to see more cases of rent arrears coming to County Court and coming earlier than usual, perhaps because we're beginning to see the impact of the bedroom tax.

Response: Yes. We will need to, and want to collaborate closely with partners to tackle these issues.

Q18: What is the relationship like with Let to Birmingham?

Response: It's a partnership with BCC and Omega Lettings. We no longer fund them as funding was for 18 months; however we still work with them. We hope to have them providing a front line presence in the new one-centre Housing Advice Centre. This does not happen at the moment.

Q19: What happened to the Customer Service Centres?

Response: It is still there. The Centre was run by Capita but was brought back in house. Calls to the main council number regarding Homelessness will be referred to us and not dealt with there.

Q20: Is there any provision for training for volunteers and charities who want to assist customers and provide advice.

Response: BCC hopes to provide this training to upskill other groups to see customers and provide quality advice to reduce the strain on our own services. A representative from the National Homeless Advice Service, run by Shelter, who was a meeting participant, said that they could offer free training as well. The need for energy saving advice was also raised.

Birmingham City Council

Consultation on Birmingham Housing Advice Service

Summary Report on Consultation Meetings

Introduction

Birmingham City Council has been consulting upon the proposal to move the delivery of Housing and Homelessness Advice to a single location at the Newtown Customer Service Centre in Aston, Birmingham. A component of this consultation process involved four public meetings called to provide an opportunity for residents and organisations to have a face-to-face dialogue with relevant Council staff about their concerns on the impact of the proposal and any ideas for improving the service including the potential for collaborative action.¹ A meeting was been scheduled for each quadrant of Birmingham and an individual report has been completed for each meeting.

These sessions were advertised and promoted as widely as practicable with a view to maximising public and partnership attendance. A variety of promotional methods were engaged. These are listed below:

1. A press release was issued by the Birmingham City Council Press Office detailing the times, dates and locations of the proposed events.
2. Emails were sent to MP's, Local Councillors and Partner Agencies detailing times and dates of the events and encouraging attendance.
3. Posters for all four events were displayed prominently in Housing Advice Centres (and events were timed so many customers may have knowledge of the proposals as the paper based survey in HAC's had been taking place for some weeks).
4. Flyers were handed out at Housing Advice Centres
5. Posters were displayed by partner agencies including displays at Citizen's Advice Bureau's and Police Stations (including Steelhouse Lane as the only remaining 24hr station).
6. Details of the events were loaded onto the Housing Advice Service's 'Be Heard' online consultation page.
7. Posters were displayed In BCC Temporary 'Accommodation Centres' for Homeless Persons.
8. Details of the events were 'Tweeted' by Birmingham Newsroom and Cllr Stacey.
9. Details of the events were included in internal publications 'Weekly Staff News' and the fortnightly 'Leadership Bulletin'.

¹ Other components of the consultation involve an online questionnaire hosted on the Be Heard website (which can be accessed via the Council's website) and a face-to-face survey of users of the Advice Service.

10. Emails and telephone calls to agencies and voluntary and community groups in Birmingham that worked with people who had become homeless or were at greatest risk of becoming homeless.

11. Emails to all of the cities registered social landlords/housing associations

This is a summary report of all the meetings in the form of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and areas that the Housing and Homelessness Advice Service committed to exploring to improve the proposed service. While many concerns were expressed and ideas put forward on how negative impacts could be mitigated or the service could be improved, no meeting participant suggested an alternative to the consolidation into a one-centre model.

The meetings were attended by 21 people in total, as well as Council staff, although there were no attendees for one meeting.

The purposes of the meeting were:

1. To inform Birmingham citizens and organisations about the proposal to move the delivery of Housing and Homelessness Advice to a single location at Newtown Customer Service Centre, Birmingham and alternatives that have been considered. The proposal involves more advisors on duty, additional interview appointments and improved advice available via phone and the web.
2. To obtain greater insights into the likely impact of this proposal.
3. To explore ways that any potential negative impacts could be avoided or mitigated and new ways of working that could improve the service to people seeking housing and homelessness advice.

Frequently asked Questions

Q1: Who pays for the first phone call? Some people in need will also have no phone or no credit on their phone. Will there be a free phone call service available?

Response: We will look into the possibility of having a free phone call service. We would need to make sure that this applies to mobile phone calls too as some services are only free from landlines.

Q2: First point of contact – will this be Newtown regardless of where they are? For example, if I met someone at Bournville College who wants to be housed, where do I take them?

Response: They could either travel to Newtown direct or phone the Newtown office to secure advice on the phone. You may take them to the Northfield Neighbourhood Office or to a partner agency who would help them contact Newtown. However, there will be increased provision of phone and web access to Newtown so we could assist many people who are not under immediate threat of homelessness avoid the need to travel.

Q3: Could some community facilities act as contact points, creating a network with free phone access to the Housing Advice Centre?

Response: Current plans are that the Northfield and Erdington Neighbourhood Offices will remain and there will be free phones to use there. Customers tend to gravitate towards Neighbourhood Offices first where they will be put in touch with the Housing Advice Service. However, we can look into providing free phone access at other venues.

Q4: How will referrals to community services such as food banks and extra support needs be managed?

Response: Referrals will continue as officers in Newtown will have a comprehensive, updated knowledge of facilities local to where the person seeking advice and support is from. Currently 60% of enquirers tend to go home after advice rather than into temporary accommodation. We do ask enquirers about their money situation and organise food parcels for those who need to go into temporary accommodation. We are establishing additional emergency accommodation of our own and therefore further reduce our emergency use of Bed and Breakfasts. We currently place on average two people per night into emergency accommodation through our out of hours service.

Q5: Are there financial reasons for this proposal?

Response: The reductions in the budget for Neighbourhood Advice Centres will have an impact on the Housing Advice Service but the proposal is not about staff savings for the Service itself and is centred on improvements to the current service.

Q6: Is there a plan to utilise third sector expertise? We need to encourage the Council to find out what services are out there to support it and the Council needs to be pro-active in finding things out and seeking support. You may need to organise meetings with local organisations to discuss through the details of how we could work together. Also, don't forget to link in with the growing networks of local Councillors and MPs.

Response: We are keen to work with agencies to support prevention while meeting our statutory duties on homelessness, but we do not have any new money to support this. We are also happy to develop this joint working to avoid customers having to make unnecessary trips to Aston. We would rather that a person received good advice locally and did not have to travel to us in Aston. Councillor Cotton, the Cabinet Member responsible for this Service, is very keen that we work collaboratively and there appears to be a real appetite for this across the city. We need to think about how we do this better and how we do it across the city, particularly where Neighbourhood Offices are closing down.

Q7: The most vulnerable people will not be able to make the trip to Aston. Asking residents in shock, not just the most vulnerable, to travel is concerning as they won't know how to get there and fear of the journey may prevent them from getting to their interviews. This is also linked to mental health issues.

Response: Detailed travel advice will be provided including which bus to get, where the bus stop is, where to get off and where any connecting bus stop is. In extreme circumstances, those unable to travel will be catered for via taxi provision and visiting staff. We will investigate addressing vulnerability by adopting the Youth Hub's model of phoning up or texting applicants who have missed an appointment to check whether they need further support.

Q8: Parents dropping off their children at school may be unable to attend as they will worry about getting back to pick them up. Or they will take their children out of school to attend an interview. Will the proposal discriminate against families?

Response: We will ensure that appointments for families fit in with school times, allowing plenty of time to travel between dropping off and picking up children. We will also advise them that they will have time to return for their children before pick-up time.

Q9: Do visiting officers currently have a backlog and are there any plans to increase their numbers? What are the criteria for a visit from a visiting officer?

Response: There is no backlog at present. However, we have not discounted increasing the number of visiting officers if we need to which is possible to do relatively quickly as all front-facing officers have generic job descriptions. Visits are related to vulnerability and ability to travel and visiting officers will negotiate this. They use their own vehicles and travel

anywhere in Birmingham and to surrounding areas as some applicants are from outside Birmingham.

Q10: You said that you looked at other Core Cities and all but one had a single Housing Advice Centre. However, Birmingham is a bigger city than these others and also has the largest number of homelessness applicants, so is it fair to make this comparison?

Response: We have benchmarked our service against other large cities in England, the so called Core Cities such as Manchester, Bristol, Nottingham, Liverpool, Newcastle, Sheffield and Leeds. Only one core city (Liverpool) provides homelessness advice from more than one site; Liverpool have five offices but last year had just under 300 homeless applications compared with BCC's over 5,000. We do have a larger population than any of the other Core Cities but Sheffield and Leeds cover a larger geographical area.

Q11: Have you looked at how far people have to travel to get to Newtown?

Response: Yes, we did an analysis of how many buses and how much time it would take from the centre of each of the city's 40 Wards to reach the Newtown office. All but two in normal traffic conditions required 2 buses and 45 minutes or less. The other two required just over an hour.

Q12: Is there sufficient parking provision at the Newtown, Aston office?

Response: Yes, there is a car park which allows 2 hours parking and there is also plenty of street parking available in the vicinity.

Q13: Can a customer request a call back through the website?

Response: Not at present but it is a consideration for the future. We are looking to improve the website and look at the possibility of other IT tools such as Skype for interviews. We will also explore ways of developing third sector organisations and our collaborative working with them to assist in delivering our statutory duty and to reduce demand on the Housing Advice Centre.

Q14: Why will people have to go to Newtown for an interview? Can't a homeless application be done by phone?

Response: Mainly because we need to see their documentation. It is also easier to assess vulnerability face-to-face. In addition, we have to check for fraud and we have a passport/identity documentation checker in that office.

We're currently considering taking applications over the phone. This will still involve people making a trip to Newtown to provide original identification documents and sign forms at some point. It can be useful if a telephone interview is scripted well and in emergency situations where time constraints prevent a face-to-face interview. It needs to be planned and extensively tested to ensure it is working.

Visiting officers are being provided with mobile scanners to assist in their role where verification is required. We are looking at ways to do these checks as conveniently as possible. You obtain more information face-to-face as you see how they respond and this can prompt your next question. The purpose of face-to-face interviews is not to catch people out but to ensure that vulnerable people are able to answer properly.

The Council is also corporately looking at Skype, as are we in our specific Housing Advice Service. However we are not in a position to offer this at the moment.

Q15: If all goes wrong after implementation of this proposal, what is the timescale for review?

Response: If the proposal is agreed, we will be monitoring and reviewing from day one including the numbers who don't turn up for interview and reasons for this. Developing the proposal has been an ongoing process over the past 12 months. Councillor Cotton, the responsible Cabinet Member, has been very challenging to make sure we get it right. Ultimately, as we are a statutory service, we will end up in court if we don't get it right. But we will get it right!

Q16: What kind of numbers do you expect to be coming through the service?

Response: We take about 5,000 homeless applications per year and expect that to continue. There are also about 10,000 preventions and we expect this to go up. However we hope to decrease the footfall due to better phone and web access.

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Response: The Rough Sleepers Team does see a number of people sleeping rough but also people involved with them drinking, begging etc. who do not sleep rough. The numbers do fluctuate over the year but the official figure has gone up from 20 to 36 although Birmingham has been proud of its record of reducing the numbers in earlier years. It is an issue which has risen up the political agenda and a priority for the new Council Leader.

Improvements to be explored

- Providing a free number to call which is also free for mobiles.
- Developing a stronger collaborative network with third sector organisations and other agencies involving training, direct phone systems, two-way communication and updating, referrals, provision of information on support others can offer, and continual development of the overall system of advice and support on homelessness and housing issues including through local meetings of partners.

- Developing and testing homeless applications by telephone and, eventually, Skype and other video-conferencing technologies.
- Developing web-based resources including the possibility of asking for a call back through the website.
- Extending the number of visiting officers if demand is there.
- Adapting the call or text back service used for non-attendees at the Youth Hub for non-attendees at the Newtown office.
- Committed to monitoring performance and impact from day one.