

**NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME BOROUGH COUNCIL**

**EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT TEAM'S REPORT TO CABINET**

**Date 18<sup>th</sup> October 2017**

<b><u>HEADING</u></b>	<b>The Gold Standard for Homelessness Services Diagnostic Peer Review</b>
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<b><u>Portfolio:</u></b>	<b>Communities and Social Cohesion; Planning and Housing.</b>
<b><u>Ward(s) affected:</u></b>	<b>All</b>

**Purpose of the Report**

**To inform of the outcome of the DCLG's Gold Standard Peer Review Assessment of the Council's Housing Options Service.**

**Recommendations**

- (a) For the Council to consider and implement actions / recommendations from the Continuous Improvement Plan prior to pursuing the challenges.
- (b) To authorise the Executive Director for Regeneration and Development in consultation with the relevant Portfolio Holders to consider and review the improvement plan as this is developed and implemented.

**Reasons**

**The actions and recommendations within the Continuous Improvement plan will support the measures, which will need to be taken in the coming months to ensure that the housing service is able to meet the statutory requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, when enacted (expected to be April 2018).**

**The information within this report was considered by the Economic Development and Enterprise Scrutiny on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2017. The panel supported the recommendations and requested that the timescales for the Improvement Plan be developed by March 2018, thus forming part of the annual service plan. Then for further reporting to a future Scrutiny meeting on progress in implementing.**

**1. Background**

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the DCLG Gold Standard Peer Review Assessment, as reported previously at Cabinet on the 7th January 2016. Participation of the Gold Standard Process is considered to be a key process to support the continuous improvement of the homelessness / housing services at the Council.
- 1.2 In February 2017 the Council's Housing Strategy Team and Newcastle Housing Advice Service participated in a housing sector led Diagnostic Peer Review ('DPR'). The DPR is the first step Local Authorities take when participating in the Homeless Gold Standard Challenge, which is designed to help local authorities deliver more efficient and cost effective homelessness prevention services. The challenge follows a 10 step continuous improvement

approach that starts with a pledge for local authorities aspiring to 'strive for continuous improvement in front line housing services' and culminates in an application for the Gold Standard Challenge.

- 1.3 The DPR was conducted over a four day period by a Lead Reviewer from the National Practitioner Service and a shared second reviewer role by Officers from Amber Valley and South Derbyshire Councils.
- 1.4 The DPR included investigation of core housing options and homelessness services. The sub-categories which were assessed were: Homeless Prevention Strategy; Website; Reception & Interview Room Facilities; Customer Interview Observation; Housing Options File Reviews; Homelessness File Reviews; Staff; Managers; Partners; Visits (Temporary Accommodation); Quality of Housing Options.
- 1.5 Upon completion of the DPR a Continuous Improvement Plan ('CIP') was drafted by NPSS. The Continuous Improvement Plan considers all areas of the review and provides recommendations and actions for the areas of the review which were deemed to have room for improvement.
- 1.6 It is worth highlighting that as a Council we continue to set ourselves ambitious targets for high quality service provision and that alongside our newly commissioned debt advisory service and related services, this peer review process is about making sure that we continue to provide high quality support for our residents when faced with new and revised responsibilities placed on us by central government. More particularly it should be acknowledged that this process is about driving up the quality and consistency of essential support services for the most vulnerable people in our community.

## 2. **Issues**

- 2.1 Newcastle achieved an overall score of 67%, which represents a solid pass rate (60% being the threshold). This means that the Council has successfully passed the first stage of the Gold Standard process.
- 2.2 There were a number of key recommendations within the 'Continuous Improvement Plan' these related to the website, reception & interview facilities, homelessness case files and the overall quality of the housing options.
- 2.3 **The Website:** The review identified that the NHA Options website is a key area for people to self-help and it could be improved further by increasing the range of accessibility options available on the site. It was also recommended that Officers review the information currently available on the site to ensure that it is fit for purpose and user friendly.
- 2.4 **Reception & Interview Room Facilities:** These facilities were identified as sub-standard and subsequently were scored well below the required benchmark. The reception area and the interview room were deemed to be small and unsuitable, giving rise to disability and safety concerns. It was also noted that the lack of available ICT equipment within the interview room was inefficient and could lead to delays in service provision. Confidentiality issues were also raised in relation to both areas (e.g. lack of screens/booths or private areas).
- 2.5 **Homelessness Case Files:** The review identified that there was a requirement for better case file management systems and improved consistency for the Homelessness Case Files.

2.6 **Overall Quality of the Housing Options Service:** The review identified that the service was particularly weak at being able to demonstrate that good practice systems are in place and confirmation of advice is provided.

2.7 **Good Practice Identified in the Review:** There were also a number of areas within the report highlighting 'good practice' which included;

- An excellent Homelessness Strategy;
- Skilled and professional staff;
- Prevention ethos demonstrated throughout the service;
- Established relationships with partners;
- One off payments Pot;
- Customer Service and;
- Fully furnished self-contained Temporary accommodation units.

### 3. **Options Considered**

3.1 There are two stages to the Gold Standard process, the DPR, followed by further assessment against the 10 local challenges, leading to the award of Bronze, Silver and ultimately Gold Standard Status.

3.2 Having achieved more than the minimum 60% required to pass, the DPR assessment, the Council has the following options:

3.3 **Option 1**  
For the Council to pursue the next stage of the Gold Standard Challenge.

3.3 **Option 2**  
For the Council to consider and implement actions from the improvement plan prior to pursuing the challenges.

3.4 **Option 3**  
For the Council to note the findings of the review, but take no further action.

### 4. **Proposal and Reasons for Preferred Solution**

4.1 Officers recommend Option 2, which in the first instance gives priority to addressing the findings of the review and considering the recommendations and actions from the Continuous Improvement Plan.

4.2 By doing this, service delivery can be enhanced and any improvements made will go some way in supporting the measures, which will need to be taken in the coming months to ensure that the housing service is able to meet the statutory requirements of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, when enacted (expected to be April 2018) (Please see The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 Cabinet report in this pack for further information). One example of an improvement measure that can and should be explored is the potential to utilise interview room space at the new Castle House building to address the issues highlighted at paragraph 2.4.

4.3 Once the Council is satisfied that the Housing Service is meeting the new statutory requirements for the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, Officers can commence the assessment stage of the Gold Standard Challenges.

5. **Outcomes Linked to Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Priorities**

5.1 The provision of a homelessness and housing advice service enables the Council to prevent homelessness which assists in meeting the Corporate Priorities to provide a Clean, Safe and Sustainable Borough, a Borough of Opportunity, a Healthy Active Community and Becoming a Co-operative Council by delivering high quality community driven services.

6. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

6.1 Local Authority obligations to homeless people are set out in statute and are the subject of a Code of Guidance.

6.2 The Council has a statutory duty to assist all persons who are homeless or threatened with homelessness under the Housing Act 1996 (as amended 2002) part 7 Homelessness.

6.3 The Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 when enacted will place a new duty on Local Authorities to help to prevent homelessness in all client groups, rather than those with specific eligibility status.

7. **Equality Impact Assessment**

7.1 There are no direct equalities issues arising from this report but it is anticipated that the diversity of client service needs will be best achieved by the Council continually working to improve the homelessness service provision within the Borough.

8. **Financial and Resource Implications**

8.1 It is anticipated that as is the case with all review and evaluation processes there will be additional resource implications to implement service improvements. At this stage it is not known what these resource implications will be, should additional investment be required this will be subject to further Cabinet consideration.

9. **Major Risks**

9.1 There are no major risks associated with this report.

10. **Key Decision Information**

10.1 This is not a key decision.

11. **Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions**

11.1 Gold Standard for Homelessness 16<sup>th</sup> March 2016.

11.2 EDE Scrutiny 18<sup>th</sup> September 2017. The panel supported the recommendation and requested that timescales for the Improvement Plan be developed by March 2018, thus forming part of the annual service plan. Plus a further report, on the progress in implementing to be submitted to a future Scrutiny.

12. **Background Papers**

12.1 Further information about the ten Gold Standard Challenges is available from the Housing Strategy team on request.