

<b>1 October 2019</b>		<b>ITEM: 5</b>
<b>Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee</b>		
<b>Housing Solutions Customer Excellence Programme- External Review Findings</b>		
<b>Wards and communities affected:</b> All	<b>Key Decision:</b> N/A	
<b>Report of:</b> Lorrita Johnson, Housing Solutions Manager		
<b>Accountable Assistant Director:</b> Carol Hinvest, Assistant Director of Housing		
<b>Accountable Director:</b> Roger Harris, Corporate Director of Adults, Housing and Health and Interim Director of Children's Services		
<b>This report is</b> Public		

## **Executive Summary**

The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 (HRA17) implemented on 3 April 2018, originated as a private member's bill tabled by Bob Blackman MP. The legislation is based on changes made to the Welsh homelessness legislation in 2016 and was fully endorsed by government during its passage.

The Act has brought about notable changes to the delivery of homeless services across England. The requirement to provide services to everyone who is 'eligible' and 'homeless', regardless of 'priority need' and 'intentional homelessness' has resulted in more people being provided with assistance.

In considering a further service redesign, the Housing Solutions Service has undertaken a programme of customer service improvement during 2018-19. The service also commissioned the National Practitioner Support Service (NPSS) and Shelter to conduct a full review of the service focusing on key areas which impacts on the customer experience.

The main aim of the review was to seek an external view on how Thurrock is performing against the new legislative functions introduced by the HRA 17 and how well the service is working with residents and partners in making the correct decisions and providing the right advice in line with the law on homelessness.

The NPSS review was undertaken in July 2019 with Shelter conducting a File review in March 2019 and Mystery Shopping in June-July 2019.

In April 2013, the National Practitioner Support Service (NPSS) was established to support local authorities to meet the 10 Local Challenges set out in the 'Making

every contact count' report, which had been published the previous year by the Ministerial Working Group on Homelessness.

The detailed findings and common themes from both reviews are illustrated in further sections of this report. However, as shown in the below tables, overall both reviews scored the service a score of 'Fair to Good'. This is consistent with the performance rates of other local authorities since the introduction of the HRA 2017 and provides a positive endorsement of the service albeit with significant recommendations in some areas to improve the service delivery. The NPSS have to date undertaken 5 reviews of Local Authorities homeless services. Prior to the implementation of the HRA 17, the 'pass' mark was 60%.

Since the new legislation has been implemented, no Local Authority has reached this threshold.

The table below shows the ratings achieved by authorities thus far.

Authorities assessed	Rating
Local Authority 1	49%
Local Authority 2	45%
Local Authority 3	58%
Local Authority 4	42%
Local Authority 5	56%

Thurrock achieved an overall score of 56% which is a high average in comparison with the authorities reviewed. It is noted that this is reflective of the challenges the HRA 17 has presented for Local Authorities. Undertaking a review offers Thurrock, the opportunity for an objective assessment of the effectiveness of the services and the opportunity to improve and learn from peers as we seek to improve service delivery.

Shelter reported that the service is set up to provide access to basic advice and information to anyone whether or not they were within 56 days of homelessness and whether or not they were the sort of person who might not be in priority need or who might be intentionally homeless. The Homelessness Code of Guidance encourages such flexibility.

Activity Area- Mystery Shopping & File Assessment	Performance 2019	
	%	Rating
<b>Email</b>	48%	Fair
<b>Telephone</b>	68%	Good
<b>Face to Face</b>	65%	Fair- Good
<b>File Assessment</b>	65%	Fair-Good
<b>Overall</b>	60%	Fair

Essentially, the overall results from Shelter's mystery shopping and File assessment suggests that there isn't a 'gatekeeping' practice. This means there were no barriers to access the service for advice and the authority has some positive areas in its

current service offer. In addition, Shelter's analysis of the results for each area indicate that the Service is currently performing at Fair to Good rating level. This report provides a summary of the actions undertaken by the service in implementing the HRA 17, the findings of the reviews and next steps of actions which will be delivered through a continuous improvement plan.

## **1. Recommendation(s)**

### **1.1 That the Committee comment on the information provided on the implementation of the Act and take note of the findings of the reviews and the continued work of the Housing Solutions Service to meet the service demands whilst providing an excellent service to applicants.**

## **2. Background – Changes introduced by HRA 17**

- 2.1 The previous homelessness legislation provided an important safety net for vulnerable households, but it required local housing authorities to intervene only at crisis point, often too late to prevent an expensive homelessness crisis. This led to two significant issues:
- 2.2 Households who did not have a priority need (i.e. do not have dependent children or who are not considered 'vulnerable' but who may still have complex needs) often did not receive the support they needed to secure accommodation;
- 2.3 Studies found that the structure of the legislation meant local authorities did not always intervene as early as possible.
- 2.4 The HRA 2017 made significant changes to the homelessness legislation contained in Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 ("the 1996 Act"), by placing new duties on local housing authorities to intervene earlier and prevent a homelessness crisis for all households.
- 2.5 The newly created 'prevention' and 'relief' duties requires authorities to take 'reasonable steps' to help to secure accommodation for 6 months for eligible homeless applicants accepted by the Council as being threatened with homelessness. Essentially, anyone owed the new prevention or relief duty requires 'reasonable steps' to be undertaken to help them avoid becoming homeless or relieve their homelessness.
- 2.6 Applicants assessed as having 'priority need' must also be provided with temporary accommodation whilst steps are undertaken to secure future longer term accommodation.
- 2.7 HRA 17 also extends the definition of those considered 'threatened' with homelessness to include people likely to lose their home from 28 days to 56 days. This includes those served with a valid Section 21 notice by a landlord notifying the tenant that possession of the private sector property is required.

- 2.8 The Act also specifies the need for enhanced advisory services. The Housing Act 1996 stipulates that local authorities must ensure advice and information around homelessness and preventing homelessness is available free of charge to everyone in their district. The new Act requires a more robust and targeted approach to advisory services with the need to provide information and advice on:
- Preventing homelessness;
  - Securing accommodation if homeless;
  - The rights of people who are homeless or threatened with homelessness and; any other support (provided by the local authority or any other local organisations) that is available for people who are homeless or likely to become homeless as well as how to access that help.
- 2.9 HRA 17 stipulates that the support offered to eligible applicants is to be more robust than previously required. Once a local authority is satisfied that someone is homeless / threatened with homelessness and eligible for assistance an assessment should be carried out which includes;
- The circumstances that have caused homelessness / potential homelessness;
  - The housing and other support needs of the applicant and their household;
  - A personalised plan, setting out steps for the applicant and the Council to take to ensure accommodation is secured and/or retained.
- 2.10 An applicant's assessment and plan must be kept under review and updated as necessary, until the local authority has determined that no further duty is owed. This has resulted in an extended casework and caseload with officers holding cases for months at a time.
- 2.11 In addition, a new provision places a requirement on all applicants to cooperate with the Council's attempts to prevent or relieve their homelessness. If the Council considers that an applicant has deliberately or unreasonably refused to cooperate or take steps agreed as part of their assessment plan, a notice can be served to the individual informing them of the Council's decision, the consequences of it (e.g. ending of prevention /relief duty) and their right to request a review. This notice can only be served if a warning has been given to the applicant beforehand and a reasonable time period has elapsed since the warning was given. To date the Council has only served one such notice.
- 2.12 The Housing Act 1996 ("the 1996 Act"), gives applicants the right to request a review of any decision made by the local authority. In addition to these the current legislation also includes:
- Steps set out in assessment plans;
  - Giving notice to withdraw prevention or relief duties;
  - Suitability of accommodation offered.

- 2.13 Under the HRA 17, “specified public authorities” e.g. NHS services, probation and others are required to refer details of people who they consider being homeless or threatened with homelessness to their local authority (if the person agrees to the notification being made). The local authority will in turn need to make contact with this individual for assessment.
- 2.14 The main cause of homelessness in Thurrock is increasingly becoming the end of private rented tenancies which mirrors the national trend. This indicates that affordability is a significant issue as these householders are unable to find alternative housing without assistance (the previous main cause of homelessness was parental eviction).
- 2.15 The increase in demand, and the wider changes that the implementation of the HRA 17 has brought about, necessitates a rethink of the previous service delivery model to ensure there are sufficiently skilled front line resources and housing options to support the homelessness prevention agenda.
- 2.16 Thurrock has made good progress in preparing and implementing the changes required by HRA 17. The service re-modelling initially led to the removal of the Housing Employment and Education (HED) self-referral system, directing customers to contact the service via a face to face and telephone triage system coupled with an enhanced suite of information updated on the website for customers.
- 2.17 There has been significant work to strengthen existing partnerships which is crucial for cohesive work towards the prevention agenda. Training and staff development has been a core part of the implementation plan and remains an integral part of the service delivery strategy. This is also in recognition of the fact that staff need to be equipped to deal with the intense level of support required for some homeless and rough sleepers to engage with relevant support services.
- 2.18 There is a requirement for authorities to update their Homelessness Prevention Strategies, Thurrock are currently in the process of consulting with key individuals, partners and stakeholders. There is a paper on this elsewhere on the agenda. The new strategy will be live from March 2020 and be in place for 5 years.
- 2.19 The service has seen an increase of 15% in the number of new homelessness applications, whilst this is not a significant number, in the context of the additional work required, this has resulted in an increase in caseloads ranging from 60-70 per officer where previously it was 30-40.
- 2.20 Furthermore the number of applicants in temporary accommodation continues to rise at the same time as the average length of stay is also increasing as staff spend a longer period to exhaust all reasonable steps to relieve homelessness.

### **3. Shelter and National Practitioner Support Services**

- 3.1 NPSS support Local Authorities and their partners to deliver early intervention and prevention focussed Housing Solutions Services. The credibility of the NPSS comes from the experience of the team; all of whom are practitioners on secondment from local authorities across the country and who remain embedded in local services.
- 3.2 Shelter is a voluntary organisation with over 52 years' experience of providing housing advice nationally and have staff with expertise in housing/ homelessness and specialist legal knowledge.
- 3.3 Shelter services are geared to work with local authorities on transforming the quality, efficiency and effectiveness of support services and/or housing options and homelessness assessment service delivery with a clear focus on value for money and good customer service.
- 3.4 Shelter services are provided by Quality Assurance Managers who work across Shelter's national network of advice, support and specialist projects, and or freelance experts that have been recruited for their specialist knowledge and practitioner experience.

#### 4. Shelter Review- Findings and Key Themes

4.1 A set of standards from Shelter's quality assurance framework were applied to each assessment area, based on statutory requirements, the Code of Guidance (updated in February 2019) and Shelter's policy and practice briefings. Section four contains a summary of findings for each standard assessed and a summary rating for the authority. Shelter conducted the following:

- Case file review: A total of 50 files covering advice only, prevention, relief and main duty cases were selected by Shelter and assessed by two auditors' onsite including a review of randomly selected files and cases which were the subject of enquiries from members. The files reviewed were cases completed during the first few months of HRA 17 implementation. The review focused on the quality and effectiveness of the authority's housing solutions service in meeting the new prevention and relief duties.
- Mystery shopping exercise: The mystery shopping exercise included face to face, email and phone contacts to the authority. This was conducted over a period of 6 weeks July 2019.

#### 5. Shelter File Assessment

**Table 1- Assessment Area Results**

Advice Only	Fair (61%)
Prevention	Good (69%)
Relief	Good (68%)
Main duty	Fair (60)

- 5.1 The authority's results indicate that staff have a reasonable grasp of the changes made by the HRA 17 and appreciate what is required in managing homelessness cases, in addition to the other duties, i.e. an assessment, a plan, a decision on whether the prevention and relief duties were owed. It is noted that much of the work is instructed by the processes and system requirements of Housing Jigsaw, the casework management system used by the service to record assessments and approaches.
- 5.2 As shown in the above table, a Good rating was achieved for cases where the final decision were Prevention or Relief and a rating of Fair for Advice only and Main Duty cases. Some cases achieved a range of Excellent/Good scores but some included Poor or Failing ratings and this is largely due to an inconsistent approach in the handling of cases.
- 5.3 Based on the evidence from the triage records, better scores were achieved for work undertaken at the initial triage stage, where the information gathered at the first point of contact were detailed and robust. After this initial work the homelessness assessment and follow up casework activity varied across the team with some cases showing lack of progress.
- 5.4 According to Shelter's feedback, this finding is not uncommon across authorities who report that whilst demand to the service has not necessarily increased, the workload volume and capacity of staff is being impacted.

5.5 **Areas of good service**

- Evidence of applicants having a named officer in all cases
- Reasonable level of contact between officer and applicant including where appointments were missed.
- A swift prevention approach when applied were highly effective
- The service had an offer of Private Rented Sector rent deposit and advance rent payments.
- Evidence of effective outcomes to relieve homelessness
- Rough sleeper cases involving females offered help to find accommodation
- The triage initial assessment notes were detailed and very helpful
- Majority of cases had Personalised Housing Plans (PHP) on file

5.6 **Recommendations**

- During the Prevention and Relief stages of an application, missed opportunities to do effective prevention of homelessness resulted in

delayed resolution of homelessness. There was evidence that some staff lacked clarity around the Prevention and Relief duties.

- Some PHP's lacked the personalisation element, there need to be a consistent approach by all staff in completing PHPs.
- Evidence of lack of progression of casework following the initial assessment with regular updates from officers detailing any actions undertaken to meet the agreed outcomes in the personalised housing plan.
- Assessment to be composite with the support needs of all household members considered.
- When providing temporary accommodation the reasons for refusal of accommodation should be fully documented.

## **6. Shelter Mystery Shopping**

- 6.1 A total of 20 telephone calls, 10 email enquiries and 2 face to face visits were undertaken during June- July 2019. The team encountered some challenges in finding face to face mystery shoppers due to participants' inability to travel outside of London, and other issues for a number of shoppers. This was despite additional incentives offered during this exercise. The future mystery shopping recommendation would be for the authority to include local volunteers through partner stakeholders or service users' involvement projects.
- 6.2 A selection of typical advice scenarios with varying levels of needs were used. Some scenarios were sometimes repeated to assess the service's ability to identify repeat customers or where same (similar) advice situation would lead to a different result/outcome. All scenarios were tailored with local information for authenticity. Each mystery shopper was asked to contact the authority via the appropriate channel and then rate their experience against a number of assessment criteria. Shelter's Quality Standards was used to assess the results of the mystery shop.
- 6.3 The emails to the service are managed by a duty officer daily. The service receives an average of 25 emails per day of which 10 would be new enquiries requiring advice and information.
- 6.4 The reviewers found that the service is currently not set up to offer advice through emails as it serves as a filtering portal of enquires to the service. There is a need to update the current provision to ensure a high quality of advice is given at the first point of contact.
- 6.5 The mystery shoppers attended the Civic Offices, Grays, they accessed the service through the triage system and had an initial interview with the duty Housing Solutions Officer. The experience of one mystery shopper is more

positive with good advice being offered and the other requiring further advice and signposting to other relevant agencies.

- 6.6 A number of very positive reports and rating. Evidence of very clear advice given to customers. There was an indication that the first point of contact is managed by staff skilled at handling initial enquiries.
- 6.7 The ratings are largely positive due to the very good customer handling skills so even though some callers received limited advice or were told that someone would call them back, the customer felt confident/very confident that the authority took their call seriously and wanted to help.
- 6.8 Potential customers are routinely told that the Housing team will be able to help them and several callers were told that they would be treated as homeless and would be entitled to some help.
- 6.9 Ease of access was rated very good – no long delays or waiting for call to be answered. As with above results there is scope to provide better advice and information, and no one was told about other sources of help or directed to other sources such as the Council's website.

## **7. NPSS Review Findings and Key Themes**

- 7.1 The NPSS completed a Diagnostic Practitioner Review (DPR) which is designed to help local authorities to deliver more efficient and cost-effective homelessness prevention services.
- 7.2 The review highlights gaps in service provision, recognises good practice and makes recommendations for service improvements. It is, fundamentally, a 'critical friend' assessment of how a local authority is performing in its efforts to tackle homelessness.
- 7.3 The Reviewers completed a process mapping of the customer journey through the service by talking to and shadowing staff, talking to partner agencies and organisations (external and internal, statutory and non-statutory) and completing the off-site and on-site assessments.

The review focussed on 10 assessment areas:

- Quality of Housing Options
- Homelessness Strategy Overview
- Website Review
- Reception and Interview Room Facilities
- Hostels Focus Group
- Visit to Hostels
- Customer Interview Observation
- Staff Focus Group
- Managers Focus Group (including portfolio holder)
- Partners Focus Group

## 8. Quality of Housing Options

**Table 2 - Quality of Housing Options Results**

Service standards promote quality	64%
Baseline threshold service	63%
Good practice systems in place	50%
Confirmation of advice is provided	50%
Overall	59%

The Quality of Housing Options assessment involve four main areas which look at the processes that are in place: service standards that promote quality, what the baseline threshold service is like, what good practice systems that are in place including the advice and use of Personalised Housing Plans.

This differs from the overall score which encompasses the entire assessments undertaken in the 9 areas which looks at the practical application of the processes. The overall quality score of 59%, is higher because whilst there were good process in place, they were not always necessarily translated into operational working practice.

### 8.1 Areas of good service

- There reviewers found evidence that there has been investment in a number of comprehensive training courses for frontline staff. They all use the new Casework Management System Jigsaw and there is a uniform method of record keeping.
- There is a plethora of robust procedures in place to support the service and the response to the legislative changes. During the review, no customers were observed to wait more than 30 minutes.
- The website is excellent and provides opportunities for self-help, which is a good platform to begin using the Customer Portal
- The provision of Temporary Accommodations with support enables the service to meet the needs of a range of applicants.
- There is excellent partnership working, in particular with Children's and Adult Social Services.
- There is a continuous commitment towards improvements to address gaps in the service and increase capacity for staff.

### 8.2 Recommendations

- An amendment to the temporary accommodation procedure is required to align with the HRA 17.

- Consideration should be given to expanding the Triage Team to provide more opportunities for pre-prevention and advice work.
- Develop a procedure around Private Rented Sector incentives for landlords with the aim of increasing the number of landlords interested in working with Thurrock to house homelessness applicants.
- The service to support housing officers to deliver surgeries within the community, in an effort to work more upstream.
- Develop a placement policy to support officers and help with managing expectations of customers. Customers required information on the housing options and the possibility of being offered accommodation out of borough due to affordability and limitation of accommodation within Thurrock.
- Team managers require regular case supervision sessions with frontline officers, to ensure customers receive information and regular updates on progression of case.

## 9. Homelessness Strategy Overview

**Table 4- Homelessness Strategy Results**

Current Homelessness Strategy	50%
Review and Strategy Development	55%
Strategic Priorities	47%
Fit for Purpose	30%
Corporate Commitment	50%
Investment	40%
Evidence of joint working	50%
<b>Overall</b>	<b>45%</b>

As part of the off-site review the reviewers assessed the Homelessness Strategy. The current strategy was drafted in 2015 and requires updating to include the functions of the new legislation and other factors relevant to the delivery of the homelessness service.

### 9.1 Areas of good service

- On review it was found that there was good record of consultation amongst partners and good access to support services for identified cohorts.
- Although the strategy was drafted prior to HRA17, there was a commitment to the development of new social housing to meet demand. There was also specific focus on prevention of homelessness.

### 9.2 Recommendations

- Key partners should be involved in formulating the Homelessness Strategy
- The Strategy should highlight authority's allocation of funds from the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP).
- Use the Homelessness and Mental Health Forum as a tool to monitor Homelessness.

## 10. Website Review

**Table 5- Website Review Results**

Accessibility and Navigation	<b>92%</b>
Information and Advice	<b>75%</b>
Links and Directory	<b>100%</b>
Contact and On-line Application	<b>63%</b>
<b>Overall</b>	<b>79%</b>

### 10.1 Areas of good service

- The website contained very good range of accessibility tools for customers to use. The pages were well laid out in plain English, with excellent links, which makes information very easy read and to find.
- Throughout all the homelessness pages there are links to where people can get independent advice about their situation which is really good practice.
- There is an excellent range of information available for a range of different client groups/situations

### 10.2 Recommendations

- The reviewers made some recommendations in respect of the additional enhancements to the website which were already included in the customer excellence programme.

## 11. Reception and Interview Facilities

**Table 6- Reception and Interview Facilities Results**

Reception Facilities	<b>50%</b>
Interview Facilities	<b>45%</b>
<b>Overall</b>	<b>48%</b>

### 11.1 Areas of good service

- The face to face service is provided from the Civic Offices reception area.
- The service has the use of 4 interview rooms, which also provides space for the Housing Solutions Team Manager to be based at the reception with the frontline staff.
- All interview rooms are equipped with a phone and PC so that officers can “talk and type” when conducting interview, which is an efficient way of capturing information from customers.
- The reception area has a significant number of tablets for use by members of the public which give direct access to the Council’s website. In addition there are four PC’s for customers to use to access other services, e.g. Department of Work and Pensions for Universal Credit applications.

## 11.2 Recommendations

- Officers have the ability to print off leaflets and information for customers and there is good information displayed about transport links/departures on the screens.
- The out of hours service information needs to be clearly displayed in the reception area and outside the building
- The reception and waiting area would benefit from having some additional features to be more customer friendly and suitable for children whilst they wait, i.e. toys, books.
- The service standards should be displayed in the waiting area and develop more leaflets for customers.
- Consideration should be given to delivering surgeries within the community to make the Housing Solutions service more accessible.
- A review and risk assessment of the interview rooms is required to take into account the Equality Act 2010, the safety of staff and the overall customer experience.

## 12. Hostel Focus Groups

**Table 7 – Hostel Focus Group Results**

	Overall
Clarence Rd	<b>52%</b>
Charles Street hostel	<b>33%</b>

The reviewers met with 6 residents across the two hostels.

## 12.1 Areas of good service

- The hostel staff were supportive and had good rapport with customers. One customer was very happy with no complaints and was generally very happy with the outcome of this contact and assessment by the Housing Solutions Service.
- A common theme from the customer feedback at Charles Street was the lack of contact from Officers, some of the customers indicated that they did not know the name of their current officer and required further information.
- There was a general dissatisfaction with the length of stay in the hostel with most staying for over 6 months. This is impacted by the lack of Council accommodation and the expectation of customers that they would all be provided with social housing.

## 12.2 Recommendations

- Ensure that expectations around access to social housing are managed effectively.
- Ensure that where relief duties come to an end, a main duty decision is made on day 57 or as close to this as practicable.
- Complete a review of all residents in TA to ensure that main duty decisions are made where appropriate, and that all residents are made aware of the next stages for them in terms of move on.

## 13. Visits Overview

**Table 12 - Visits summary of the statutory Temporary Accommodation**

	71%
Overall	71%

The onsite visit included assessment of the temporary accommodation hostel building and review of records of key work sessions undertaken by staff to support customers during their stay.

### 13.1 Areas of good service

- The key work sessions undertaken by the support staff were seen as positive with staff discussing move on with residents. As part of the initial assessment when someone moves in, an assessment is undertaken to identify any health issues, with support offered to address the need.

- The support offer includes a period of floating support following their departure from the hostels. All the properties are very centrally located with easy access to public transport.
- It was evident that staff are very committed and very supportive of customers.

### 13.2 Recommendations

- The reviewers suggested additional features to improve the building and hostel environment. The recommendations included a consideration of separating the location of single people and families.

## 14. Customer Interview Observation

**Table 8- Customer Interview Observation Results**

Preparation	50%
Establishing the Facts	54%
Providing Advice	42%
Engaging with the Customer	50%
Efficiency of Approach	58%
Effectiveness Of Approach	46%
<b>Overall</b>	<b>50%</b>

As part of the onsite review the reviewers observed a number of interviews between customers and staff, covering the triage desk where initial assessments are undertaken, prevention interviews schedule appointments and relief interviews where applicants present as homeless on the day requiring emergency assessment and assistance.

### 14.1 Areas of good service

- There was evidence of kind and sympathetic approach, officers sourced the most appropriate facts, were calm and non-judgmental throughout interviews.
- Officers utilised the new casework management system to structure interviews and to be very focused on efficiency.
- At triage customers were provided with written record of appointments, as well as a checklist of required documents for further assessments.

### 14.2 Recommendations

- The recommendations follow the findings of Shelter detailed above. Principally, there is further learning on the interpretation of the legislation for staff, these are included in the team training and induction plan for all staff. There is also a requirement to increase the

level of engagement with customers after assessments have been undertaken.

## 15. Staff Focus Group

**Table 9- Staff Focus Group Results**

Customer Experience	56%
Operational Delivery	67%
Resources	67%
Staff Development & Involvement	50%
Evidence of Joint Working	67%
<b>Overall</b>	<b>60%</b>

The focus group was held with a number of housing solutions staff and included those working within temporary accommodation, private sector procurement and homelessness caseworkers.

### 15.1 Areas of good service

- Officers conducting the initial triage functions are skilled to make decisions.
- Managers have responded to making changes to the Duty Rota to increase capacity for staff to undertake casework and decisions making.
- There is a specific resource to support single, non-priority customers in to PRS accommodation and staff believe customers get treated the same regardless of priority need or any statutory duties owed. There was evidence of good partnership working, particularly with internal partners such as Children Services.

### 15.2 Recommendations

- There is a need to develop a minimum package for incentives to landlords to increase the number of affordable properties to ensure consistent message to Landlords.
- The whole team must be consulted on the Homelessness Strategy and be provided with details as to how their role supports the highlighted objectives.
- The 'Help to Rent' online resource for customer should further developed to encourage Landlords to work with Thurrock Borough Council This offer includes the provision of a landlord insurance which covers people with a history of rent arrears not vetted by landlord prior to the tenancy commencement.

- Members should be included in briefing sessions as a means of raising awareness of the new legislation, the prevention agenda detailed in the strategy and the work by the service to support customers. Further work is required to provide clearly defined pathways for customers with complex needs.

## 16. Managers Focus Groups

**Table 10- Managers Focus Groups Results**

Service Structure & Staff Development/Involvement	58%
Customer Experience	58%
Resources	50%
Operational Delivery	56%
Evidence of Joint Working	58%
Corporate Commitment	75%
Overall	57%

The managers' focus group included interviews with the Portfolio holder for Housing, Corporate Director, Assistant Director, Housing Solutions Manager and Team Managers. The results indicate high corporate commitment to support the service and the prevention agenda. This extends to Portfolio Holder bi-weekly meetings with Senior Leadership Team, which is a clear indication of the support and interest in the service.

### 16.1 Areas of good service

- The authority is committed towards limiting the use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation and only uses this as a last resort.
- The additional offer for single people, based on newly developed resource is excellent for those who would usually be owed limited duties after the expiration of the statutory duties. The offer called the 'New Start Scheme' is provided by two dedicated officers to help couples and single people, including those with a history of offending, to access suitable private rented accommodation. As well as helping you find suitable housing, the officers work closely with applicants and their landlords to sustain the tenancies.
- Officers have been provided a delegated budget to support creative prevention initiatives. There is a continuous process of procuring and increasing the temporary accommodation stock.

### 16.2 Recommendations

- Ensure there is a continued high-level dialogue with London boroughs to agree suitable arrangement for placements in the borough.

Customer portal to be launched to help manage customer contact in a more streamlined way.

- Managers should periodically observe interviews to ensure customer care is continually at the heart of all interactions.

## 17. Partner Focus Group

**Table 11- Partners Focus Group Results**

Operational Delivery	<b>64%</b>
Resources	<b>58%</b>
Evidence of Joint Working	<b>55%</b>
Customer Experience	<b>54%</b>
<b>Overall</b>	<b>58%</b>

This focus group was held with internal and external partners, it included staff from Adult and Children Social Care teams, Community Safety, Thurrock Mind, DWP, St Mungos and Open Door.

### 17.1 Areas of good service

- There were service level agreements in place across the board and effective joint working protocols between Housing and Children's Services. Partners have been involved in consultation meetings for the new Homelessness Strategy.
- There is a multi-agency approach which is reinforced by the Homelessness and Mental Health forum where there is a cross service representation from statutory and third sector agencies.
- Partner involvement in the Housing Staff Conference 2019 has improved communication and raised awareness of the housing service.
- The 14 Local Area Co-ordinators (LAC) assist with the early intervention and prevention of homelessness, supporting Housing Solutions Service in delivery the corporate agenda. There is financial help for deposits to assist applicants who are successful in finding private rented accommodation.
- All partners agreed there is a good relationship between partners and Housing Solutions Service.

### 17.2 Recommendations

- There is a need to clearly define pathways for Rough Sleepers, which includes a single service offer. Further exploratory work is required in

accessing funding opportunities to sustain/ expand the Housing First scheme for complex needs customers.

- Develop a joint working protocol with the LAC's to clearly define the interface between the two services. The service should continue to embed specialisms such as the Mental Health Worker in to the Housing Solutions Service.
- Customers with mental health should have a tenancy sustainment offer with appropriate signposting to other agencies for support.

## **18. Summary of Actions to date**

- 18.1 The review was commissioned and completed during a period where the service is still embedding the new functions within the HRA17, training and equipping staff, raising awareness of the prevention agenda and the need to reduce rough sleeping with stakeholders, whilst meeting the demands of an ever increasing presentation of applicants with complex needs.
- 18.2 The review has highlighted areas of high performance and shown the service is performing at a reasonable level. There is a continuous corporate commitment to help residents to prevent and relief homelessness.
- 18.3 The Housing Solutions Service prepared intensively for the challenges of the Act, there was a consideration of the anticipated new levels of demand with a heavy focus on early intervention, prevention and targeting of the key cohorts driving the demand.
- 18.4 To date, good progress has been made, through an initial remodelling of the service, the acquisition of a new bespoke system, work to strengthen partnerships, staff training to empower staff in delivering an excellent service.
- 18.5 An action plan detailing the recommendation from the review has been developed for the service to focus on tackling the gaps in the service and improving the customer experience.
- 18.6 Following the review there has been a number of activities undertaken to achieve some of the recommendations detailed in the reviewers report. The training programme for staff has been rolled out with the majority due to be completed by the end of the 2019 calendar year.
- 18.7 The new mental health practitioner has been recruited and commences on 16 September 2019. The officer will be based within the Housing Solutions Service and be on hand to offer the expertise and support to staff. They would also be available to conduct the necessary mental health assessments and assist in the formulation of a support plans for applicants.
- 18.8 Several enhancements have been made to the Jigsaw case management system to remove duplication and streamline the housing needs assessments, this has resulted in reduced interview times from over 2 hours to

approximately 1.5 hours. In addition, addition the service has successfully provided all the required government statistical data through using the information collated from the Jigsaw system.

- 18.9 The service has consistently limited the use of bed and breakfast accommodation and placements in out of borough areas for families and vulnerable households.
- 18.10 The landlord offer has been revised to include a combination of discretionary payment, deposits and advance rent payments. This will be shared on relevant platforms as a marketing tool to increase interest from the private landlord
- 18.11 The service has piloted holding surgeries within the hostels with staff attending daily to meet customers. This will be extended to the hubs and other venues such as the children centres and the local college.
- 18.12 In order to assist applicants in finding affordable alternative accommodation, the service has identified a new accommodation finding software which is provided with a bespoke landlord insurance developed specifically for homeless applicants.
- 18.13 Thurrock has been successful for additional rough sleeper funding from MHCLG. This is being used for the recruitment of a rough sleeper coordinator and additional outreach worker to increase the opportunity to find and assist anyone bedded down or likely to be street homeless within Thurrock. This recruitment is time limited for one year (2019- 2020) but the local churches have expressed an interest in working with Thurrock to establish a Night Shelter provision, the role of the Coordinator will therefore be vital in developing this with the churches.

## **19. Next Steps**

- 19.1 A continuous improvement plan has been developed which details the recommendations from the review. The service is working towards a target completion of March 2020.

The findings of the review will be shared with the Homelessness and Mental Health forum and relevant actions will be developed through the forum.

- 19.2 However, the suggested improvements to the reception area will require longer term planning as it is included in the Civic Office transformation programme. This will be monitored with on-going dialogue and involvement of the service to inform the final layout of the waiting area and interview rooms.

## **20. Reasons for recommendation**

- 20.1 Required as part of statutory service to provide homelessness service, assessing needs and providing resolutions.

## **21. Consultation**

- None

## **22. Background Papers used in preparing the report**

- Homelessness Reductions Act 2017
- Homelessness Code of Guidance 2019
- NPSS review findings presentation & Sheltered final report

## **23. Implications**

### **23.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: **Mike Jones**  
**Strategic Lead, Corporate Finance**

The service intends to meet the majority of the increased demand through the new ring-fenced `new burdens; grant as set out in the main body of the report. As this is for a transitional period, reliance on this funding cannot be given in the medium to long term and alternative funding will be required as demand on the service continues in line with current trends.

The Council identified additional growth within the Medium Term Financial Strategy as part of the 2019/20 base budget. However, as this is a demand lead budget, it continues to be closely monitored

### **23.2 Legal**

Implications verified by: **Martin Hall**  
**Housing Solicitor/Team Leader**

There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Following the introduction of the Homeless Reduction Act 2017 it was expected that the service would need to adapt to cope with the new duties in a relatively short time frame. It is important that further/ongoing training is delivered to staff to ensure that the service is legally compliant and robust to limit successful lawful challenges.

### **23.3 Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Natalie Warren**  
**Strategic Lead, Community Development and Equalities**

The new MHCLG data collection is being set up to receive household level rather than aggregated local authority level data. It will cover a broader range of households, including all those who receive homelessness assistance from

the local authority rather than, as now, focusing primarily on those that authorities are currently legally obliged to help under the statutory homeless definition.

The design of the new data collection has been shaped by the HRA 17 and will collect data to enable the effects of the Act to be monitored. We will continue to monitor trends for adverse and positive impacts on people with protected characteristics and review actions needed as required.

The Homelessness Strategy is being refreshed and the new data sets will inform a Community Equality Impact Assessment. We will work with partners and community groups to encourage representatives of diverse communities to be represented on Homelessness Forums.

**23.4 Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

- Staffing levels may need to be continually reviewed to effectively manage the increased demand.

**24. Appendices to the report**

- None

**Report Author:**

Lorrita Johnson  
Housing Solutions Manager  
Housing