

Housing Services for Vulnerable People

REPORT OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE



**London Borough of Islington
June 2017**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Housing Services for Vulnerable People

Aim: To review the effectiveness of the housing services the council provides to vulnerable people

Evidence

The review ran from July 2016 until March 2017 and evidence was received from a variety of sources:

1. Presentations from council officers

- Maxine Holdsworth, Service Director for Housing Needs and Strategy
- Paul Byer, Service Development Manager
- Claudia Thompson, Assistant Director for Adults Integrated Community Services
- Cora Nicholls, Housing Options Manager, and Vicky Manser, Principal Re-Housing Manager
- Jon Farrant, Head of Tenancy and Estate Services
- Glenn McCorkindale, Property Services Programme Manager

2. Documentary evidence

- Summary of the specialist housing services provided to vulnerable people
- Summary of the housing services provided to vulnerable people by LB Haringey

3. Information from witnesses

- Members of the Housing Disability Panel
- Clare Norton, Chief Executive Officer, and Pet Yesufu, Supported Housing Manager, Peter Bedford Housing Association
- Ismail Bahriyeli, Carers Services Manager, and Andy Murphy, Chief Executive, Age UK Islington
- Tom Irvine, Service Improvement and Engagement Manager, Partners for Improvement in Islington

4. Scrutiny visit

- Visit to Hornsey Road Reception Centre
- Visit to Disability Action in Islington to discuss the draft recommendations with representatives of the Housing Disability Panel

Main Findings

The Committee considered how housing services define vulnerability. The Housing Service's IT systems recognise eight categories of vulnerability; blindness, learning disability, mental health, physical impairment, deafness, mobility issues, wheelchair user, and 'other'. The 'other' category may be used to flag that the household includes young children or frail elderly people.

Residents may be vulnerable for a number of reasons. Their vulnerability may be linked to a single issue or impairment, or they may have multiple vulnerabilities. Vulnerable people generally have additional needs which necessitate either additional or tailored housing services; however the services they require depend on the effect and extent of their vulnerability. Vulnerable people may be disabled, however not all disabled people are vulnerable. The impact of someone's vulnerability may depend on circumstances, such as the condition of their home and living arrangements.

The Committee thought that the current definitions of vulnerability used by the council's housing services were not particularly helpful to officers or residents. The categorisations of vulnerability are broad and do not make reference to the individual needs of residents and how their interactions with the housing service may be affected. It is suggested that adopting more refined definitions would help to ensure that services are focused appropriately on meeting the additional needs of those who would be at risk or would suffer a loss of wellbeing if their needs were not met. Adopting definitions based on recognising additional needs, rather than vulnerabilities, may be an appropriate way of ensuring that housing services are able to offer a more personalised service to those who need it most.

It is recommended that Housing Services should clarify their definitions of vulnerability and disability, and how these relate to each other.

The Committee received evidence on the range of housing options available to vulnerable and disabled people. Vulnerable elderly residents may be eligible for sheltered housing schemes, extra care sheltered housing, or care homes, depending on their level of need. Those with mental health issues may be eligible for supported accommodation or residential care; different options are available for those with different needs. Homeless residents may be accommodated in reception centres while their homelessness application is processed. Disabled residents may be eligible for supported accommodation. There are specialist housing pathways for those with substance misuse issues. Residents who are terminally ill may be eligible for hospice accommodation.

The Committee concluded that there is a comprehensive range of specialist housing options available for those with significant needs. However, specialist housing is not appropriate or necessary for all vulnerable people, and the council faces a severe shortage of general needs housing for vulnerable and disabled people who are able to live independently. There are over 20,000 households on the council's housing register, with 9,000 households in housing need, yet only around 1,000 properties available to be let a year. Although the council is developing new housing, the new requirement to sell housing to fund Right to Buy discounts may result in an overall decrease to the council's housing supply, reducing the council's ability to rehouse vulnerable people and contributing further to the significant 'points inflation' experienced in recent years. The Committee is particularly concerned about this.

Whilst the council does publicise the shortage of available housing, the Committee heard that some residents do not have realistic expectations of the council's housing supply and what they may be able to successfully bid for. It is suggested that communications around the council's housing supply are strengthened to help vulnerable people make more informed decisions about their housing options. Although the council's website does detail the average number of points needed to successfully bid for a property, providing more tangible examples may help to demonstrate the shortage of housing.

It is therefore recommended that Housing Services further publicise the shortage of council housing in order to set realistic expectations of what residents may be able to successfully bid for. It is recommended that anonymised case studies are used where appropriate to illustrate the shortage of housing and to help disabled and vulnerable people choose the 'best available option'.

The Committee received evidence on the range of additional housing services offered to vulnerable and disabled people. This includes an annual programme of visits to tenants aged 75 and over, referrals to services that help vulnerable people manage their tenancies, and visits to vulnerable and disabled people prior to capital works commencing. The Responsive Repairs service assigns additional priority to vulnerable people if their repair is considered detrimental to their needs. Assisted decoration and discretionary repairs schemes are available to tenants aged over 70 and those in receipt of certain disability benefits. Discretionary repairs may also be available to those with mental health issues. An adaptations service is available to assist disabled and vulnerable

tenants, and work is underway to make this service more efficient by training housing officers to be Trusted Assessors; this will allow housing officers to make assessments and install minor adaptations without further referral to Occupational Health. A handyman scheme for small DIY jobs is available for older, disabled and vulnerable people; this is available to all residents, including those in private or housing association properties. Some services may be chargeable and different eligibility criteria apply.

The Committee welcomes that there is a wide range of additional services available, however notes that these seem to be planned on a service-level basis. Officers do not have a comprehensive understanding of all of the additional housing services which vulnerable and disabled tenants may be entitled to. The Committee heard that the preference of the Housing Disability Panel would be for one officer to be responsible for coordinating the housing offer for disabled and vulnerable people as this would ensure that clear information was available through a single point of contact. The Committee recognises that it may not be possible to establish a single contact point within existing resources; however considers that having a comprehensive and accessible resource detailing the services available would benefit both residents and officers. A guide to the additional services offered would help to direct enquiries to the most appropriate section and assist with establishing resident expectations. It would be particularly useful for this to detail the limits of support offered and to provide advice on how best to access services not offered by the council.

It is therefore recommended that the information on housing services for vulnerable people be reviewed to provide a comprehensive resource, setting out the services provided by the council, eligibility criteria, any limits to that support, and advice on how to access services that the council does not provide. This should be provided in a range of accessible formats, as required by legislation.

The Committee heard varied evidence on the accessibility of housing services. Whilst officers provided examples of how the accessibility of services has increased significantly in recent years, the evidence received from service users from the Housing Disability Panel indicated that further work is required to improve accessibility and communication and engagement with service users.

The Committee welcomed that housing services have become more accessible in recent years through innovations such as telephone-based interpreting services, web-based sign-language interpreters, and accessible online services. However, it was reported that the accessibility of services could be improved further. For example, more complex repairs are not able to be reported through the council's website and have to be reported by telephone, which is not an accessible communication method for all people. The Committee considered that all transactional processes should be able to be carried out entirely online; however it is also important to maintain alternative ways of accessing housing services for those not able to access the internet.

It is recommended that key online customer processes be reviewed to identify and close gaps in accessibility. All housing transactions should be able to be carried out without use of a telephone or having to visit council offices; the introduction of a webchat function would be welcomed. However, it should also be recognised that exclusively online services are not accessible to all.

The Committee gave particular consideration to the accessibility of the Housing Options service. Whilst it was found that the bidding system was accessible to those with disabilities, it was considered that improvements could be made to the moving process. The Committee heard instances of when vulnerable tenants had successfully bid for properties and thought that adaptations and other works would be completed before they moved in, only to find that these had not been carried out. It was thought that such issues were unnecessary and could be resolved through better communication around the moving process.

The Committee recommends that, when moving into a council property, disabled and vulnerable tenants should be consulted on the repairs and adaptations that are required to the property. The works to be carried out should be confirmed in writing with indicative timescales to ensure that both the council and the tenant have mutually agreed expectations.

Overall the evidence received suggested that although the council has developed the accessibility of housing services, disabled and vulnerable peoples' experiences of those services can vary considerably. The Committee noted examples of unacceptable experiences, including a wheelchair being removed from a resident's home by a contractor, strained relationships with housing officers, and difficulties in accessing information about services.

Whilst the council's housing services generally have good levels of customer satisfaction, the Committee appreciates that sometimes things go wrong and is concerned that poor customer service can have a significant detrimental effect on vulnerable and disabled people, more so than other residents. Service users reported feeling frustrated, and commented that poor experiences could discourage vulnerable and disabled people from accessing services which they need and are entitled to. The Committee thought that sharing and reviewing service standards with disabled and vulnerable people would help to ensure that officers and service users have shared expectations of how the council should work with vulnerable and disabled people.

It is recommended that housing services publish the standards which they seek to meet when communicating and engaging with disabled and vulnerable people, and should consider reviewing service standards and feedback mechanisms with service users.

Evidence received from the Housing Disability Panel indicated that housing services' engagement with vulnerable and disabled people is variable. The council's Corporate Plan commits the council to co-production and person-centred services; however the Housing Disability Panel thought that these principles were not applied consistently, commenting that consultation with service users sometimes appeared to be an afterthought, rather than a key stage in the decision-making process. The Committee agrees that involving vulnerable and disabled people in how services are planned, delivered and monitored is the best way in ensuring that services work for vulnerable people.

The Committee recommends that consideration be given to how the voices of vulnerable people can be heard earlier in decision-making processes on procurement, commissioning and designing services; and how vulnerable people can be further involved in service monitoring and evaluation.

The Committee was concerned that some vulnerable people could be unknown to housing services, however agreed that there are many opportunities for staff to identify disabled and vulnerable people. The Committee welcomed that staff receive training on identification and referral mechanisms, however, concerns were raised that some officers did not have a detailed understanding of the specific needs of vulnerable and disabled people and how these could have practical implications on how they deliver their service. It is thought that a better service could be provided to residents if staff received further information on how to support residents with additional needs. Reviewing the way in which staff are trained alongside service users such as the Housing Disability Panel would be an effective method of ensuring that staff have access to the information they need.

It is therefore recommended that Housing Services should review how staff are trained, kept up to date, and access information on how to best support residents with additional needs. This review should be in conjunction with service users, to identify knowledge and skills gaps and agree how these should be resolved. Staff need to understand how additional needs will have a practical impact on their work and their interactions with residents.

In addition to reviewing staff training, it is thought that developing the data held by housing services would assist staff when delivering services to vulnerable and disabled people. Holding detailed data based on resident needs, rather than vulnerabilities, would support officers in providing more customer-focused services. Officers advised that such information would also generate efficiencies by helping to clarify resource requirements in advance of services being delivered. Such a system would be most effective if multiple services were able to access and contribute to the data, as this would support integrated working between services in more complex scenarios.

A comprehensive needs matrix should be developed to enable housing services to record the needs of vulnerable and disabled people in greater detail. This will help to ensure that staff have the right resources and are aware of how they need to adapt their services for those with additional needs.

The Committee considered how more detailed information on the needs of vulnerable and disabled people could be generated. It was thought that relying on self-referral mechanisms would not be sufficient to capture information on the complex and unique needs of residents. Staff on estates such as caretakers provide a vital link between residents and the council, and the Committee suggests that developing this relationship further will greatly assist capturing detailed information on resident needs.

In order to develop the relationship between the council and local communities, consideration should be given to making the Housing Operations service more 'holistic', whereby a greater range of services are provided to residents on a more local basis.

The data on resident needs could also be informed by existing data held by other services. Although it was highlighted that services may not always be able to share sensitive data with other departments, the Committee considered that barriers to accessing data should be minimised as far as possible to enable the council and its contractors to provide good quality services.

The council should review its information governance responsibilities and data sharing agreements to ensure that the support needs of residents are known to the services that need this information. It is important that housing services and contractors can access residents' data securely to enable them to provide high quality services to vulnerable people.

The Committee was keen to ensure that the council's housing services for vulnerable people were in line with those of other housing providers and incorporated best practice approaches. Overall the Committee considered that the council's housing services for vulnerable people were largely in line with those of other housing providers. However, the Committee was particularly impressed with the ethos of Peter Bedford Housing Association, a specialist housing provider for vulnerable people, which focused all of its services around providing holistic support to residents.

The Committee found that there is a great deal of joint working between the council's housing services and other services, however thought that some relationships could be made more effective. Staff at the Hornsey Road Reception Centre commented that communication between services could be improved, and highlighted that one particular issue was hospitals directly discharging patients to reception centres, noting that this sometimes resulted in residents not receiving the support they required.

It is recommended that liaison between housing, social services and NHS services be reviewed in regards to hospital discharge arrangements; to ensure that reception centres and other relevant housing services are aware of care needs and that disabled and vulnerable people are fully supported.

It was also considered that further joint working was needed with the council's housing contractors to ensure that they adequately meet the needs of vulnerable people. The Housing Disability Panel

commented that the service received from contractors was inconsistent, that they seemingly were not aware of their duty to make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010, and that they were often not aware of disabled and vulnerable people's needs.

It is recommended that housing services should set clear expectations for contractors about working with disabled and vulnerable residents; this should include standards for staff training and accessibility. Compliance should be enforceable and regularly monitored to ensure that contractors are compliant with relevant disability legislation and that they are responsive to the needs of vulnerable and disabled people. Housing contractors should also be required to report any welfare concerns they have to the Housing service.

The Committee considered the views and experiences of carers, who have a unique insight into the housing issues affecting vulnerable people and could also be vulnerable themselves. Age UK Islington had carried out a survey of carers to gauge their opinions on housing services for vulnerable people. It was found that 13% of the organisation's casework was housing related. Age UK surveyed 36 carers and identified four main housing-related themes; rehousing, repairs, money (i.e. financial support with housing and utilities costs), and aids and adaptations. Feedback on the council's services was generally mixed.

The Housing Operations service is to carry out a fundamental review of the council's housing offer over the next year. This is intended to review how Housing works with other services and how the service could be more personalised and user-led, with a focus on the integration of services and early-intervention to support the independence and resilience of vulnerable people. The Committee consider that vulnerable and disabled people must be engaged in this review; both through representative organisations such as Disability Action in Islington and on an individual basis.

It is recommended that service user groups should be invited to participate in the forthcoming review of the Council's housing management services, and other service reviews as appropriate.

Conclusions

The Committee welcomes the council provides a wide range of specialist housing options and additional housing services to disabled and vulnerable people. However, it is considered that these services could be made more effective. One particular area for improvement is communication and engagement, which appears to be at the heart of many of the issues raised by both residents and officers.

Developing communication between housing, other services, and contractors will help to ensure that staff have access to comprehensive, accurate and practical information on resident needs, which will support them in delivering housing services more effectively. Further communication and engagement with disabled and vulnerable people will help to ensure that services are meeting their needs, that residents are aware of the services available and how to access them, and what can be expected from those services.

The Committee has made 14 recommendations in response to the evidence received. It is hoped that the Committee's recommendations will assist the council in providing more effective and more personalised housing services, which will support the overall wellbeing of vulnerable people and help to maintain or develop their independence and resilience.

In carrying out the review, the Committee met with officers, service users, and other housing providers to gain a balanced view. The Committee would like to thank the witnesses that gave evidence in relation to the scrutiny. The Executive is asked to endorse the Committee's recommendations.

Recommendations

1. Housing Services should clarify their definitions of vulnerability and disability, and how these relate to each other.
2. Housing Services should further publicise the shortage of council housing in order to set realistic expectations of what residents may be able to successfully bid for. It is recommended that anonymised case studies are used where appropriate to illustrate the shortage of housing and to help disabled and vulnerable people choose the 'best available option'.
3. That the information on housing services for vulnerable people be reviewed to provide a comprehensive resource, setting out the services provided by the council, eligibility criteria, any limits to that support, and advice on how to access services that the council does not provide. This should be provided in a range of accessible formats, as required by legislation.
4. Key online customer processes be reviewed to identify and close gaps in accessibility. All housing transactions should be able to be carried out without use of a telephone or having to visit council offices; the introduction of a webchat function would be welcomed. However, it should also be recognised that exclusively online services are not accessible to all.
5. The council should review its information governance responsibilities and data sharing agreements to ensure that the support needs of residents are known to the services that need this information. It is important that housing services and contractors can access residents' data securely to enable them to provide high quality services to vulnerable people.
6. Consideration be given to how the voices of vulnerable people can be heard earlier in decision-making processes on procurement, commissioning and designing services; and how vulnerable people can be further involved in service monitoring and evaluation.
7. Housing Services should review how staff are trained, kept up to date, and access information on how to best support tenants with additional needs. This review should be in conjunction with service users, to identify knowledge and skills gaps and agree how these should be resolved. Staff need to understand how additional needs will have a practical impact on their work and their interactions with residents.
8. A comprehensive needs matrix should be developed to enable housing services to record the needs of vulnerable and disabled people in greater detail. This will help to ensure that staff have the right resources and are aware of how they need to adapt their services for those with additional needs.

9. When moving into a council property, disabled and vulnerable tenants should be consulted on the repairs and adaptations that are required to the property. The works to be carried out should be confirmed in writing with indicative timescales to ensure that both the council and the tenant have mutually agreed expectations.
10. Housing services should publish the standards which they seek to meet when communicating and engaging with disabled and vulnerable people, and should consider reviewing service standards and feedback mechanisms with service users.
11. In order to develop the relationship between the council and local communities, consideration should be given to making the Housing Operations service more 'holistic', whereby a greater range of services are provided to residents on a more local basis.
12. Housing Services should set clear expectations for contractors about working with disabled and vulnerable residents; this should include standards for staff training and accessibility. Compliance should be enforceable and regularly monitored to ensure that contractors are compliant with relevant disability legislation and that they are responsive to the needs of vulnerable and disabled people. Housing contractors should also be required to report any welfare concerns they have to the Housing service.
13. Liaison between housing, social services and NHS services be reviewed in regards to hospital discharge arrangements; to ensure that reception centres and other relevant housing services are aware of care needs and that disabled and vulnerable people are fully supported.
14. Service user groups should be invited to participate in the forthcoming review of the Council's housing management services, and other service reviews as appropriate.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE HOUSING SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 2016/17

Councillors:

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan (Chair)
Councillor Marian Spall (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Gary Doolan
Councillor Aysegul Erdogan
Councillor Osh Gantly
Councillor Mouna Hamitouche MBE
Councillor Una O'Halloran
Councillor Angela Picknell

Observers:

Rose-Marie McDonald – PFI Managed Tenants
Jim Rooke – Directly Managed Tenants

Substitutes:

Councillor Raphael Andrews
Councillor Alex Diner
Councillor Satnam Gill
Councillor Gary Heather
Councillor Olly Parker
Councillor Alice Perry
Councillor Dave Poyser

Acknowledgements:

The Committee would like to thank all the witnesses who gave evidence to the review.

Officer Support:

*Paul Byer – Service Development Manager
Jonathan Moore – Senior Democratic Services Officer*

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Committee commenced the review in July 2016 with the overall aim of reviewing the effectiveness of the housing services the council provides to vulnerable people.

The Committee also agreed to the following objectives:

- To identify and assess the housing options and additional housing services available to vulnerable people
 - To confirm that the council's housing services are accessible to vulnerable people
 - To assess how vulnerable people and their particular needs are identified by housing services
 - To evaluate how the council's housing services communicate and engage with vulnerable people
 - To benchmark the council's housing services for vulnerable people against those of other housing providers and to identify best practice
 - To review the extent of joint working with adult social care and others.
- 1.2 The Committee consulted the Housing Disability Panel on the scrutiny initiation document and amendments were made as a result.
- 1.3 In carrying out the review the Committee met with several officers from Housing and Adult Social Services, service users from the Housing Disability Panel, and representatives from Partners for Improvement in Islington, Age UK, and Peter Bedford Housing Association, a specialist housing provider for vulnerable and disabled people. The Committee also visited the reception centre at 305 Hornsey Road.

Local context

- 1.4 The council's Corporate Plan states 'We want to ensure that everyone in Islington has a place to live that is affordable, decent and secure'. It states that a priority of the council is 'making Islington a place where our residents have a good quality of life' and this will be achieved by supporting vulnerable residents and carers and helping residents to live healthy independent lives. The Corporate Plan is underpinned by the council's principles of early intervention and prevention, people-centred services, co-production, strong partnerships, making every contact count, and being employment focussed.
- 1.5 Specialist or additional housing services for vulnerable people are provided by several teams across the Housing and Adult Social Services directorate. Different services have different eligibility criteria, which may be based on age, vulnerability, or tenure. Some services are only available to council tenants, whereas others are available to all. In total there are around 4,000 residents flagged to the housing service as being vulnerable.
- 1.6 The Committee decided to undertake this review in the context of the significant financial challenges facing the council. By 2020 national government will have cut its funding to Islington Council by 70 per cent since 2010. The Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 introduced a 1 per cent annual reduction in social rents over the next four years; resulting in a loss of £71 million income to the housing service, and a £1.7 billion loss if the 1 per cent reduction continues over the life of the business plan. The Committee was keen to ensure that the housing services provided to vulnerable people remain effective and accessible in the face of the severe budget reductions.

2. Findings

Who are 'Vulnerable People'?

- 2.1 The Committee considered how housing services define vulnerability. The Housing Service's IT systems recognise eight categories of vulnerability; blindness, learning disability, mental health, physical impairment, deafness, mobility issues, wheelchair user, and 'other'. The 'other' category may be used to flag that the household includes young children or frail elderly people. How these vulnerable people are identified is explored in detail elsewhere in this report.
- 2.2 Residents may be vulnerable for a number of reasons. Their vulnerability may be linked to a single issue or impairment, or they may have multiple vulnerabilities. Vulnerable people generally have additional needs which necessitate either additional or tailored housing services; however the services they require depend on the effect and extent of their vulnerability. Vulnerable people may be disabled, however not all disabled people are vulnerable. The impact of someone's vulnerability may depend on circumstances; someone with mobility issues may be very vulnerable if living in unsuitable housing, however may not be if living in an accessible and adapted home. A person may be very vulnerable if they live by themselves, however may not be if they live with a family member or carer. Some people may consider themselves to be vulnerable; whereas some people with additional needs have a high level of independence and would not consider themselves to be vulnerable.
- 2.3 The Committee thought that the current definition of vulnerability used by the council's housing services was not particularly helpful to officers or residents. Although it is useful for housing services to know if a resident has a mental health issue (for example), many residents will be captured by this categorisation, without any reference to their individual needs and how these will affect interactions with the housing service. Categories such as 'learning disability' and 'physical impairment' are also particularly broad, and people experiencing those issues will have very specific and different needs to one another.
- 2.4 It is suggested that adopting more refined definitions would help to ensure that services are focused appropriately on meeting the additional needs of those who would be at risk or would suffer a loss of wellbeing if their needs were not met. Adopting definitions based on recognising additional needs, rather than vulnerabilities, may be an appropriate way of ensuring that housing services are able to offer a more personalised service to those who need it most.
- 2.5 **It is recommended that Housing Services should clarify their definitions of vulnerability and disability, and how these relate to each other.**

The housing options available to vulnerable people

- 2.6 The Committee received evidence on the range of housing options available to vulnerable and disabled people. The housing services available to vulnerable and disabled people are informed by the Care Act 2014, which places a duty on local authorities to promote individual wellbeing. 'Wellbeing' is defined in the Act as having reference to personal dignity, physical and mental health, protection from abuse and neglect, suitable living accommodation, and other factors.
- 2.7 Vulnerable elderly residents may be eligible for specialist housing options to meet their needs. There are approximately 700 older Islington residents in sheltered housing schemes, which is permanent accommodation for those with relatively low level needs. Around 90 residents are in extra care sheltered housing, which is suitable for those with moderate needs. Such schemes are staffed on a 24 hour basis and are provided with additional GP cover due to the health needs of residents. Those with a high level of need may be eligible for care home accommodation; there are eight care homes in Islington which often providing nursing care alongside support to the residents' personal health and social wellbeing.

- 2.8 Residents with mental health issues may be eligible for supported accommodation. This provides tiered support to adults with various levels of need; different options are available for those with low, medium and high levels of need. Residents are supported by staff who provide one-to-one support and help residents to develop independent living skills, such as budget management, healthy eating, engagement in community activities, accessing employment or education, and assisting with physical health. Use of supported accommodation for those with mental health issues is usually time limited to two years; it is intended that the residents develop independent living skills before moving back into their own accommodation. The council has contracts to support 246 adults residing in such accommodation.
- 2.9 Residents with more significant mental health issues and a higher level of dependence may be eligible for residential care. This provides tailored support to those with very specific and high level needs; such as older homeless people with alcohol-related dementia, or elderly people with mental health needs. Residents tend to stay in residential care in the longer term, however if appropriate residents may be moved to supported accommodation or another setting which would provide them with a greater level of independence. The council has contracts to support 32 adults residing in such accommodation.
- 2.10 The council operates three reception centres which provide short-term emergency accommodation for vulnerable residents who have submitted a homelessness application. Members of the Committee visited the reception centre at 305 Hornsey Road, which provided basic accommodation to single adults and families. Once a homelessness application is granted the resident will generally move into temporary accommodation. The Committee was impressed with the standard of reception centre accommodation and commented that the visit was particularly useful to see first-hand how housing officers support residents with a range of vulnerabilities. Whilst reception centre accommodation is intended to be temporary, it was noted that some residents can stay in the reception centre for several months while their application is assessed.
- 2.11 Other specialist housing options include a specific housing pathway for those with substance misuse issues; with 12 services offering a total of 209 bed spaces. There are also a range of supported accommodation options for those with disabilities, including learning disabilities. Residents who are terminally ill may be eligible for hospice accommodation, which is located outside of Islington and funded by Islington CCG.
- 2.12 Although specialist housing options are required for those with the most significant needs, the majority of vulnerable and disabled people do not need specialist accommodation and live independently in general needs housing with varying levels of support. There are various support services available depending on need and eligibility, including services for those with specific conditions such as dementia, stroke, anxiety and depression; day services; reablement services; domiciliary care; drug and alcohol treatment services; and employment support services for those with specific needs.
- 2.13 The Committee concluded that there is a comprehensive range of specialist housing options available for those with significant needs. However, specialist housing is not appropriate or necessary for all vulnerable people, and the council faces a severe shortage of general needs housing for vulnerable and disabled people who are able to live independently. The Committee is acutely aware that many vulnerable residents also experience overcrowding, which is particularly detrimental to family wellbeing and may result in inappropriate bedroom shares. Other vulnerable and disabled residents may be living in properties which are unsuitable to their needs in other ways; they may be difficult for people with impairments to access, or may not be able to be adapted appropriately. In all instances the council faces an increasingly small supply of properties to alleviate housing need. There are over 20,000 households on the council's housing register, with 9,000 households in housing need, yet only around 1,000 properties available to be

let a year. Although the council is currently developing new social housing, the council may be forced to sell up to a third of its vacant properties each year to fund Right to Buy discounts. This will further reduce the council's ability to rehouse vulnerable people, exacerbating their housing needs and further increasing the 'points inflation' experienced in recent years. The Committee is concerned that the average number of points needed to successfully bid for a two bedroom property was over 280 in 2015/16; compared to around 220 in 2013/14.

- 2.14 Whilst the council does publicise the shortage of available housing, the Committee heard that some residents do not have realistic expectations of the council's housing supply and what they may be able to successfully bid for. Although some residents are vulnerable and in a high level of housing need, they may have their own criteria which are unlikely to be met by the council's available housing stock. The Committee heard instances where residents had declined properties which would be more suitable for their needs than their current property. Whilst the Committee supports the principles of the council's choice-based lettings scheme, it is felt that communications surrounding the council's housing supply could be strengthened to help vulnerable people to make more informed options about their housing situation. Although the council's website does detail the average number of points needed to successfully bid for a property, it is suggested that providing more tangible examples would help demonstrate the shortage of housing.
- 2.15 **It is therefore recommended that Housing Services further publicise the shortage of council housing in order to set realistic expectations of what residents may be able to successfully bid for. It is recommended that anonymised case studies are used where appropriate to illustrate the shortage of housing and to help disabled and vulnerable people choose the 'best available option'.**

The additional housing services available to vulnerable people

- 2.16 The Committee received evidence on the range of additional housing services offered to vulnerable and disabled people. The Committee initially received a list of the support services available, and then received detailed evidence from officers on the services offered.
- 2.17 An annual programme of visits to tenants aged 75 or over is carried out by the Tenancy Management team, with an annual target of visiting 400 tenants. These visits help to identify the needs of older people and referrals to social care or other support services are made as appropriate.
- 2.18 Area Housing Offices make referrals to help vulnerable people manage their tenancies, for example through the floating support service provided by the Single Homeless Project. A total of 340 referrals were made in 2015-16.
- 2.19 Housing Operations visit disabled and vulnerable people prior to capital works commencing to establish if the works would have an adverse impact on their wellbeing, and if this could be mitigated. This frequently raised access issues which were considered when planning improvement projects.
- 2.20 The Responsive Repairs service assigns additional priority to vulnerable people if their repair is considered detrimental to their needs. The repairs most likely to be escalated are electrical or plumbing faults; however the decision on whether to escalate the repair is made by a team leader on a case by case basis. Officers noted that there may be cost implications and implications on wider service delivery when the priority of jobs is increased.
- 2.21 Property Services offered an assisted decoration scheme to tenants aged over 70 and those in receipt of certain disability benefits. This provided tenants with an internal redecoration of their

property every seven years. 57 properties were decorated through the scheme in 2015/16.

- 2.22 Property services also offer a discretionary repairs scheme to tenants aged over 70 and those in receipt of certain disability benefits, through which 363 repairs were carried out in 2015/16. A further 15 repairs were carried out to support those with mental health problems; it was explained that this was because the condition of their property was either detrimental to their needs or was resulting in delayed discharge from specialist accommodation. The discretionary repairs service provides repairs which general needs tenants are not eligible for, however vulnerable and disabled people would have difficulty in carrying out themselves. Common discretionary repairs included fixing new toilet seats, repairs to kitchen units, and replacing lightbulbs.
- 2.23 An adaptations service is available to assist disabled and vulnerable tenants to live independently. Around 1,200 adaptations projects are carried out each year, with 17% of these considered to be complex projects. Adaptations are generally limited to the inside of a tenant's property however adaptations to communal areas will be considered and balanced against the needs of others. The team receives referrals directly from Occupational Therapy in Adult Social Services and employs specialist contractors to install, service and test equipment. Minor adaptations are installed within the repairs service's standard 20 day response period, with more complex installations such as level access showers installed within 40 days. Satisfaction with the service was 99.5% in 2015/16.
- 2.24 Property Services is working with Adult Social Services to trial a Trusted Assessor scheme. This enables housing officers to identify if a resident needs minor aids and adaptations to their property (i.e. grab rails) and then raise orders for these directly without further reference to Occupational Health. This is intended to improve efficiency, reduce the pressure on the Occupational Health team, and offer a faster and more streamlined service to residents.
- 2.25 The Islington Handyperson Scheme provides small repairs and DIY-type jobs to older, disabled and vulnerable people. Typical jobs include building flat-pack furniture, installing curtain rails, and minor electrical works. The service is available to all; regardless of if they are a tenant, leaseholder, housing association tenant, or private tenant. There is a £28/hour charge for the service; however those on means tested benefits received the service at a subsidised rate of £10/hour. 785 residents made use of the service in 2015/16; around half of which were council tenants.
- 2.26 Property services also make referrals to the Fire Brigade for a home visit where the residents have a higher than average risk from fire. This may include tenants with mobility impairments who would face difficulty in safely leaving their home in the event of a fire. 592 referrals were made in 2015/16.
- 2.27 The Housing Needs service offers extra assistance to vulnerable and disabled tenants when they view a new property. This could take the form of offering a longer viewing, offering multiple viewings, or being more flexible on timings.
- 2.28 The Customer Service Centre at 222 Upper Street provides 'floor walkers' to help vulnerable and disabled people who may need additional help accessing computer terminals.
- 2.29 Whilst not an 'additional' service, improvements to meet the needs of disabled and vulnerable people are made through the capital works programme. This includes braille on all new door entry systems and lift controls, power assisted doors, and flashing light systems instead of doorbells for deaf residents.
- 2.30 The Committee also noted that mainstream housing services can have an additional importance for disabled and vulnerable people. For example, the cleanliness and maintenance of estates

was essential for those with mobility issues. Problems such as dog fouling may be trivial for some people, but can be particularly problematic for wheelchair users and those with visual impairments.

- 2.31 Service users made a number of comments on the accessibility of the council's housing services and these are considered in detail elsewhere in this report. As a general point, the Committee welcomes that a wide range of additional services are available, however notes that these seem to be planned on a service-level basis. Officers do not have a comprehensive understanding of all of the additional housing services which vulnerable and disabled tenants may be entitled to. The Committee heard that the preference of the Housing Disability Panel would be for one officer to be responsible for coordinating the housing offer for disabled and vulnerable people as this would ensure that clear information was available through a single point of contact. The Committee recognises that it may not be possible to establish a single contact point within existing resources; however considers that having a comprehensive and accessible resource detailing the services available would assist both residents and officers. A guide to the additional services offered would help to direct enquiries to the most appropriate section and assist with establishing resident expectations. It would be particularly useful for this to detail the limits of support offered and to provide advice on how best to access services not offered by the council. For example, the Committee heard that some disabled and vulnerable tenants requested decorative and gardening works which were not offered through the repairs service or the handyman scheme. It would be helpful to advise how to access such services through the voluntary or community sector, or how to find reputable tradespeople in the private sector. Such a guide could be included in the new tenants pack.
- 2.32 **It is therefore recommended that the information on housing services for vulnerable people be reviewed to provide a comprehensive resource, setting out the services provided by the council, eligibility criteria, any limits to that support, and advice on how to access services that the council does not provide. This should be provided in a range of accessible formats, as required by legislation.**

Accessibility, Communication and Engagement

- 2.33 The Committee heard varied evidence on the accessibility of housing services. Whilst officers provided examples of how the accessibility of services has increased significantly in recent years, the evidence received from the Housing Disability Panel indicated that further work is required to improve accessibility and communication and engagement with service users.
- 2.34 Housing services have become more accessible in recent years. Officers have access to a telephone-based language interpretation service. Housing information, including tenancy agreements, can be provided in a range of formats, including an 'easy-to-read' format for those who have difficulties with written language. The Committee particularly welcomed innovations in the Repairs service, which now gives operatives access to sign-language interpreters through a tablet computer.
- 2.35 The further development of the council's online services has improved the accessibility of housing services to vulnerable and disabled people. Repairs are now able to be reported through the council's website. The Housing Options website which allows residents to register on the housing waiting list and bid for properties includes translation and text re-sizing options. Online services are generally more accessible and the development of these services was welcomed by members and service users; however the Housing Disability Panel highlighted that the accessibility of services could be improved further. More complex repairs are not able to be reported through the council's website and have to be reported by telephone, which is not an accessible communication method for all people. It was suggested that a webchat feature would be a more accessible alternative.

- 2.36 The Committee considered that all transactional processes should be able to be carried out entirely online; however it is also important to maintain alternative ways of accessing housing services. Half of those unable to access the internet are disabled; so whilst online services may be more accessible to many people, the council must still make provision for residents who are not able to access the internet.
- 2.37 **It is recommended that key online customer processes be reviewed to identify and close gaps in accessibility. All housing transactions should be able to be carried out without use of a telephone or having to visit council offices; the introduction of a webchat function would be welcomed. However, it should also be recognised that exclusively online services are not accessible to all.**
- 2.38 The Committee gave particular consideration to the accessibility of the Housing Options service. It was welcomed that the Housing Options website has an automatic bid feature for those who are unable to routinely access the bidding system. The Committee noted the difficulties that vulnerable and disabled people face when bidding for a home and thought that more could be done to support them in this process. The Housing Options website details if a property has level access or if it has been adapted, however it was reported that this information is inconsistently provided by Area Housing Offices. The Committee thought that this was not acceptable and welcomed that work to increase the quality of this information received from Area Housing Offices was already underway.
- 2.39 The Committee also considered small changes which could make a difference to vulnerable and disabled tenants. The Committee heard instances of when tenants had successfully bid for properties and thought that repairs and adaptations would be made before they moved in, only to find that these had not been carried out. The Committee thought that this caused unnecessary anguish and could be mitigated by simply consulting and agreeing with the tenant the works to be carried out and confirming these in writing. Providing timescales of when works would be completed would also help to set the expectations of tenants in advance of their move.
- 2.40 **The Committee recommends that, when moving into a council property, disabled and vulnerable tenants should be consulted on the repairs and adaptations that are required to the property. The works to be carried out should be confirmed in writing with indicative timescales to ensure that both the council and the tenant have mutually agreed expectations.**
- 2.41 Overall the evidence received suggested that although the council has developed the accessibility of housing services, disabled and vulnerable peoples' experiences of those services can vary considerably. Some of the service users interviewed provided examples of particularly poor service from the council's housing services. One resident advised that a council contractor had removed her wheelchair without replacement, resulting in her being unable to leave her home for several days. Another resident advised of a poor experience she had with a housing officer, who had repeatedly arranged repairs at times when she had previously stated she was unavailable due to medical appointments. One resident required adaptations to her home however had not been offered adequate help in accessing these despite raising the issue with the council. Service users reported that they sometimes found housing services difficult to navigate and spoke of being passed between different teams. It was evident that although staff receive training on disability issues and additional services for vulnerable residents are in place, this does not always ensure a positive experience for service users.
- 2.42 The council's housing services generally have good levels of customer satisfaction; with repairs satisfaction currently at around 90% and the Resident Satisfaction Surveys conducted every two years consistently rating overall tenant satisfaction at over 70%. However, the Committee

appreciates that sometimes things will go wrong and is concerned that poor customer service can have a significant detrimental effect on vulnerable and disabled people, more so than other residents. Service users reported feeling frustrated, and commented that poor experiences could discourage vulnerable and disabled people from accessing services which they need and are entitled to. The Committee thought that sharing and reviewing service standards with disabled and vulnerable people would help to ensure that officers and service users have shared expectations of how the council should work with vulnerable and disabled people. The Committee did not consider service standards as part of the review, however it is suggested that these should align with the council's agreed principles of people-centred services and co-production, and officers should be aware of how these principles correspond to their own role.

- 2.43 It was also thought that resident feedback mechanisms could be explored with service user groups. Although the council has an established complaints procedure, the Housing Disability Panel commented that a method of providing more immediate feedback on interactions with the housing service would help to shape services in a more direct way, and would ensure that positive interactions are also recognised.
- 2.44 **It is recommended that housing services publish the standards which they seek to meet when communicating and engaging with disabled and vulnerable people, and should consider reviewing service standards and feedback mechanisms with service users.**
- 2.45 The Committee considered how housing services engage with vulnerable and disabled people. The council's housing services have established several resident groups, including the Housing Disability Panel, which is facilitated by Disability Action in Islington. This provides a forum for service users to review and feedback on housing services for disabled residents; however, evidence received from the Housing Disability Panel indicated that housing services' engagement with vulnerable and disabled people is variable. Although it was recognised that some teams champion the needs of service users, it was commented that other teams take a more bureaucratic view, particularly when dealing with more complex issues. The council's Corporate Plan commits the council to co-production and person-centred services; however the Housing Disability Panel thought that this was not applied consistently, commenting that consultation with service users sometimes appeared to be an afterthought, rather than a key stage in the decision-making process.
- 2.46 The Committee agrees that involving vulnerable and disabled people in how services are planned and delivered is the best way in ensuring that services work for vulnerable people. This is not only relevant to how new services are designed, but how existing services are monitored and evaluated. Given the financial challenges facing the council, it is recognised that services may undergo a period of transformation in the coming years. It is important that service users, particularly the most vulnerable, are asked about their priorities as part of this process.
- 2.47 Meaningful engagement with vulnerable people requires sustained effort and patience. The Housing Disability Panel commented on the need to empower disabled and vulnerable people; these people may not be confident in expressing their views, however engaging vulnerable people in consultations and service reviews not only ensures that housing services are designed to meet their needs, but provides added value by helping to build the skills and confidence of those taking part. The Housing Disability Panel is also keen for service users to be involved in the delivery of services; commenting that this would make services more empathetic to the needs of vulnerable people, and that disabled people would respond well to housing services being provided by other disabled people.

- 2.48 **The Committee recommends that consideration be given to how the voices of vulnerable people can be heard earlier in decision-making processes on procurement, commissioning and designing services; and how vulnerable people can be further involved in service monitoring and evaluation.**

Identifying the needs of vulnerable and disabled people

- 2.49 There are around 4,000 residents flagged by the housing service as being vulnerable. The Committee heard that the vast majority of these residents had been identified through self-referral, often during a transaction with the service. For example, residents are asked about their vulnerabilities when completing a change of circumstances form or moving property. The extent of their vulnerability is self-defined by the residents themselves. Although housing officers advised that staff do occasionally identify vulnerable residents who were previously unknown to the service, the Committee expressed concern that housing services are overly reliant on residents themselves identifying their vulnerabilities to the council. There was a worry that residents who do not access housing services frequently may have needs that are unknown to the council and are not being adequately met.
- 2.50 The Committee considered the significant opportunities the housing service has to engage with disabled and vulnerable people and identify their needs. The Housing Operations service carries out 14,000 home visits each year in relation to income and other tenancy matters. Officers meet with new tenants during the sign-up process and then carry out a home visit four weeks after their move. Caretakers interact with residents on a daily basis. The gas team should visit all properties with gas appliances annually to carry out a service, although it was highlighted that a number of tenants would not allow the council to access their property. Frontline staff receive training on identifying the needs of vulnerable and disabled tenants, as well as how to identify safeguarding issues and other risks, and referrals to support services are made as required.
- 2.51 Although the Committee noted their concerns that some vulnerable people could be unknown to housing services, it was agreed that there are many opportunities for staff to identify disabled and vulnerable people. The Committee welcomed that staff receive training on identification and referral mechanisms, however, concerns were raised that some officers did not have a detailed understanding of the specific needs of vulnerable and disabled people and how these could have practical implications on how they deliver their services. For example, evidence from the Repairs service highlighted that housing services hold data on vulnerabilities rather than resident needs. Officers commented that sometimes it was difficult for staff to know how to react to this information; for example although staff may know that a resident has mobility issues, they may not know if they require access to specialist equipment; staff may know that residents have communication difficulties, but may not know how best to communicate with them. In addition, members of the Housing Disability Panel reported inconsistencies in how the statutory requirement for services to make reasonable adjustments was applied.
- 2.52 It is thought that a more effective service could be provided to residents if staff received more relevant information on how to support residents with additional needs. Reviewing the way in which staff are trained alongside service users such as the Housing Disability Panel would be an effective method of ensuring that staff have access to the information they need.
- 2.53 **It is therefore recommended that Housing Services should review how staff are trained, kept up to date, and access information on how to best support residents with additional needs. This review should be in conjunction with service users, to identify knowledge and skills gaps and agree how these should be resolved. Staff need to understand how additional needs will have a practical impact on their work and their interactions with residents.**

- 2.54 In addition to reviewing staff training, it is thought that developing the data held by housing services would assist staff when delivering services to vulnerable and disabled people. It has already been highlighted that reviewing definitions of vulnerability may help to develop the council's housing services. Similarly, holding detailed data based on resident needs, rather than vulnerabilities, would support officers in providing more customer-focused services. Officers advised that such information would also generate efficiencies by helping to clarify resource requirements in advance of services being carried out. It is thought that such a system would be most effective if multiple services were able to access and contribute to the data, as this would support integrated working between services in more complex scenarios.
- 2.55 **A comprehensive needs matrix should be developed to enable housing services to record the needs of vulnerable and disabled people in greater detail. This will help to ensure that staff have the right resources and are aware of how they need to adapt their services for those with additional needs.**
- 2.56 The Committee also considered how housing services could develop more detailed information on the needs of vulnerable and disabled people. It was thought that relying on self-referral mechanisms would not be sufficient to capture the complex and unique needs of residents. Officers noted that staff on estates such as caretakers provide a vital link between residents and the council, and the Committee suggests that developing this relationship further will greatly assist capturing detailed information on resident needs. It was also commented that residents have a great deal of knowledge about their local area and community, particularly in relation to neighbours with additional needs and issues which may affect them more acutely than others, such as anti-social behaviour, dog fouling, trip hazards, and so on. Harnessing this information would be of significant benefit to the council's housing services. Age UK also commented on the potential of the community in supporting vulnerable people, and advised of their long-term ambition to develop local volunteering schemes which would allow care to be provided by others in the community.
- 2.57 It is essential for estates staff to have their own 'patch' to allow relationships with the community to develop. The Committee thought that a more 'holistic' housing operations service, delivered on a more local basis, would support the development of stronger relationships between officers and residents. A holistic service would deliver a greater range of support services alongside housing services, for example, it was suggested that Area Housing Offices could help residents with cognitive disabilities to complete forms, or help residents who are unable to access the internet to access online services. This would not only contribute to the wellbeing of tenants, but help them to manage their tenancy, finances, and to live independently.
- 2.58 **In order to develop the relationship between the council and local communities, consideration should be given to making the Housing Operations service more 'holistic', whereby a greater range of services are provided to residents on a more local basis.**
- 2.59 The data on resident needs could also be informed by existing data held by other departments. The Housing Disability Panel reported how frustrating it was for disabled people to have to repeat their needs to multiple officers, particularly when the council was already aware of these. Officers advised that these issues sometimes arose because social services may not be able to share sensitive information with housing, or housing may not be able to share sensitive information with contractors under the council's existing data sharing agreements. However, the Housing Disability Panel suggested that it may be possible to share information on resident needs without reference to more sensitive data on vulnerabilities and personal circumstances. Whilst the security of sensitive data is essential, the Committee considered that barriers to accessing data should be minimised as far as possible to enable the council and its contractors to provide good quality services. This may involve thinking innovatively about data sharing agreements and how information is held. Services will also need to consider issues related to the ownership of data, to ensure that residents remain in control of how their information is processed.

- 2.60 **The council should review its information governance responsibilities and data sharing agreements to ensure that the support needs of residents are known to the services that need this information. It is important that housing services and contractors can access residents' data securely to enable them to provide high quality services to vulnerable people.**

Benchmarking services and identifying best practice

- 2.61 The Committee was keen to ensure that the council's housing services for vulnerable people were in line with those of other housing providers and incorporated best practice approaches. Evidence was received from Partners for Improvement in Islington; Homes for Haringey; and Peter Bedford Housing Association, a specialist housing provider for vulnerable people. The Committee was particularly interested in the services provided by Partners, given that they manage 6,400 street properties owned by the council. The Committee thought that these residents should not receive a significantly different service to those in directly-managed properties.
- 2.62 All Partners properties were general needs properties and were not specifically designed for those with support or care needs. Partners was aware that 21% of its tenants had a disability or impairment, however thought the true number would be higher. As with the council, Partners was largely reliant on self-referral of vulnerabilities. Partners only held the specific details of one third of tenants with a disability or impairment, with many choosing not to disclose this information to Partners.
- 2.63 Partners acknowledged that it was not a specialist in providing support services to vulnerable people. As a result Partners was keen to work with Social Services to ensure that appropriate referrals were made when required. The importance of joint working with social care and other agencies was a key theme which emerged from all of the housing providers that gave evidence to the review. Islington Council's own housing service is very well positioned to work in partnership with adult social care given that they sit within the same directorate.
- 2.64 Partners provided enhanced services to vulnerable people which were similar to the council's own. Heating and hot water repairs were prioritised for vulnerable people, with a 24 hour response target. Partners had a budget for discretionary repairs and adaptations, and also had a rolling programme of visiting older and vulnerable tenants. The Committee noted that Homes for Haringey also offered many services similar to those offered by Islington Council, including an enhanced repairs service, a handyperson scheme, and a programme of visiting elderly and vulnerable tenants.
- 2.65 The evidence received from all housing providers indicated that it was commonplace for frontline staff to attend training courses on identifying the needs of vulnerable people. The council's housing officers attended such courses, as well as courses on mental health first aid, safeguarding, disability awareness, deafness awareness, diversity, and managing conflict.
- 2.66 The Committee identified that Peter Bedford Housing Association demonstrated good practice in a number of areas. As the housing provider operated on a relatively small scale, it was able to interact with all of its 275 tenants on a semi-regular basis. Vulnerable residents were supported in participating in community activities, taking up volunteering opportunities and developing relationships with their neighbours. The Committee was particularly impressed with the ethos of the housing association, which was focused on providing integrated care, holistic support, mutual trust, empathy, and empowering vulnerable residents to live independently. Some of the services provided by Peter Bedford Housing Association were already provided by the council. Peter Bedford Housing Association commented on the importance of incorporating the needs of vulnerable people into major incident response plans; the Committee was reassured that this

work had already been carried out by the council. Peter Bedford also noted that documents for residents were produced in an easy to read format; Islington Council also did this for key documents.

- 2.67 Peter Bedford Housing Association highlighted that it was particularly difficult for vulnerable people to save for private sector deposits and suggested that Islington Council could support vulnerable people further in this area; it was commented that the London Borough of Hackney provided vulnerable people with loans and grants for this purpose.
- 2.68 Overall the Committee considered that the council's housing services for vulnerable people were largely in line with those of other housing providers. However, the Committee particularly welcomed the ethos of Peter Bedford Housing Association, which was focused on providing holistic support to vulnerable people. It is hoped that the recommendations in this report will contribute towards making the council's housing services more responsive to the needs of vulnerable people.

Joint working between Housing and other services

- 2.69 Joint working between Housing and other agencies is mandated by law; the Care Act introduced a statutory requirement for adult social services, children's services, the NHS, and housing services to collaborate and cooperate. Local authorities are also required to work together to assist transitions across borders and from children's to adult's services.
- 2.70 The relationships that Housing has with other services are formalised in a number of joint working protocols. These include protocols and guidance documents mutually agreed between Housing and Adult Social Services, Housing and Children's Services, and documents formalising how joint working should take place between various organisations around specific issues, such as Mental Health, Hoarding, Domestic Violence, and the Independent Futures services for care leavers. The Committee did not scrutinise the content of joint working protocols in detail, however these covered how services should work together in terms of communication, escalation processes, referrals, and information sharing; and how housing services should deal with issues such as access to properties, income recovery, eviction, and so on.
- 2.71 Joint working was not only limited to health and care services. The Committee welcomed partnership work with the Planning section to develop and implement housing standards which prioritise accessibility. Islington Council policy requires 10% of new homes to be wheelchair accessible, and all homes to be built to the National Housing Standard, which replaced the previous Lifetime Homes standard. This ensures that properties are able to be adapted as the needs of their residents change, as well as providing easy access and a WC at ground level. The Committee recognised that many older properties were difficult to adapt and could present a risk to their tenants who may understandably want to stay in their own home; and hoped that modern design standards would support residents to live in new properties independently.
- 2.72 The Committee heard practical examples of joint working in action. The Housing Options team reported that they had a good working relationship with social services, the Islington Learning Disabilities Partnership, Age UK and the Police; and high-risk cases were regularly discussed with these agencies. On the other hand, the Housing Disability Panel suggested that, from a service user perspective, joint working was not always effective. This was demonstrated by having to repeat information to different services.
- 2.73 The Committee found that there is a great deal of joint working between the council's Housing Services and other services, however thought that some relationships could be made more effective. Staff at the Hornsey Road Reception Centre commented that communication between services could be improved. An example was given of a homeless 18 year old in the centre who had not lived independently before; staff thought that this young person needed some additional

guidance and support but found it difficult to action change in other services. It also became apparent during the visit that staff were not aware that another resident's application for re-housing had been accepted by the council.

- 2.74 Lack of communication between services can be detrimental to vulnerable people's wellbeing. Reception centre staff highlighted that one particular issue was hospitals directly discharging patients to reception centres. This may happen if the patient is homeless, or is unable to return to their own property. There had been instances where reception centre staff were not advised of what support or care these vulnerable people needed; these people generally arrived at the Reception Centre by ambulance without clothing or food and sometimes were not able to go out and get the supplies they needed. The situation was exacerbated if these residents arrived on Friday afternoon, as it was difficult to liaise with the hospital or social services because staff had left for the weekend. As a result the Reception Centre had started demanding that a care plan was provided in advance of these residents being accepted; however the Committee thought that this area warranted a higher-level review of how housing, social services, and the NHS liaise in relation to hospital discharge arrangements.
- 2.75 **It is recommended that liaison between housing, social services and NHS services be reviewed in regards to hospital discharge arrangements; to ensure that reception centres and other relevant housing services are aware of care needs and that disabled and vulnerable people are fully supported.**
- 2.76 It was also considered that further joint working was needed with the council's housing contractors to ensure that they adequately meet the needs of vulnerable people. The Housing Disability Panel commented that the service received from contractors was inconsistent, that they seemingly were not aware of their duty to make reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act 2010, and that they were often not aware of disabled and vulnerable people's needs. The Committee suggests that these issues could be partially addressed through more comprehensive information sharing agreements, however acknowledges that there may also be performance issues which need addressing. Islington Council contractors should be held to the same standards as council staff, and their services to vulnerable people and compliance with disability legislation should be monitored through contract management processes, with enforcement action taken if necessary.
- 2.77 **It is recommended that housing services should set clear expectations for contractors about working with disabled and vulnerable residents; this should include standards for staff training and accessibility. Compliance should be enforceable and regularly monitored to ensure that contractors are compliant with relevant disability legislation and that they are responsive to the needs of vulnerable and disabled people. Housing contractors should also be required to report any welfare concerns they have to the Housing service.**

Other findings: the experiences of carers

- 2.78 The Committee considered the views and experiences of carers, who have a unique insight into the housing issues affecting vulnerable people and could also be vulnerable themselves. Evidence was received from Age UK Islington, which is commissioned by the council to manage the Islington Carers Hub, providing a one stop shop for advice and support, as well as workshops, training opportunities and facilitated support groups. Age UK was also able to provide carers assessments, help with completing forms, benefits advice, and a flexible breaks fund.
- 2.79 There are 16,311 carers in Islington which represents around 8% of the borough's population. However, only around 2,000 carers are registered with the Carers Hub; Age UK was concerned

that there was a number of carers, and by extension vulnerable people, who were not receiving support or advice on care issues. To increase their client base Age UK advertised the Carers Hub in GP surgeries, Job Centres, and other community buildings; as a result the organisation was registering 37 new carers a month. The organisation was also proactive in identifying vulnerable people's needs, and regularly made calls to vulnerable people and their carers to establish if they needed any additional support.

2.80 Age UK Islington had carried out a survey of carers to gauge their opinions on housing services for vulnerable people. It was found that 13% of the organisation's casework was housing related. This could relate to council housing, housing association properties, or private housing. Age UK surveyed 36 carers and identified four main housing-related themes; rehousing, repairs, money (i.e. financial support with housing and utilities costs), and aids and adaptations. Feedback on the council's services was generally mixed. It was reported that some carers were unaware of the services the council offered to vulnerable people. It was also highlighted that carers themselves faced specific housing issues, with Age UK regularly providing advice on succession rights, which could be problematic in the event of a vulnerable person's death. The Committee welcomed the work of Age UK Islington in supporting carers, noting that carers had a very important role in supporting the wellbeing of vulnerable people.

2.81 Other findings: service reviews

2.82 The Housing Operations service is to carry out a fundamental review of the council's housing offer over the next year. This is intended to review how Housing works with other services and how the service could be more personalised and user-led, with a focus on the integration of services and early-intervention, to support the independence and resilience of vulnerable people. The Committee consider that vulnerable and disabled people must be engaged in this review; both through representative organisations such as Disability Action in Islington and on an individual basis. It is important to ensure that people with a wide range of vulnerabilities are consulted.

2.83 **Service user groups should be invited to participate in the forthcoming review of the Council's housing management services, and other service reviews as appropriate.**

3. Conclusions

- 3.1 The Committee welcomes the council provides a wide range of specialist housing options and additional housing services to disabled and vulnerable people. However, it is considered that these services could be made more effective. One particular area for improvement is communication and engagement, which appears to be at the heart of many of the issues raised by both residents and officers.
- 3.2 Developing communication between housing, other services, and contractors will help to ensure that staff have access to comprehensive, accurate and practical information on resident needs, which will support them in delivering housing services more effectively. Further communication and engagement with disabled and vulnerable people will help to ensure that services are meeting their needs, that residents are aware of the services available and how to access them, and what can be expected from those services.
- 3.3 The Committee has made 14 recommendations in response to the evidence received. It is hoped that the Committee's recommendations will assist the council in providing more effective and more personalised housing services, which will support the overall wellbeing of vulnerable people and help to maintain or develop their independence and resilience.

3.4 In carrying out the review, the Committee met with officers, service users, and other housing providers to gain a balanced view. The Committee would like to thank the witnesses that gave evidence in relation to the scrutiny. The Executive is asked to endorse the Committee's recommendations.

SCRUTINY INITIATION DOCUMENT (SID)
Review: Housing Services for Vulnerable People
Scrutiny Review Committee: Housing Scrutiny Committee
Director leading the review: Maxine Holdsworth, Service Director, Housing Needs and Strategy
Lead officer: Paul Byer, Service Development Manager
Overall aim: To review the effectiveness of the housing services the council provides to vulnerable people
<p>Objectives of the review:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To identify and assess the housing options and additional housing services available to vulnerable people • To confirm that the council's housing services are accessible to vulnerable people • To assess how vulnerable people and their particular needs are identified by housing services • To evaluate how the council's housing services communicate and engage with vulnerable people • To benchmark the council's housing services for vulnerable people against those of other housing providers and to identify best practice • To review the extent of joint working with adult social care and others.
<p>How is the review to be carried out:</p> <p><u>Scope of the review</u></p> <p>The review will focus on:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Vulnerabilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An overview of the social care offer to borough residents and how this relates to housing services • Definitions of vulnerability, identification mechanisms, the types of additional support required and how housing services can be best tailored towards vulnerable people • How the needs of vulnerable people can be prioritised within the housing service

2. Housing services

- The housing options for vulnerable people and how housing is allocated
- The additional services available to vulnerable council tenants, Partners tenants, leaseholders, and others, including those with mental health issues; including how services are developed
- The effectiveness and accessibility of additional services such as the assistive decorative scheme, discretionary repairs, the handyperson scheme, the adaptation service and floating support service
- How housing services communicate and engage with vulnerable people, including customer service and complaints procedures
- Advocacy services available for vulnerable people at risk of losing their home

3. Partnership work

- Cross-service work between Housing and Adult Social Services and others
- Partnership work with other housing providers: i.e. Circle Housing providing sheltered housing
- Partnership work with TMOs and the voluntary sector

4. The performance, sustainability and value for money of services

- Comparing and benchmarking our services to those of other boroughs and housing providers
- How the performance of services is monitored
- The views and experiences of service users
- The resources available for vulnerable housing and additional services
- Risks and opportunities, such as legislative change and new technologies
- Identifying possible service improvements

Types of evidence

1. Documentary evidence including:

- Contextual report/presentation
- Case studies
- Demographic information on the vulnerable people accessing the council's housing services
- Relevant service specifications, policies, performance indicators and other documentation

2. Witness evidence including:

- Officers from across the council's housing services
- Service providers
- Service users and representatives of vulnerable tenants, such as the Housing Disability Panel and the Older Person's Champion
- Islington Carer's Hub
- Relevant voluntary and community sector organisations
- Another local authority, either a neighbouring borough or a best practice authority
- A good practice housing association

3. Scrutiny visit as required

Additional information:

The Council's Corporate Plan states 'We want to ensure that everyone in Islington has a place to live that is affordable, decent and secure'. It states that a priority of the Council is 'making Islington a place where our residents have a good quality of life' and this will be achieved by supporting vulnerable residents and carers and helping residents to live healthy independent lives. The Corporate Plan is underpinned by the council's principles of early intervention and prevention, people-centred services, co-production, strong partnerships, making every contact count, and being employment focussed.

The Committee has decided to undertake this review in the context of the significant financial challenges facing the Council; to ensure that the housing services provided to vulnerable tenants are effective and accessible at a time when budgets are under increasing pressure.

In carrying out the review the committee will consider equalities implications and resident impacts identified by witnesses. The Executive is required to have due regard to these, and any other relevant implications, when responding to the review recommendations.

Programme

<u>Key output:</u>	<u>To be submitted to Committee on:</u>
1. Scrutiny Initiation Document	11 July 2016 & 6 September 2016
2. Draft Recommendations	28 March 2017
3. Final Report	20 June 2017

Housing Scrutiny Committee – Work Plan

11 July 2017		
Who / What	Organisation / Purpose	Other key information
Maxine Holdsworth, Service Director, Housing Needs and Strategy	To introduce the scrutiny initiation document and to advise on the context of the review.	The SID was referred to the Housing Disability Panel and subsequently agreed following amendment.

6 September 2016		
Who / What	Organisation / Purpose	Other key information
Paul Byer, Service Development Manager	To provide an introduction to the support services offered by the Housing service to vulnerable residents, and other contextual information.	To meet SID objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To identify and assess the housing options and additional housing services available to vulnerable people
Claudia Thompson, Assistant Director, Adults Integrated Community Services	Adult Social Services – To provide an overview of the social care context in Islington and to describe the additional needs and challenges faced by vulnerable residents.	To be supported by written information compiled by Tessa Cole, Improvement and Efficiency Programme Manager, and Michele Chew, Head of Quality and Performance. To meet SID objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To review the extent of joint working with adult social care and others.

17 October 2016

Who / What	Organisation / Purpose	Other key information
Cora Nicholls, Housing Options Manager, and Vicky Manser, Principal Re-Housing Manager	Housing Needs and Strategy – on the work undertaken by the service on supporting vulnerable people.	To meet SID objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To identify and assess the housing options and additional housing services available to vulnerable people • To assess how vulnerable people and their particular needs are identified by housing services • To evaluate how the council's housing services communicate and engage with vulnerable people • To review the extent of joint working with adult social care and others

1 December 2016

Who / What	Organisation / Purpose	Other key information
Jon Farrant, Head of Tenancy and Estate Services	Housing Operations – on the work undertaken by the service on supporting vulnerable people, including referrals to advocacy organisations and Social Services.	To meet SID objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To identify and assess the housing options and additional housing services available to vulnerable people • To assess how vulnerable people and their particular needs are identified by housing services • To evaluate how the council's housing services communicate and engage with vulnerable people • To review the extent of joint working with adult social care and others
Glenn McCorkindale, Property Services Programme Manager	Property Services – on the work undertaken by the service on supporting vulnerable people.	

Representative of Peter Bedford Housing Association	Peter Bedford Housing Association – to review the services for vulnerable people provided by a good practice Housing Association.	To meet SID objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To benchmark the council's housing services for vulnerable people against those of other housing providers and to identify best practice
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10 January 2017

Who / What	Organisation / Purpose	Other key information
Housing Disability Panel representatives	Housing Disability Panel – to provide information from a service user perspective.	To meet SID objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To confirm that the council's housing services are accessible to vulnerable people To evaluate how the council's housing services communicate and engage with vulnerable people
Age UK – Carer's Representatives	Age UK – To provide information from a carer's perspective.	
Service users	Open invitation for service users to attend and provide evidence.	

2 February 2017

Who / What	Organisation / Purpose	Other key information
Representative of another local authority	To benchmark the council's housing services for vulnerable people to that of another local authority.	To meet SID objectives: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To benchmark the council's housing services for vulnerable people against those of other housing providers and to identify best practice
Partners representative	Partners for Improvement in Islington – on the additional services offered to vulnerable Partners tenants.	

Scrutiny visit:

Visit to Reception Centre accommodation at 305 Hornsey Road – 28 February 2017

Key dates:

28 March 2017: Draft Recommendations

20 June 2017: Final Report