

Equalities Monitoring

Housing Service

Annual Report - 2022-23



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1. Introduction

The housing service covers a wide range of statutory services from homelessness prevention and housing options, a housing register (waiting list), temporary accommodation and disabled facilities grants.

The service has several strategies and policies which underpin the work of the teams, including but not limited to:

- Housing Strategy 2023-2028,
- Homelessness Strategy 2022-2027,
- Rough Sleeping Strategy (dates),
- Housing Allocation Policy *under review
- Housing Assistance Policy
- DA New Burdens (date)

The housing options team includes a single person and rough sleeping team, the housing register team and a team of housing options officers who work with service users to prevent and relieve homelessness, as well as to ensure available properties are allocated as per the Council's housing allocations policy.

The housing management team manage the Council's temporary housing stock into which homeless households who are owed an accommodation duty, are placed. The team also provide specialised support and assistance to service users who have fled domestic abuse and to those who have previously been sleeping rough.

The disabled facilities grant (DFG) team administer grants to help service users pay for adaptations to their home to help them to be able to live with more independence.

2. Performance against public sector equality duty

Eliminating discrimination, harassment, victimisation, and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act.

Along with other services within the Council, recruitment has been undertaken in the service in the last 12 months and has been blind recruitment, where characteristics such as age or ethnicity, are not shared in advance of a formal interview.

There is a zero-tolerance approach taken to any instances of discrimination, harassment, or victimisation, from staff and from customers using the service. Where there is an incident of this, action is taken immediately.

The public sector equality duty is a key consideration for officers when determining applications for homelessness assistance.

The service is aware of the requirements of the Equality Act 2010 and this it is unlawful to discriminate, treat some people less fairly or put them at a disadvantage.

Equality Impact Assessments are used by the service to inform decisions on changes affecting the service including as an example, an assessment of the impact of proposed changes to the housing allocation policy which will be consulted on from December 2023 to February 2024.

Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a relevant protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

As above, the housing service has recently reviewed its housing allocation policy, with proposed changes subject to a formal equalities impact assessment.

Training is ongoing for team members on programmes to address unconscious bias and promote inclusivity.

Opportunities for advancement and promotion within the team have been made available to all members, and support has been offered to those seeking to apply.

The application of the Council's flexible working policies, also enable work arrangements to be accommodating of personal and family needs, ensuring a commitment to a strong work / life balance.

Fostering good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

The leadership of the housing service is committed to promoting good relations between groups within the wider community. Role modelling this to team members and ensuring an ongoing commitment to personal learning and development in this area is a priority.

3. Equalities Monitoring

A range of information is collected by the Housing Service which helps to understand who is accessing our service and where available the outcomes for those who access the service compared to the Bracknell Forest population.

The recent Equalities Impact Assessment for the proposed changes to the housing register has identified the following:

Disability Equality – this can include physical, mental health, learning or sensory disabilities and includes conditions such as dementia as well as hearing or sight impairment.

Analysis of the Housing Register shows that disabled households accounted for 21% of applicants in 2021/22, increasing to 23% of all applicants in 2022/23.

Disabled households are more like to be single and require a one-bedroom property. Analysis of the housing register shows that 72% of disabled applicants require a one bed property and 11% a two-bed property. 17% require a larger 3+ bed property. Some disabled people live with a carer, or may be adult or dependent members of a larger family households.

In 2022/23, 24% of general needs properties were let to disabled households and over 50% of sheltered properties. In total, disabled households received 30% of all properties let.

The 2021 Homelessness Strategy found that in 2019/20, 12.9% of homeless applicants reported physical ill health issues and disability and 14% of homeless applicants were claiming benefit on the basis of long term illness or disability.

Racial Equality

2021 Census data showing ethnic breakdown of Bracknell Forest population: 86% white British or other, 7% Asian, 2.5% Black British, African or Caribbean, 3% mixed ethnicity, 1.5% other.

Housing register. A breakdown of applicants by ethnicity shows: 83.4% white British or other, 2.6% Asian, 4.8% Black British, African or Caribbean, 3% mixed ethnicity, 2.2 other. Therefore, Black British, African or Caribbean households are slightly over-represented on the housing register and Asian households are under-represented.

Analysis of the housing register shows that Black and Asian applicants are more likely to be overcrowded and are over-represented among those needing a larger home of three or more bedrooms. 6.2% of those needing a larger home are Black British, African or Caribbean households and 3.7% are Asian households (compared to 4.8% and 2.6% of all applicants respectively).

Black households, in particular, are over-represented among homeless households. The 2021 Homelessness Strategy found that 5.2% of homeless applicants were Black British, African or Caribbean households, 1.7% were Asian, 2.3% were mixed ethnicity and 3% were other ethnic groups.

Black British, African or Caribbean households are slightly under-represented in Bands A and B of the housing register. White households and mixed race households are slightly over-represented. Asian households are represented in line with their share of overall applications.

Black and Asian households received a higher share of lettings relative to their share of applications in 2022/23. Other groups (white, mixed and other ethnic groups) have received slightly less than their share of applications.

Gender Inequality

A higher proportion of total applications on the housing register are from female applicants compared to male applicants. Female applicants make up 66% and males 34%.

However, some caution needs to be applied in interpreting this as those recorded as female applicants include women that have made an application on behalf of two adult households as well as lone female headed households.

Women are over-represented in the homelessness statistics, with the Homelessness Strategy finding that women are at higher risk of homelessness.

Female headed households (lone parent households) are highly represented among homeless applicants and those owed a duty.

Older single people that are under-occupying are more likely to be female than male.

Female headed households make up a large proportion of households fleeing domestic abuse who may be placed in refuge accommodation out of borough.

Sexual Orientation Equality

Housing register analysis: 97% of applicants that responded to the question on sexual orientation identified themselves as heterosexual/straight. 2% of applicants described themselves as gay/lesbian and 0.7% as bisexual.

There is some evidence nationally that young LGBTQ+ people have a higher rate of homelessness.

Gender Reassignment

There is no data available in relation to housing register applicants.

National research suggests that Trans people may be particularly at risk of housing crisis and homelessness arising from transphobic reactions and harassment by family, neighbours and members of their local community.

Age Equality

2021 Census data: Older people (65+) make up 15% of the local population (19.4% in South East). This equates to 18% of the adult population (over 16). 14% of the population are young people aged 20-24. Working age people make up 68% of the local population (with those between 25-44 accounting for 36%) .

Housing Register: Age of applicants. The vast majority of applicants (80%) are of working age (25-64), with 60% aged between 25 and 44 years. Younger applicants (19-24) account for 12.7% and older applicants (65+) for 6.3%.

This means that older people are under-represented on the housing register with working age households, especially those between 25-44, heavily over-represented. Young people are slightly below their share of the population.

Homelessness Strategy 2021: 18–34 year olds are significantly over represented in the homelessness figures, with the 35 – 45 year old age group also over represented. Young people aged 18–24 are almost 3 times more likely to become homeless than those aged 45–54.

Older households are highly represented among under-occupying households.

Older households may be living outside of borough but need to return for family support or following breakdown of family support elsewhere.

Older people more likely to be vulnerable, have medical and mobility issues needing wheelchair or accessible accommodation. Older people more likely to have dementia and other care needs requiring specialist accommodation with care and support.

Young people may be vulnerable and require support to manage a tenancy.

Some young people will be care leavers.

Religion or Belief Inequality

2021 Census data: 48% Christian, 40% no religion; 6% no response, 1% Buddhist, 2% Hindu, 2% Muslim, 1% Sikh.

There is research to suggest that some religious groups (Muslims and Hindus) are more likely to live in larger, extended households, which contain more non-dependent members, compared to others (e.g. Christians).

Analysis of applicants affected by the proposed bedroom standard policy has looked at the religion of those affected: 0.7% Buddhist, 34% Christian, 9.3% Prefer not to say, 0.7% Hindu, 2% Muslim, 46.7% No religion, 6% Other.

Pregnancy and Maternity Inequality

Homeless pregnant households are usually considered to be in priority need.

Pregnant households will usually require an additional bedroom once their child is born.

Marriage and Civil Partnership Inequality

2021 Census: 48.3% of people are married or in a civil partnership in Bracknell Forest – slightly higher than SE and England averages. 35.4% have never been married, 2% are married but separated, 9.4% are divorced and 4.9% widowed. 63% are living in a couple and 37% not. Overall, nearly half of Bracknell Forest households are married or in a civil partnership

Census 2021. 26.8% and 33.8% of people lived in single person or two person households. 17.8% and 14.4% lived in three and four person households. 6.3% of people lived in households with five or more people.

Key issues for coming year

The proposed housing allocation policy will be consulted on between December 23 and February 24, with feedback due to be considered and reported to the Council's Executive in Spring once assessed.

The feedback received will be carefully considered to ensure any impact on those with protected characteristics are fully understood and considered prior to finalising the policy.

The proposed policy is a major change to the way homes will be allocated in the Borough with the previous policy having been in place since at least 2016, therefore this is a key issue.

Further to this, the service is continuing to see additional demand due to national and international issues including but not limited to the cost of living, mortgage rate increases and international events.

Actions and mitigations planned:

The new policy is aimed to ensure equality and fairness in the allocation of homes, as well as making it easier to understand, prioritising those in the highest housing need.

In terms of additional demand, the service continues to prevent homelessness, focussing on early prevention and close working with partner agencies to ensure support is available to do so.

4. Performance against the equality objectives

- Inclusive in all we do

The primary function of the housing service is to prevent and relieve homelessness.

Additional to this is the provision of disabled facilities grants via the Housing Assistance Policy which sets out the range of financial assistance that the Council can make available to improve living conditions for vulnerable residents in our community.

This includes assistance to help disabled residents in the Borough adapt and improve their properties to meet their needs or to secure alternative solutions where that is more cost effective.

- Accessible for all

The service has a number of channels for communication, including in person, visits to residents' homes, rough sleeper outreach services, a dedicated phone line and the opportunity to communicate with us via digital channels such as email. We respond to all emails, within, on average 24 hours meaning that those reaching out for help, are not waiting for longer than absolutely necessary.

- Accountable and fair

The statutory functions of the housing service require data to be published nationally on various aspects including numbers of households assisted, in temporary accommodation and rough sleeping, as well as reasons for assistance being sought.

The provision of services is carried out in line with the Council's statutory duties and are in line with the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty.

- Diverse and inclusive workforce

The housing service recruits staff via the Council's recruitment process which means that applications are anonymised, and that limited data on a protected characteristic is obtained prior to an interview. The Housing Services teams are as diverse as possible and are one of the most diverse teams in the council.

5. Views from our customers

1. Customer engagement, consultation and learnings

As stated earlier in this report, a statutory consultation will commence in December 2023 regarding a proposed new housing allocation policy. This follows a period of consultation in the development of the current housing strategy in 2021.

All of our disabled facilities grant customers are provided with a customer satisfaction survey, however only 2 surveys were received in 2022- 2023, albeit with a 100% satisfaction rate. Work is ongoing to improve the response rate with 9 responses received this year to date.

2.Customer satisfaction and learnings

Comments and compliments data is captured primarily by our corporate complaints team and equal opportunities data is not captured currently, however this can be considered for the future.

Analysis has been completed of all 23 formal compliments and comments received by the service in 2022-23.

These complaints, as would be expected cover the wide range of services provided by housing, with the majority of these related to statutory decisions made which are subject to statutory review and appeals processes.

In contrast, 14 compliments were received regarding the range of services mainly for the help and support provided by officers and the services in general.

A gap that has been identified is that the opportunity to give feedback, is not as apparent as the opportunity to register a complaint. This does suggest that there is scope to review the way in which informal feedback can be captured. This would be a wider corporate initiative but could benefit all services.

3.Complaints activity and learnings

Complaints data is captured primarily by our corporate complaints team and equal opportunities data is not captured currently.

Analysis has been completed of all complaints received by the Housing Service in 2022 – 2023 and of the 21 complaints, which were closed at Stage 1, none of these were complaints about discrimination.

There were 2 complaints taken to Stage 2, none of which were complaints about discrimination.

Overall, the level of complaints are relatively low with only 23 complaints made about the service against around 2,000 new applications into the service across the range of services.

Conclusion

The Housing Service provides statutory and non-statutory services to households in Bracknell. Within the legal framework for assessment of housing, homelessness and DFG services, there is little to no scope to amend the outcomes, but it is vitally important that access to the service is promoted to those with protected characteristics, whom, data suggests, are more likely to experience barriers to obtaining assistance.

The Housing service does meet the needs of a diverse population in accordance with the public sector equality duty, however the service needs to continue to ensure these duties are met. It is also noted that the service has a diverse workforce.

There is a gap in terms of the capture of equalities information from those seeking to provide feedback to the service via the corporate complaints process.

A corporate programme to understand the voice of the resident is underway and the Housing Service will support with this project.

