

Overview and Scrutiny

HOMELESSNESS DRIVERS AND LAND AND SUPPLY ISSUES IN HARROW

**A report by the Homelessness Scrutiny Review
Challenge Panel**

October 2016



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Chair's Foreword



Homelessness is a growing problem, both nationally and in London, and is a major issue in Harrow. More and more people are becoming homeless and face living in cramped conditions or in bed and breakfasts, sofa surfing with friends and relatives, being relocated to areas they have no connection to or social networks of family or friends in, or sleeping rough.

Homelessness is on the rise for a number of reasons: reforms to the welfare system, the austerity measures of the current government, high and increasing levels of rent, and high house prices - all coupled with the low wage levels in Harrow. It is noted the main reason for homelessness in Harrow is the loss of private rented accommodation which has steadily increased from 61 families in 2011/12 to 363 families in 2015/16. All of this gives rise to the consequent unaffordability of accommodation for many people. All of these factors add to the significant pressure on the Council to find affordable accommodation for families, as well as on the Council's budgets in the current financial climate.

This report sets out the evidence presented at the Homelessness Scrutiny Review Challenge Panel and a number of recommendations as to how the Council and its partners can improve their response. The recommendations are intended to allow members and officers to improve their ability to examine homelessness and its causes, to better understand the supply side issues that relate to London and to Harrow, and to strengthen the ability of the council to respond to the challenges which the issue presents.

I wish to thank the officers who attended the Challenge Panel, prepared the briefing and presentation, and provided critical information, and also the members of the Homelessness Scrutiny Review Challenge Panel for their valuable input and robust scrutiny on this issue.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Anderson', written in a cursive style.

Councillor Jeff Anderson

Homelessness Scrutiny Review Challenge Panel Chair

Scope of Review

1. To understand the drivers of homelessness in Harrow
2. To examine whether the solutions currently being implemented effectively address these drivers
3. To scrutinise the local supply, land and site issues.

Executive Summary

Homelessness has risen to its highest level for nearly a decade. The most common reason for losing a home is now the ending of a tenancy in the private rented sector. Department of Communities and Local Government figures show that nationally 15,170 households were classified as newly homeless in the first quarter of the year and around a third of these are in London.

The Council is developing some new homes, but is constrained by the fact that it has reached its Housing Revenue Account borrowing cap. Harrow has a small social housing stock with a very low turnover of properties. There is a high demand for housing with increasing levels of homelessness. The number of families in B&B has risen dramatically over the last 5 years.

The Council relies heavily on the private rented sector. Private rents have risen but incomes have not kept pace. While most of the cost of homelessness to the Council originates from Housing Needs there is also spend on emergency and temporary accommodation, deposits and rent in advance in Children's Services.

The main reasons for homelessness in Harrow are the loss of rented or tied accommodation due to termination of assured short hold tenancy; parents/other relatives/friends no longer willing or able to accommodate; mortgage or rent arrears; and violent relationship breakdown involving a partner. The shortage of rented accommodation has caused large increases in market rents. Both subsidy payments made to councils to provide temporary accommodation and Local Housing Allowance levels have fallen behind actual market rents charged by landlords, and the gap is increasing.

The Homelessness Scrutiny Review Challenge Panel was established to discuss these issues, and the Challenge Panel's aim was to understand the drivers of homelessness in the local area and examine whether or not the solutions currently being implemented effectively address these drivers; and to scrutinise the local land and supply issues.

Key themes emerged in terms of the issues faced and potential solutions; and the group formed recommendations around these themes: housing supply, registered providers, finance, staffing, local impact and strategy.

Methodology

Challenge Panel

Internal officers were invited to provide expert opinion on the subject areas, supplemented by a briefing paper which was circulated prior to the meeting. The meeting was split into 3 parts (1) briefing, background and preparation; (2) questioning officers; (3) forming recommendations.

Recommendations

Please note that the context around each recommendation is set out further on in the report.

1. To request that officers provide clarity on what plans there are to build more quality housing; high density, high rise (similar to the Harrow on the Hill development)
2. To request that clarity be provided as to the financing of the Council's housing portfolio expansion and to investigate whether this Council could borrow General Fund housing revenue to act as a funding stream
3. To request that the Leader of the Council raises with London Councils, concerns around the Homelessness Reduction Bill and the impact this will have locally if implemented

4. To request that officers be instructed to investigate options around utilisation of green belt land and allotments; and rationalise where you could develop housing in green belt areas and swap land elsewhere
5. To request that officers advise as to the work being undertaken with families on low incomes, whether there is close working between departments working with families at risk of homelessness, and how effective this is
6. To request that officers provide data on the correlations between up-skilling the workforce, incomes, households on benefits and housing supply
7. To request that Cabinet and officers ensure that the maximum amount of affordable housing under planning policy is achieved
8. To request that the Leader of the Council enters discussions with the Mayor of London on housing supply issues, highlighting that average wages in Harrow are low, so the Council has to ensure access to a supply of genuinely affordable housing
9. To request that consideration be given to the resourcing of the housing needs and housing regeneration teams in the event that these teams require extra resources in order to maintain and build on progress to date, particularly on homelessness prevention
10. To request that clarity be provided as to the impact of the additional resources in the housing needs team approved by the Corporate Strategic Board.

National context

Homelessness has risen to its **highest level** for nearly a decade. The most common reason for losing a home is now the **ending of a tenancy** in the **private rented sector**. Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) figures show that nationally, 15,170 households were classed as newly homeless in the first quarter of 2016/17, with around a third of these are in London.

Figures from DCLG show that 45,000 council homes have been sold nationally under the Right to Buy (RtB) since the discount amounts were raised in 2012. Only 7,000 replacement homes have been started.

Harrow Council is developing some new homes but is constrained by the fact that it has reached its Housing Revenue Account (HRA) borrowing cap. The Council supports Registered Providers (RPs) and has an Affordable Housing Policy for new build developments, but this is no longer significantly increasing the supply of affordable rented housing due to issues of scheme viability i.e. **developers are consistently able to prove in their feasibility studies that the finances of new housing schemes cannot support a significant proportion of affordable housing**.

Welfare and housing policy changes are having an impact on the supply and affordability of housing, such as the 1% decrease in social housing rents, Housing Benefit freeze, the new reduced Benefit Cap and the emphasis on home ownership in national housing policy.

The Housing and Planning Act 2016 introduced a range of changes which will deplete the affordable housing available locally to households in housing need. Regulations have not all been published to date, but the Starter Homes requirement, Mandatory Rents for High Income Social Tenants (Pay to Stay), the voluntary Right to Buy for housing association tenants and the sale of Vacant Higher Value Local Authority Housing will potentially decrease the supply of affordable housing needed to help homeless households.

Bob Blackman MP (Harrow East) has submitted a Private Members' Bill to Parliament, the **Homelessness Reduction Bill**. If successful, it will introduce new duties for local authorities to help prevent people at risk of losing their homes from becoming homeless, including securing temporary accommodation for up to 56 days for homeless people who are not in priority need. Officers expressed concern about the additional financial pressures that these new duties would create; the Challenge Panel asked that they model the Bill's likely impacts on Harrow. The second reading of the Bill is scheduled for 28 October 2016.

The Government is proposing to change the subsidy given for temporary accommodation and accommodation used for homelessness prevention. From 1 April 2017, rather than all subsidy being paid through Housing Benefit, the Housing Benefit portion will be reduced and a separate Temporary Accommodation grant will be paid to the Council. The Government has not finalised the details yet but DCLG have been consulting informally on the Temporary Accommodation Management Fee Replacement. While DCLG has given assurances that no local authority will lose out in Year 1 the impact in subsequent years depends on the method chosen for the distribution of the funding. One concern is that DCLG have indicated that the allocation will be based on data for Temporary Accommodation from the P1E quarterly data returns from local authorities on homelessness which would exclude families in some forms of Temporary Accommodation (HALD- Housing Association Leasing Direct and PSL- Private Sector Leasing) for which the management fee is currently paid). Another concern is the backlog of pre-Localism Act cases in Temporary Accommodation. Officers hope that the final decision will take into account homelessness prevention, the high ongoing costs of providing Temporary Accommodation and the number of existing and historic cases. There is also concern that the grant will be fixed, and will not rise even if homelessness pressures cause an increase need for temporary accommodation.

Local context

Harrow has a **small** social housing **stock** with a very **low turnover** of properties. There is a **high demand** for housing with increasing levels of homelessness. The number of families in B&B has risen dramatically over the last 5 years, although it is now in decline.

The Council **relies heavily on the private rented sector (PRS)**. Private rents have risen but incomes have not kept pace. While most of the cost of homelessness to the Council originates from Housing Needs there

is also spend on emergency and temporary accommodation, deposits and rent in advance in Children's Services.

There are approximately 4,880 council homes and 4,070 registered provider homes in Harrow (as at 1 April 2015), one of the smallest social housing stocks in London.

Half of the Council's original stock, of around 10,000 homes, have been sold since the Right to Buy (RtB) was introduced in 1979; home ownership has declined since April 2013, and the private rented sector has increased in size over the same period.

Year	1979-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016
RTB Sales	4,010	0	14	36	37	34

Many ex RtB homes are now let as privately rented accommodation at market rents, contributing to the upward pressure on Housing Benefit (HB) and having an impact on the management of estates. Currently 46% of Harrow leaseholders are non-resident.

1. Drivers of homelessness

Definition of homelessness

A person is homeless if they have no home anywhere in the world that is available, affordable, suitable and reasonable to occupy, for the applicant and family members who would reasonably reside with them. The homelessness assessment process takes into account homelessness, eligibility, priority need, intentionality and local connection.

The original duties to homeless people were placed on local authorities by the Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977. The current duties are set out in the Housing Act 1996, amended by the Homelessness Act 2002.

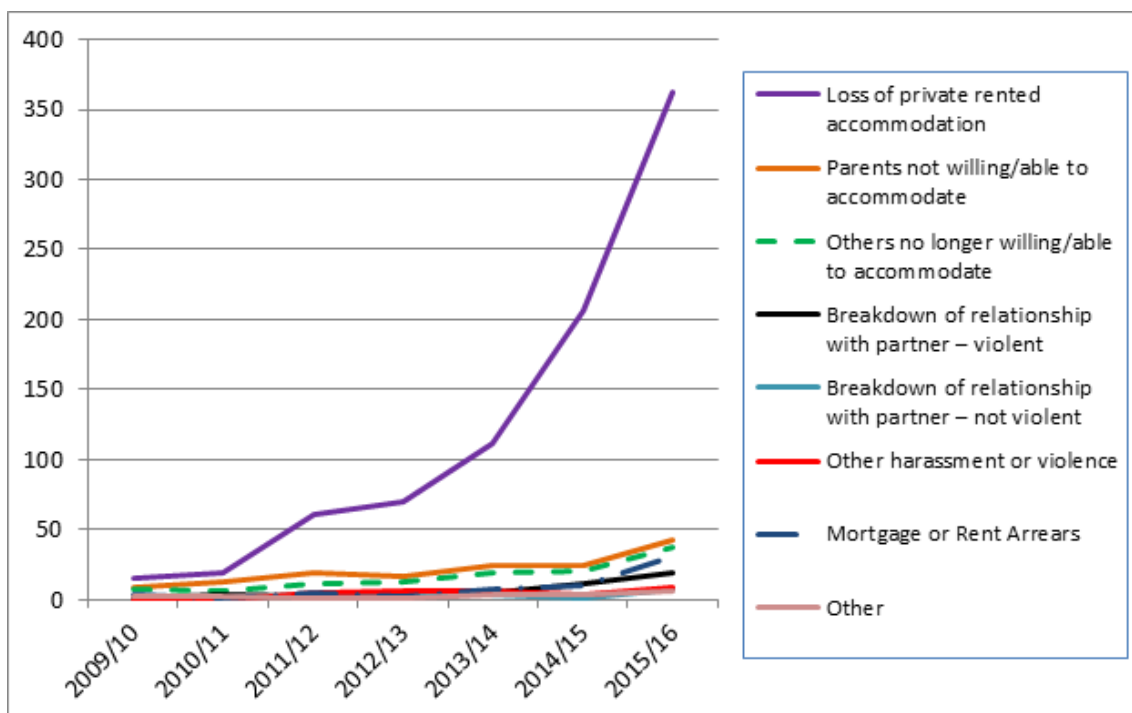
Homeless households are accommodated in shared B&B, other Emergency Accommodation or other forms of longer term temporary accommodation. This is costly and may not always be in the local area. Since 9 November 2012, a household to whom we accept a full duty to house in settled accommodation can be offered an assured short hold tenancy, in the PRS, rather than a council or housing association tenancy, to "discharge" or end the homelessness duty. Further, this accommodation must be suitable and for a fixed term of at least a year.

Reasons for homelessness

The main reasons for homelessness in Harrow are:

- Loss of rented or tied accommodation due to termination of assured short hold tenancy
- Parents/other relatives/friends no longer willing or able to accommodate
- Mortgage or rent arrears
- Violent relationship breakdown involving partner.

Reason for Acceptance	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Loss of private rented accommodation	61	70	112	207	363
Parents not willing/able to accommodate	19	17	24	24	42
Others no longer willing/able to accommodate	12	13	19	20	38
Breakdown of relationship with partner – violent	2	3	5	12	19
Breakdown of relationship with partner – not violent	4	3	4	1	8
Other harassment or violence	5	6	6	3	9
Mortgage or Rent Arrears	5	2	7	10	31
Other	1	1	3	3	6
Total	109	115	180	280	516



The shortage of PRS accommodation has caused large increases in market rents. Both subsidy payments made to councils to provide temporary accommodation and Local Housing Allowance levels have fallen behind actual market rents charged by landlords, and the gap is increasing. As a result it is increasingly difficult to access the PRS to prevent or end homelessness, or lease accommodation for temporary accommodation. Landlords can get higher rents elsewhere, so often evict tenants on Local Housing Allowance and now often will not work with councils to house homeless households.

People Profiles/Family sizes

At 18 May 2016	1 adult + 1 child	1 adult + 2 children	1 adult + 3 children	1 adult + 4 or more children	2 adults* + 1 child	2 adults* + 2 children	2 adults* + 3 children	2 adults* + 4 or more children
B&B and annexes	55	26	24	6	44	41	27	27

*2 adults or more

Currently the largest household size is 2 adults (or more) + 7 children.

2. Effectiveness of responses and initiatives

The recent roundtable and deep dive exercises undertaken have closely reviewed the Housing Needs service and demonstrated that current controls are effective in preventing homelessness. The Scrutiny Review Challenge Panel highlighted that homelessness pressures were increasing and the lack of local affordable housing meant that it was very difficult for the Council to continue to meet its duties and support families to remain in the local area¹.

¹ [Appendix 8. Risk Register 2016-17 to 2018-19](#) p. 4: “The Council is purchasing some properties on the open market to try to help ease the pressure on the budget, and in undertaking a programme of new build within the Housing Revenue Account, but these are expected to at best slow down the growth in demand for the service. The longer term prospects are likely to be improved once the Council’s Private Rented Sector new build programme and the Housing Zone construction projects get under way in earnest, but this is unlikely to make a significant contribution until around 2018 onwards.”

Recommendations that were made now form part of the combined action plan which is being taken forward by the **Homelessness Task Force**. Additional resources were also agreed on a **'spend to save'** basis, focusing on **homelessness prevention** (casework and working with families affected by the reduced benefit cap), procurement of local accommodation and private sector leasing arrears.

Officers continue to work with colleagues in Planning to ensure they are **negotiating** the **maximum** amount of **affordable housing** under planning policy.

Officers also work closely with the **Housing Benefit** team to **minimise delays**, **prevent rent arrears** and evictions and **maximise income** for the Council.

An **Out of London** Resettlement team is in place and being expanded to achieve a greater number of moves out of London and reduce the costs of temporary accommodation. Xcite are assisting in identifying employment opportunities in other areas.

Officers also regularly consider incentives to encourage prospective, new and existing PRS landlords to work with us and provide properties to which we can nominate tenants; and have regular liaison meetings with Private Sector Licensing and Enforcement colleagues.

In order to meet the Council's statutory duties and achieve its ambitions, the priority for the service is to access **400 new homes by April 2018**, above the existing supply and the current pipeline.

Homelessness Challenge

The **independent expert** who facilitated the Homelessness Demand Challenge Panel in May 2016 reported that the exercise demonstrated that the Housing Needs Division is **up to the challenges of delivering a responsive and accountable service** in this tough and demanding environment.

The **service** was found to be **well led**, with **committed, knowledgeable officers** and to be **up to date** with all the latest initiatives in the sector. The team was judged to have **clarity** in the **purpose of their service**. The service understood that there was not just one solution to the rapid increase in homelessness acceptances, but that a series of diverse initiatives to prevent homelessness and divert applicants from unavailable council housing were essential components.

The presentations and responses from officers also established their breadth of knowledge and range of activities and their readiness to open their service to scrutiny. The Challenge Panel noted the findings of the Homelessness Demand Challenge Panel, which commended the work of the Housing Needs team—and asked that that Panel's findings be attached to this Scrutiny Review (see appendix). Given the pressures that the Housing Needs are under, they are clearly delivering very well. It was queried whether they were sufficiently resourced and whether extra resources earmarked by the Corporate Strategy Board should be released to them now.

Prevention

In 2014/2015 officers reported 1426 cases of homelessness prevention and relief (1404 prevention and 22 relief). Homelessness prevention means helping people to address housing issues and avoid homelessness. Homelessness relief means helping someone secure accommodation when it has not been possible to stop homelessness, even when they were not in priority need or intentionally homeless.

Homelessness prevention includes **family mediation, conciliation** with family or friends threatening exclusion, **financial assistance, debt advice**, resolving **Housing Benefit** problems, resolving rent or mortgage **arrears, negotiation** with private rented sector landlords, **Sanctuary Scheme** measures for domestic violence, resolving general management, disrepair and tenant behaviour issues and working with a range of partner services and agencies.

New proposals

Recent proposals to address homelessness and meet our priority of accessing 400 new homes by April 2018 include:

- Adopting a different Lettings Strategy for the new Private Rental Scheme units to accommodate families to whom we want to discharge duty into the Private Rental Scheme and families in need of Temporary Accommodation as well as key workers (e.g. Social Workers, Teachers) instead of letting these units on the open market.
- Speeding up the delivery of new Private Rental Scheme units by using modular construction.
- Purchasing additional properties as part of our acquisition programme
- Purchasing and managing our own B&B or hostel.

These proposals are all still under consideration.

3. Supply and land issues

New supply

The number of new affordable rented homes completed is relatively low in Harrow and it is only these homes which directly impact on our use of B&B and other forms of Temporary Accommodation. Additionally some of the rented homes may be for specialised supported housing which is not available as housing for homeless families. For example in 2015/6, 28 of the 61 completed affordable rented homes were for an extra care housing scheme. Looking ahead, whilst the overall number of affordable homes increases as a result of major development schemes coming forward (Kodak, Lyon Road, College Road, Origin sites) the majority are for intermediate shared ownership.

Very few intermediate homes are sold to households in Temporary Accommodation or in existing social housing and some purchasers will be from out of the borough.

Where affordable homes are built for rent on housing regeneration schemes, some will be replacement homes so will not contribute to increasing the net new supply.

The **London Plan** sets out overall annual housing supply targets for each borough (Annual Monitoring Target) based on estimated housing capacity. For Harrow the target is 593 housing units. Applying the Council's Affordable Housing Policy (40% of new homes to be affordable) produces an annual target of 237 affordable housing completions.

The Council has not met this target in recent years. This is primarily due to developers proving on **viability grounds** that they cannot afford to deliver significant levels of **affordable housing**. Whilst the target is estimated to be met from 2017/18 onwards, the balance is towards shared ownership rather than rented.

In addition the estimated affordable housing delivery on the council's key strategic sites (Poets Corner, Byron Quarter) is in the design process. These schemes are also likely to be caught by the Starter Homes Initiative which takes priority over delivery of affordable rented housing and will therefore reduce the most useful tenure in terms of managing homelessness.

The current London **Mayor** is keen to increase the overall target for **affordable housing to 50%** as a long term strategy. However this is unlikely to be deliverable without increase in grant to support it and we continue to meet with GLA colleagues regularly so that we can input into emerging strategy on this.

We also need to take into account the loss of rented social housing stock through RtB and in the future through the RtB being extended to housing association tenants. Registered Providers also sell properties under their stock rationalisation programmes, although the Council can purchase these where suitable, under the property purchase programme.

Affordability is a key issue and work on new supply needs to take this into account. Affordability is based on the household spending a maximum of 40% of net income on housing costs, the industry norm.

LHA and PRS Rent Comparison May 2016 (weekly)		
Number of bedrooms	LHA rate	Average PRS rent
Shared room rate	£87.40	£124.85
0 Bedroom (studio/bedsit) shared kitchen/bathroom	£87.40	£124.85
0 Bedroom (studio/bedsit) own kitchen/bathroom	£185.81	£179.77
1 Bedroom (self-contained)	£185.81	£235.15
2 Bedrooms	£242.33	£301.15
3 Bedrooms	£303.00	£367.15
4 Bedrooms	£374.40	£499.62

(Private Rental Market Statistics May 2016 - mean rents)

Grange Farm Regeneration

The Grange Farm Regeneration Project is underway. The proposal is for 549 new homes (237 affordable rent and 312 private sale), predominantly flats with some houses. There are currently 282 total existing housing units on site (includes 20 owned by Genesis Housing Association and various properties sold under the RtB). The expected start on site to demolish first phase and commence building is spring 2017. The plan is to deliver in two phases with final completion around end of 2020-21.

Infill sites

The Council has identified 13 sites that form the first phase of the infill programme that will deliver 50 new homes, mainly family houses on small sites/ so called “hidden homes” locations. The Council has secured planning permission for 49 homes that include Chichester Court. Three sites are under construction and the first family sized, new homes will be available for letting in the spring of 2017.

Payments in lieu of affordable housing on private development sites is being used to help fund this infill development programme, which is providing additional affordable housing supply.

Acquisitions

The Council has recently purchased 8 homes from the Housing Revenue Account for permanent housing and we are in the process of purchasing up to 100 homes from the General Fund for use as temporary accommodation (these 100 homes will eventually be transferred into the Limited Liability Partnership being set up by the Council). The Council purchased three homes under this programme in 2015/16; and purchased 28 to date in 2016/17 with a further 27 in the pipeline (as at 12 October 2016). Officers aim to complete at least 60 purchases by financial year end.

Challenge Panel Meeting

Members met on Wednesday 12 October 2016 to consider the issues in hand. They heard from Jon Dalton (Head of Housing Needs) who provided a synopsis of the local and national position in relation to homelessness and an overview of the work being undertaken locally. They then heard from Alison Pegg (Head of Housing Regeneration) on the local land and supply issues.

Members were in **agreement** on the following points:

- **Prevention** is key and resources need to be allocated accordingly
- The Council requires a **longer term strategy** around **increasing supply** and especially supply of **genuinely affordable housing**
- The Council should be **lobbying** against potentially unfunded components of the Homelessness Reduction Bill.

Members questioned both officers and the following **key points of discussion** and **questions** were raised; the **recommendations** made following discussion are also set out:

Housing Supply

- Resources allocated to the purchase of properties
- Building the right type/size of housing to meet housing need
- How officers in the housing and planning teams integrate and work collaboratively

Recommendations:

- 1. To request that officers provide clarity on what plans there are to build more quality housing; high density, high rise (similar to the Harrow on the Hill development)**

Registered Providers

- Disposals by Registered Providers in Harrow and impact on nominations
- ex RtB buy backs forming part of the acquisition programme (In Harrow and outside of Harrow)
- Whether new acquisitions are subject to the RtB
- Discussion about Housing Association voluntary RtB, single homeless, office to residential conversions, new towns, building at higher density
- Structure and composition of the LLP
- Timescale for the infill sites
- Registered Providers' approach to homelessness prevention and evictions

Finance

- The need to regularly review the Council's long term business plans and debt reduction strategy
- The financial implications of the Homelessness Reduction Bill
- RtB discounts/rules; RtB in Harrow, non resident leaseholders etc.
- Incentives for landlords and impact of changes to tax relief etc. for landlords on their behaviour
- The Council's borrowing capacity - discussion about Housing Revenue Account versus General Fund
- Discussion around Harrow's Council Tax Scheme. Discussion around rent arrears, council tax arrears and bailiffs.

Recommendations:

- 2. To request that clarity be provided as to the financing of the Council's housing portfolio expansion and to investigate whether this Council could borrow General Fund housing revenue to act as a funding stream**

Strategy

- The need to consider population estimates and to plan and model for what housing is needed long term 15-20 years
- Discussion around releasing green belt, allotments, land swaps

- Opportunities for collaborative work undertaken with other boroughs on land, consortiums and suitable sites outside of Harrow
- Discussion around proposal for new lettings strategy for new Private Rental Sector units
- Suggestion of lobbying DCLG, GLA, London Councils and West London Alliance to influence reform
- Officers' work with families to increase their income levels - discussion around upskilling and in-work benefits (if salary goes up, Housing Benefit goes down etc)

Recommendations:

- 3. To request that the Leader of the Council raises with London Councils concerns around the Homelessness Reduction Bill and the impact this will have locally if implemented**
- 4. To request that officers be instructed to investigate options around utilisation of green belt land and allotments; and rationalise where you could develop housing in green belt areas and swap land elsewhere**
- 5. To request that officers advise as to the work being undertaken with families on low incomes, whether there is close working between departments working with families at risk of homelessness, and how effective is this**
- 6. To request that officers provide data on the correlations between up-skilling the workforce, incomes, households on benefits and housing supply**
- 7. To request that Cabinet and officers ensure that the maximum amount of affordable housing under planning policy is achieved**

Local impact

- Impact of moving people out of London on local employment in Harrow
- Impact on families of moving them out of London (employment, education, health)
- Length of stay in Temporary Accommodation
- Benchmarking with other West London boroughs and statistical comparators Redbridge and Merton
- In relation to recommendation 8 below, officers have suggested suggest that the estimate should be made within two months of Government Regulation being published.

Recommendations:

- 8. To request that the Leader of the Council enters discussions with the Mayor of London on housing supply issues, highlighting that average wages in Harrow are low so we need to ensure access to a supply of genuinely affordable housing** (please refer to final bullet point above).

Staffing

- Headcount and skills of the staff working in housing regeneration
- Opportunities to improve homelessness prevention and whether there is a sufficient budget (versus for acquisitions)
- In relation to recommendations 10 below, officers have confirmed that the posts were recruited on spend to save basis, and monitoring is in place.

Recommendations:

- 9. To request that consideration be given to the resourcing of the housing needs and housing regeneration teams in the event that these teams require extra resources in order to maintain and build on progress to date, particularly on homelessness prevention**
- 10. To request that clarity be provided as to the impact of the additional resources in the housing needs team approved by the Corporate Strategic Board.** (Please refer to final bullet point above).

Membership

Councillor Jeff Anderson (Chair)
Councillor Barry Kendler
Councillor Barry Macleod-Cullinane
Councillor Kairul Marikar
Councillor Anne Whitehead

Section 4 - Contact Details and Background Papers

Contact: Rebecka Steven (Policy Team – Strategic Commissioning)

Background Papers:

Homelessness pressures were recently discussed at [Overview & Scrutiny in June](#)

Housing finances were discussed at [Performance & Finance in September](#)

Briefing available via [SharePoint](#)

Appendix – observations and recommendations from the Independent Expert

The CSB Homelessness Demand Challenge Panel took place on 25 May 2016 and the subsequent report set out the observations and recommendations from the independent expert Michele Davies, who has held a range of senior housing roles including manager of Camden's Housing Advice Service.

The feedback from the CSB Challenge Panel members was that they found the presentation very interesting, they were reassured about our approach to dealing with homelessness demand and they are keen to all work together to help address this issue.

The independent expert observed that the Homelessness Challenge demonstrated that the Housing Needs Division is up to the challenges of delivering a responsive and accountable service in this tough and demanding environment. The service is well led, with committed, knowledgeable officers and is up to date with all the latest initiatives in the sector and the team seem to have clarity in the purpose of their service.

The service understands that there is not just one solution to the rapid increase in homelessness acceptances, but that a series of diverse initiatives to prevent homelessness and divert applicants from unavailable council housing are essential components.

The time allocated to the exercise was too brief to drill down and fully test the effectiveness of some practices and initiatives but the benchmarking data from other councils with similar make up demonstrates that the service's outcomes stand up to scrutiny. The presentations and responses from officers also established their breadth of knowledge and range of activities and their readiness to open their service to scrutiny.

The Challenge's key outcomes were very positive and the exercise provided a template which could be duplicated in other departments although the independent expert would recommend a longer timeframe. Homelessness is not going away any time soon and a new legislative framework will make the delivery of the services even more challenging and difficult that it already is.

The independent expert made some recommendations. These did not arise from any criticism of the service but reflect areas that were not examined due to the constraint of time and the overarching nature of the challenge. The independent expert also drew from her experience and knowledge of working in other boroughs. Some of these ideas and processes were already in train.

The independent expert concluded that Harrow Council can be proud of having an excellent service operating in a very difficult environment. The Challenge exercise would have fulfilled its purpose even if it

had only highlighted the scope of its activities and demonstrated the section's expertise and positive dedication to try and find solutions.

However no council can be complacent and there is always room for improvement even in the best performing departments. This is a changing environment in which the council needs to rely on the sheer hard work of its officers and approach all the new challenges in a purposeful manner. To do that it needs a clear framework which relies on solid performance based on "what works" and what will work in a new era without deterring innovation.

The Challenge's outcomes and the on-going examination of service delivery should deliver improvements to the provision of affordable services, ensure continuity and sustainability and foster and improve much needed internal and external communications.

The recommendations from the CSB Homelessness Demand Challenge Panel and the previous roundtable exercise are being taken forward by a Homelessness Task Force using a combined action plan. This group will report to CSB and Cabinet in due course.