



Information and Advice Strategy

2024 - 2027



LONDON BOROUGH OF
HARROW



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FOREWORD

This Information and Advice Strategy aims to enhance the delivery of information and advice services within our vibrant diverse community. At the heart of the council's ethos lies a steadfast commitment to putting residents first and supporting those in need, which are a key part of our corporate plan and local priorities. The availability and access of information and advice is critical in ensuring that residents have a seamless experience when seeking out help for the services they need.

This strategy has been developed in collaboration with a range of partners from across the information and advice sector in the borough. Harrow is home to a vibrant network of organisations and individuals who tirelessly dedicate themselves to supporting our community. Their incredible work forms the backbone of our efforts to ensure that every resident receives the assistance they require, when they need it most. However, as dedicated as these efforts may be, this strategy recognises that more can be done.

Our vision is clear: to create a future where every interaction with the council and our partners is a positive and empowering experience for residents so that they get the support to thrive. This strategy sets out a roadmap for achieving that vision, outlining key principles to enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of our information and advice services.

This strategy also represents our unwavering commitment to intervening earlier, embracing the principles of prevention to address needs before they escalate. By providing information and advice in an integrated way, both by the council and our valued partners, we aim to empower residents so they are confident to access the help they need.

As we embark on this journey of improving information and advice in Harrow, I extend my gratitude to all those who have contributed to the development of this strategy, and I invite each member of our community to join us in realising our shared vision for a more inclusive, supportive, and resilient Harrow.



Cllr Janet Mote
Portfolio Holder for
Community and Culture

INTRODUCTION

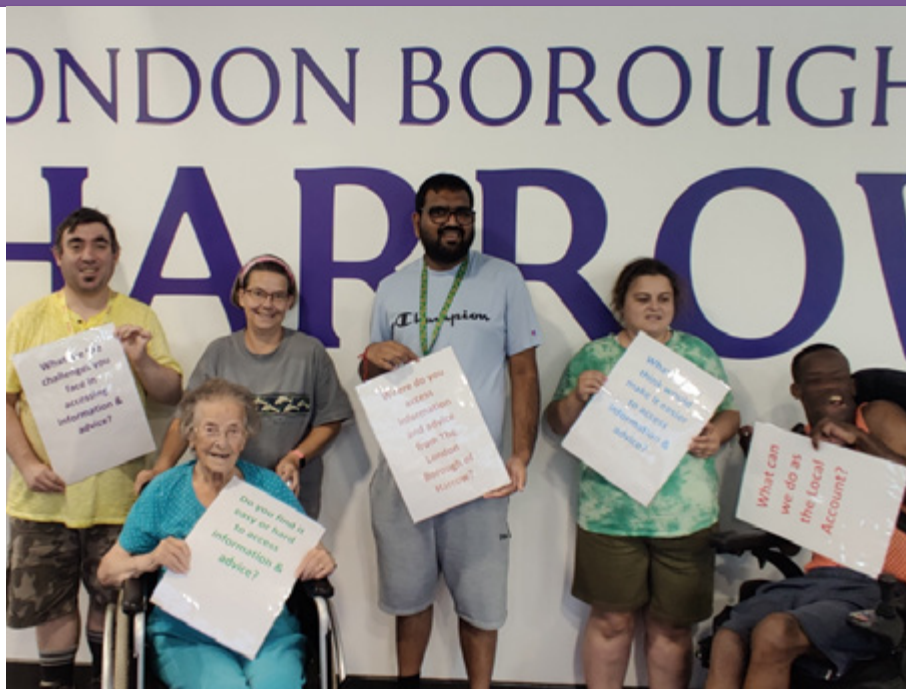
Coming out of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis following global geopolitical events, the need for accessible and reliable information and advice has never been more crucial. High quality information and advice is critical to ensuring that those in need, including Harrow's most vulnerable residents and those in need have the support they need to thrive.

This new Information and Advice Strategy spans a three-year period from 2024 to 2027. While numerous organisations provide information and advice, its effectiveness hinges on resolving residents' issues promptly and ensuring they know where and how to access support. Integration and seamlessness in information and advice provision, both from the council and partners, are imperative to ensure a smooth customer journey for residents.

Effective information and advice delivery empowers individuals to help themselves, thereby alleviating pressure on public services amidst stretched demand. It also serves as a safety net, preventing people from falling through the cracks and ensuring those most in need receive appropriate support. Challenges such as the housing demand across London and escalating rents, as well as the financial strain from the pandemic and global cost of living pressures further underscore the importance of these services.

The strategy envisages a joined-up approach to information and





advice delivery, focusing on improving resolution at the point of access, enhancing referrals, and integrating services within Children's, Adults, and Health domains. A cornerstone is around how we can prevent needs from becoming acute and how we can intervene earlier through the provision of information and advice before needs become acute.

In addition, outreach initiatives such as the Conversation Café model to reach the most vulnerable, and capacity building among information and advice providers to raise collective standards in the information and advice sector, form key parts of the principles highlighted in this strategy. Furthermore, with the recent advancement of Generative AI technology, the strategy calls for

“A cornerstone is how we can intervene earlier before needs become acute”

the council to monitor this fast-moving space so that we can adapt quickly to serve our communities better through the use of emerging AI technologies.

How we provide information and advice and our vision for this provision as put forward in this document is part a wider strategic approach in relation to Harrow's Corporate Plan for 2024-2026 on 'Restoring Pride in Harrow', particularly in terms of the key priorities of putting residents first and supporting those in need. Many of this year's Flagship Actions such as expanding the Conversation Café model, launching our Neighbourhood Resource Centres, strengthening our new Family Hub model, piloting customer service kiosks in libraries, improving our digital inclusion offer, and making our website easier to navigate are integrally linked to this Information and Advice Strategy.

In addition, this strategy is also allied with other key strategic areas including the council's Health and Well Being Strategy, Economic Development Strategy and the ongoing work around improving customer experience, as well as the North West London NHS Health and Care Strategy.



Section 2

The Local Context and Challenges

THE LOCAL CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES

According to the 2021 census, Harrow has 261,200 residents, which represents a 9.3% increase from the previous census in 2011. Harrow is among the 10% most densely populated areas in England and has among the most diverse populations in the UK, in terms of ethnicity, languages, religion and place of birth.

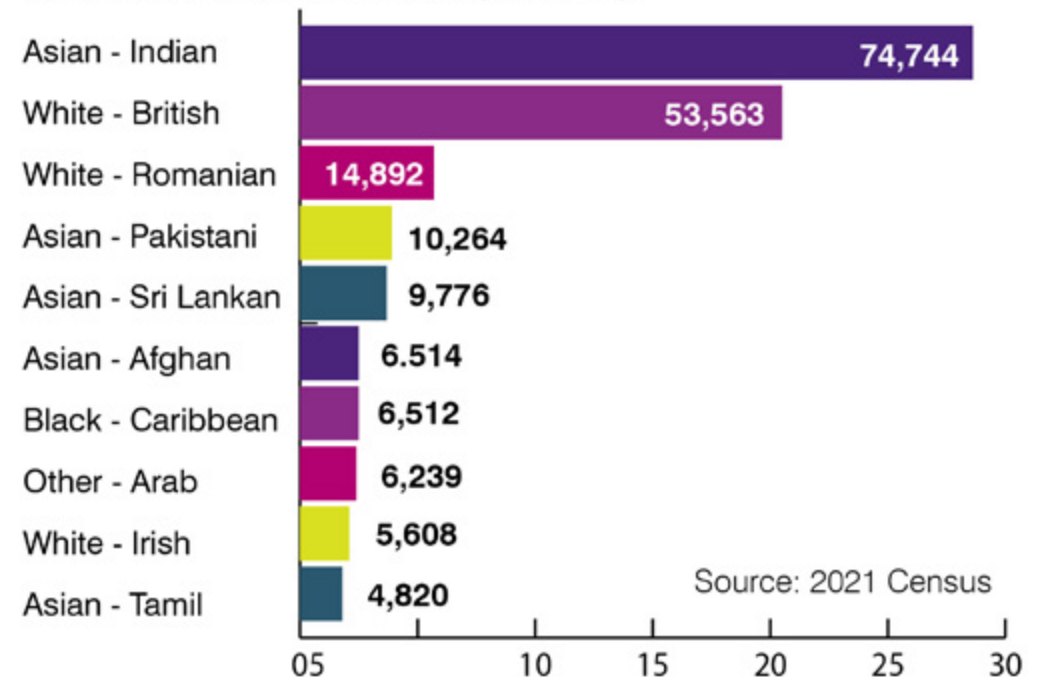
Harrow's ethnic diversity has continued to increase with 28.6% of the population of Asian-Indian heritage, 20.5% White-British, and 5.7 percent of the population of Romanian background. Other common ethnic groups in Harrow include Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Afghan, Black Caribbean, Arab, Irish and Tamil.

One of the largest changes in the population since the 2011 census has been the growth of the Romanian community, which is one of the largest in the UK. The country of birth for the population of Harrow in the 2021 census reveals a large increase in those born in Romania. The number of Harrow residents born in Romania rose from around 4,800 in 2011 (2.0% of the local population) to just under 21,100 in 2021 (8.1%).¹

1. Ethnic Diversity

Harrow's ethnic diversity has continued to increase with 28.6% of the population of Asian-Indian heritage, 20.5% White-British, and 5.7 percent of the population of Romanian background. Other common ethnic groups in Harrow include Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Afghan, Black Caribbean, Arab, Irish and Tamil. One of the largest

Number of Harrow residents by ethnicity



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¹ This country of birth number of 21,100 is higher than the ethnicity data in the 2021 census because some census respondents often self-categorise themselves in another provided category for various reasons.

Overall, the census reveals that 45.2% of Harrow's population is of Asian ethnicity, 36.5% of White heritage including 'Other White' which includes Romanians, 7.3% of Black heritage, 7.2% 'Other' including those of Arab background, and 3.8% of 'Mixed' ethnicity.

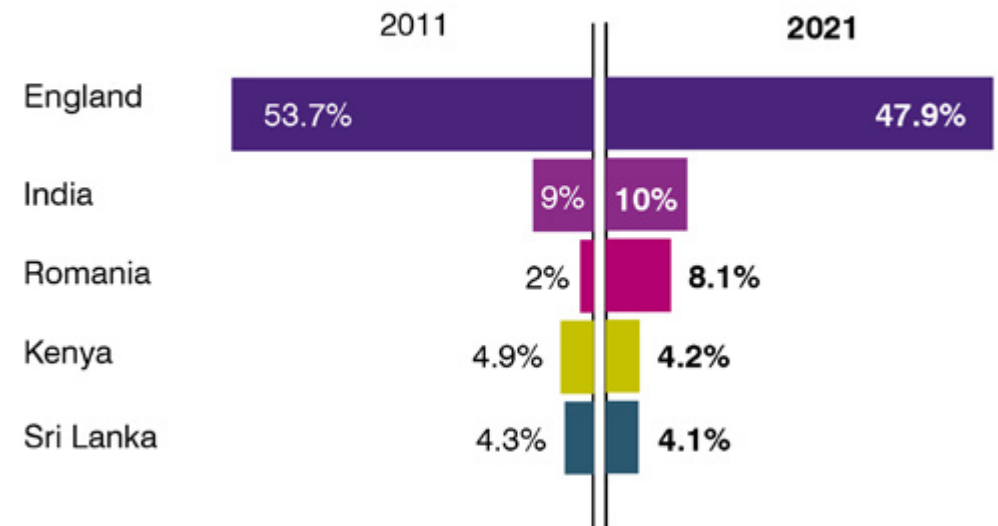
According to the census, the top languages spoken in Harrow after English were Romanian, Gujarati, Tamil, Arabic, Polish, Farsi and Pashto. This aligns with data from the council's own interpretation services which shows that the top five languages that were booked in 2022-2023 were Romanian, Pashto, Gujarati, Arabic and Tamil. It is important to recognise that information and advice provision needs to consider the language of access as well – hence ethnic community organisations are a key asset in being able to reach our diverse populations where there needs to be additional support around language.

2.2. Harrow's Ageing Population

Harrow's population continues to age as the latest census shows that the median age of residents has increased from 36 to 38. In 2021, 14.5% of Harrow residents were 65 or older, which is higher than the London average but lower than average for England as a whole.



PERCENTAGE OF USUAL RESIDENTS BY COUNTRY OF BIRTH



Source: ONS – 2011 and 2021 census

Since the 2011 census, there has been an increase of 19.4% in people aged 65 years and over, an increase of 7.8% in people aged 15 to 64 years.² The aging population has implications for greater needs in a range of areas including general information and advice covering areas as wide as social care or navigating online government systems. According to a Harrow Residents Survey carried out in 2023 among 1,101 respondents by M.E.L Research, online access of information via the council website is a more common method among those aged 25 to 34 (69%) and 35 to 44 (67%) than the overall sample and less common among those aged 65+ (31-41%).

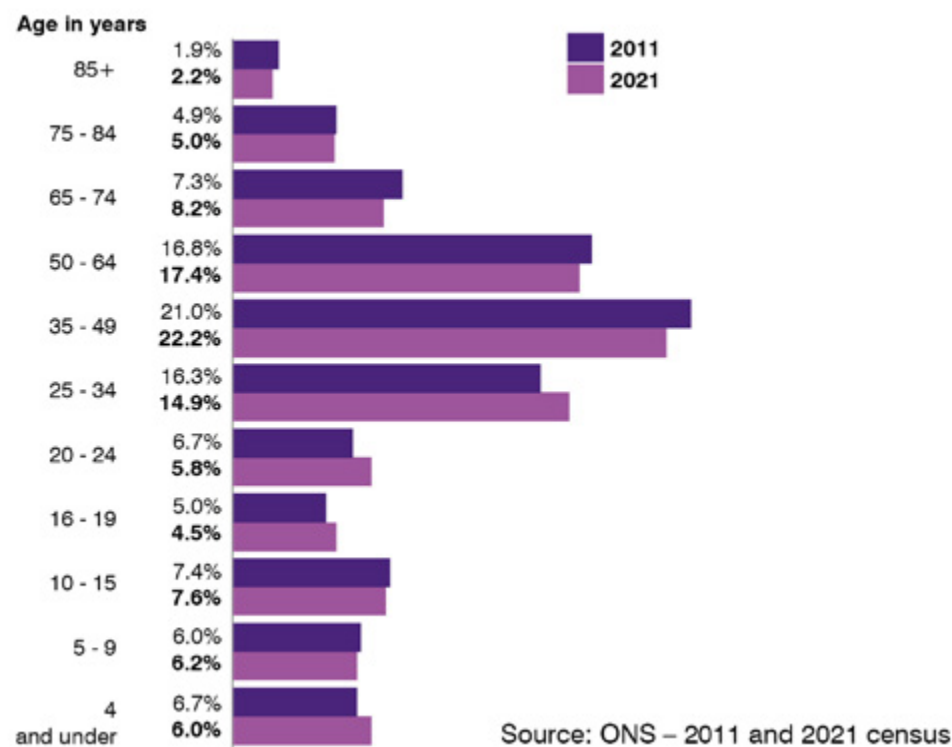
² Annual Director of Public Health Report 2022-23: Health Inequalities in Harrow



3.2 Economy and poverty

While Harrow as a borough has high economic activity compared to the rest of London – 89.2% for males and 75.4% for males and females (against the London average of 83.8% and 74.9% respectively) – we are a low wage borough with a gross weekly earnings of £514.20, which is 37% less than the London average³. Furthermore, according to the 2021 census, 17.4% of Harrow residents have no qualifications impacting on their ability to contribute to the economy effectively.

PERCENTAGE OF USUAL HARROW RESIDENTS BY AGE GROUP



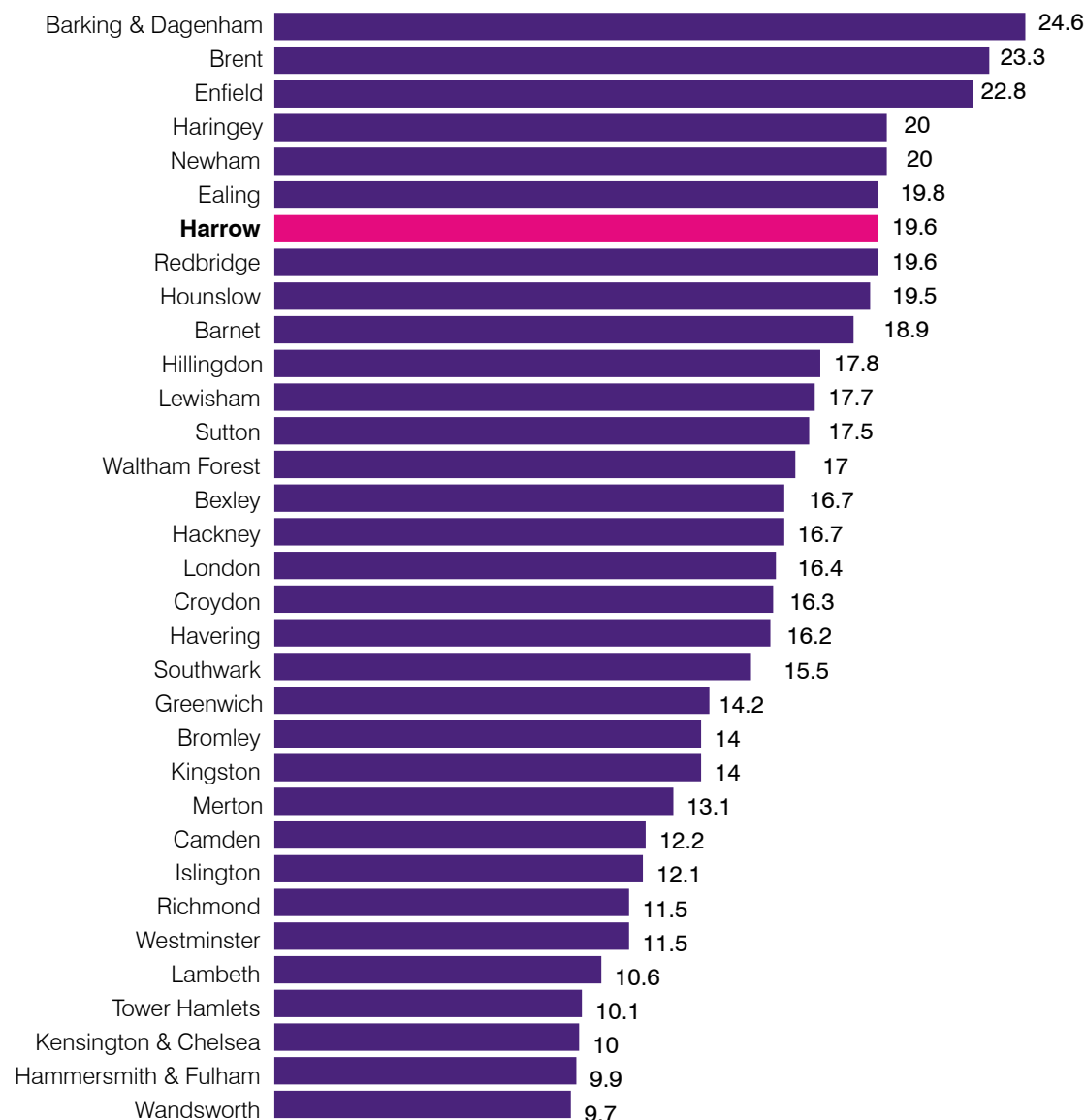
³ ONS annual population survey (2022) and ONS earnings by place of work (2021)

However, analysis by Trust for London shows that Harrow find itself in an average position compared to other London boroughs on a range of parameters such as poverty rate, child poverty rate, income deprivation, unemployment rate, and GCSE attainment (Trust for London 2024)⁴. Despite the higher levels of economic activity, data indicates that Harrow has one of the highest proportion of people in poverty among working families.

The large percentage of working households experiencing in-work poverty in Harrow indicates that from an information and advice perspective there will be greater demand from this cohort (compared to other London boroughs) so those affected can gain advice about and access to relevant services.

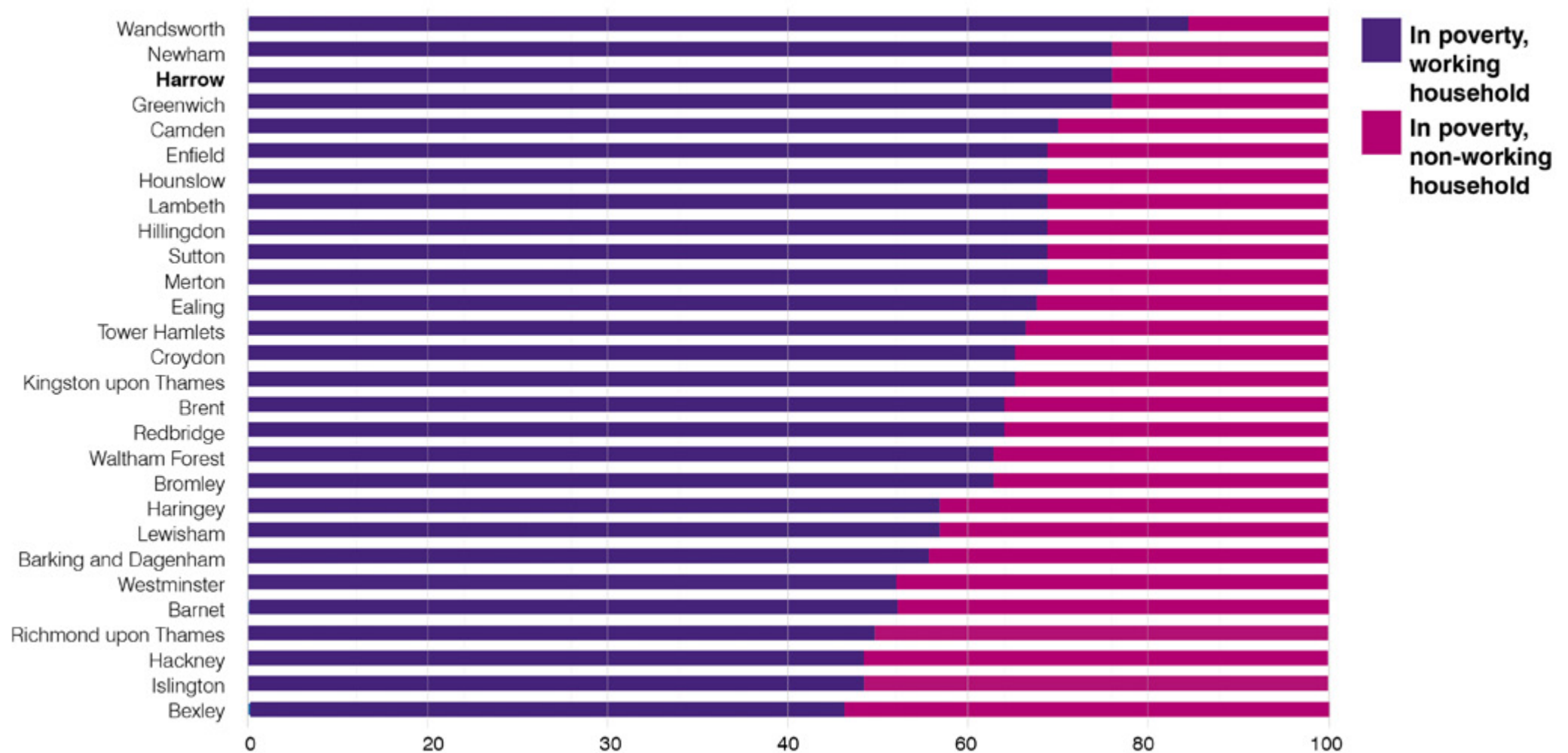
At the same time, it is important to recognise that when it comes to poverty rates alone (regardless of whether residents are in work or not), Harrow comes much further below on the London list of boroughs in 17th place (Trust for London 2022).

PROPORTION OF BOROUGH RESIDENTS' JOBS THAT ARE LOW PAID



⁴ [Overview of London Boroughs | Trust for London](#)

PROPORTION OF PEOPLE IN POVERTY IN WORKING AND NON-WORKING FAMILIES



Data source: Office for National Statistics, Social and Vital Statistics Division, NatCen Social Research, Department for Work and Pensions (2021), Family Resources Survey, 2005/06-2019/20, Households Below Average income, 1994/95-2019/20 and Pensioners' Income, 2007/08-2019/20: Safe Room Access. [data collection]. 11th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 7196

In terms of deprivation, the last available English Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) from 2019 indicates that Harrow is better off than NW London, London and England in IMD score measures:

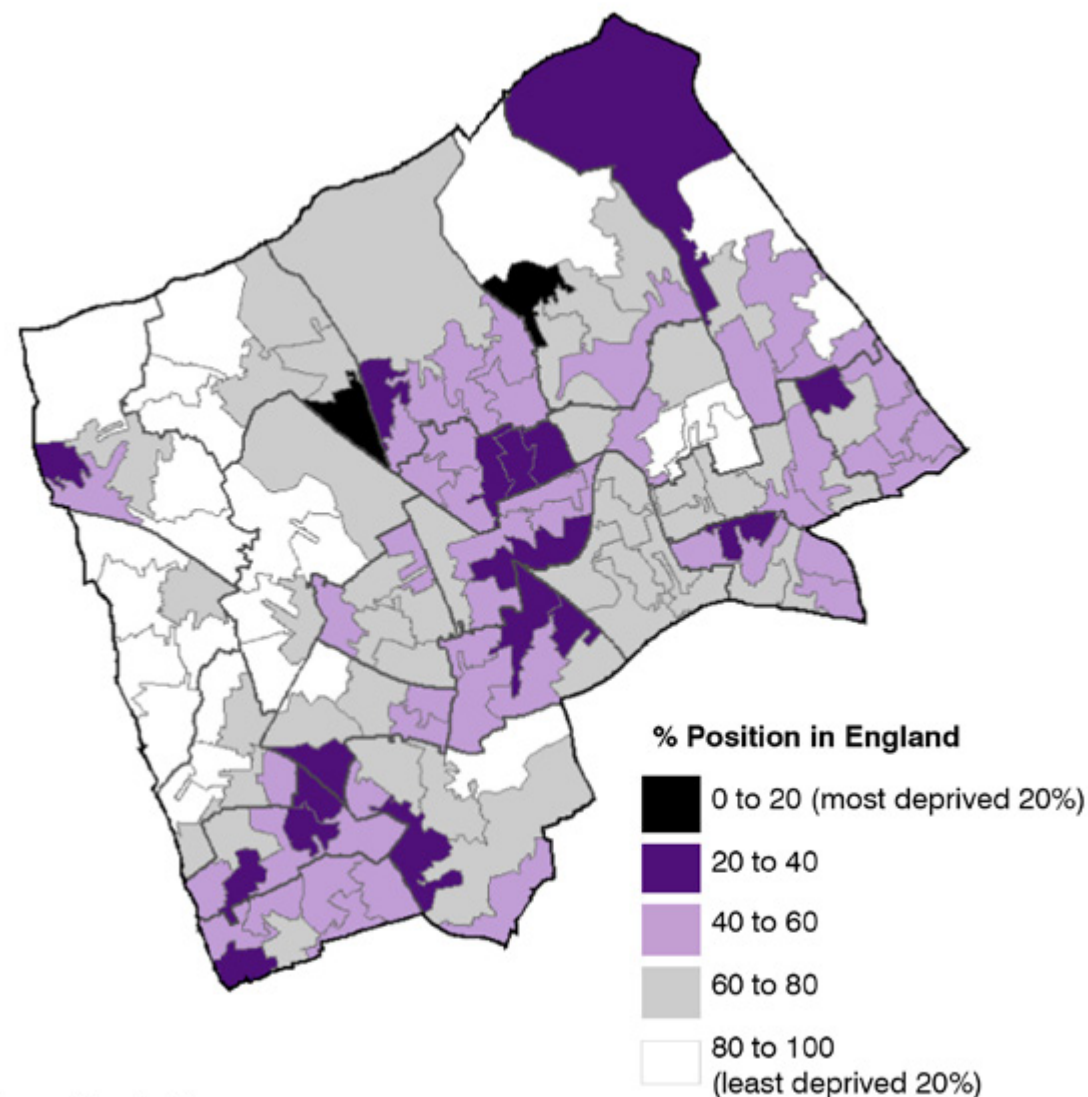
	Harrow	NW London	London	England
Average IMD score (higher is more deprived)	15.0	20.0	21.3	19.6

According to analysis by Trust for London (2021)⁵, 31% of children in the borough lived in households with an income of less than 60% of the UK median after housing costs have been subtracted, which is roughly the same as the London average. However, there is a wide geographical variation in the distribution of deprivation in the borough. Wards like Wealdstone and Roxbourne score much higher than Pinner South for instance and feature in the most deprived 20% of wards in England as per the 2019 IMD analysis.

This shows that the need for information and advice will vary widely across various parts of the borough in line with deprivation and poverty. Where relevant, local information and advice services should be signposting residents to services that can help them upskill and increase their earnings.

Learn Harrow is a key provider of functional, intermediate and higher-level skills training and it has an achievement rate of over 90% in supporting residents to increase their skills.

MULTIPLE DEPRIVATION POSITION



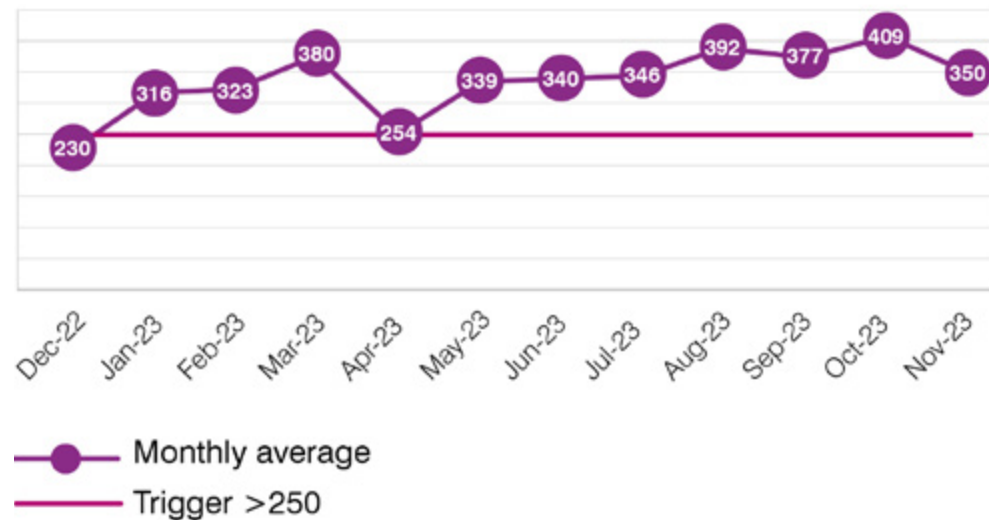
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London Borough of Harrow LA. 100019206
Source: MHCLG English Indices of Deprivation 2019

⁵ [Poverty & Inequality Data Harrow | Trust For London | Trust for London](#)

3.3.Housing and Homelessness

The demand for information and advice in the borough has become increasingly critical due to escalating housing and homelessness pressures since the 2022 housing rental crisis. Rising rents and housing instability, particularly in London, have exacerbated vulnerabilities, making it essential for residents to have access to timely, accurate support to navigate these challenges and secure stable housing. The council has seen an increase in homelessness approaches since 2022.

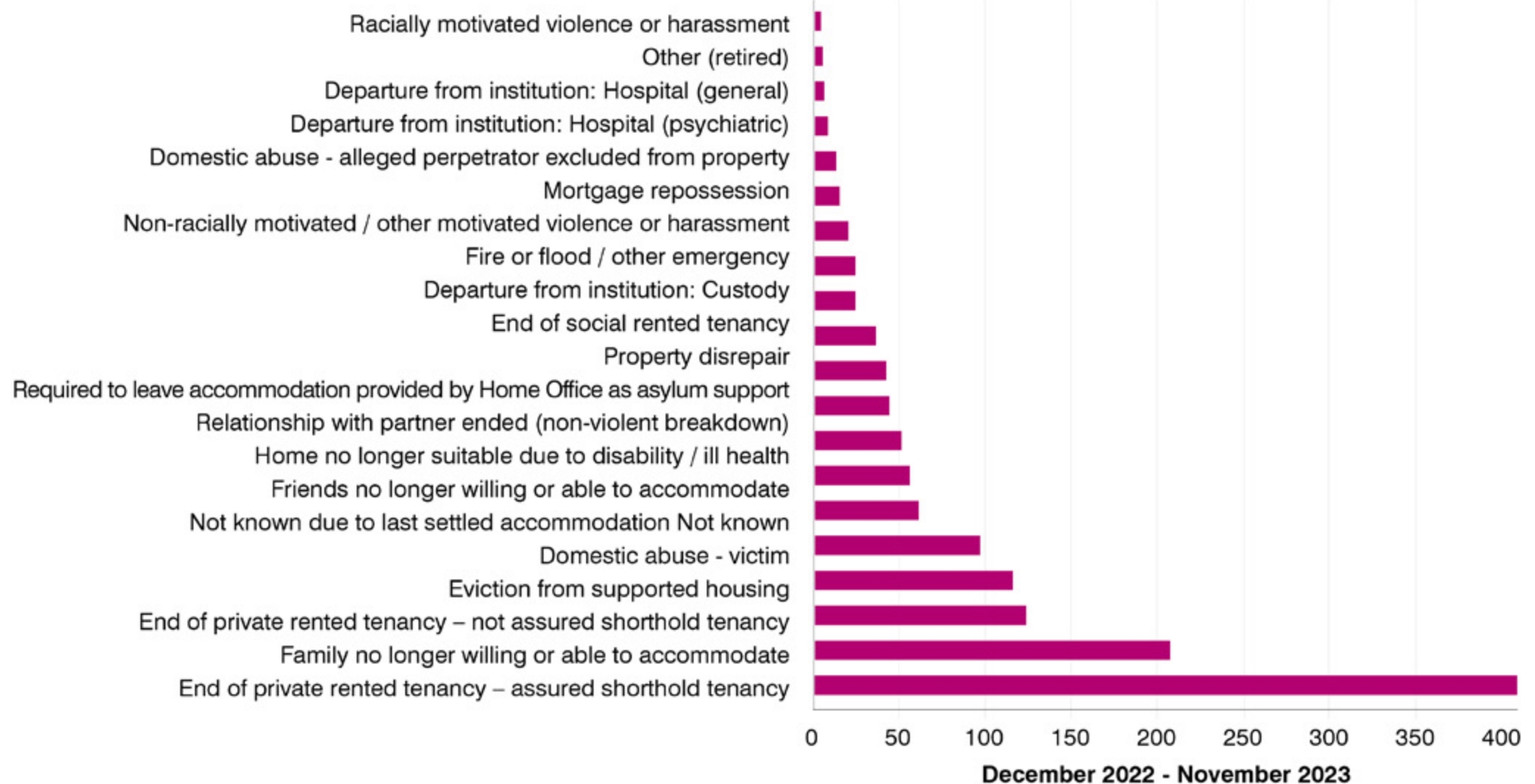
HOMELESS MONTHLY APPROACHES



One of the key factors fuelling homelessness and the need for support in this area has been the rise of private rented tenancy evictions. As rents have increased, evictions have also continued

to increase in Harrow as the above data from December 2022 to November 2023 shows the ending of private rented sector tenancies is by far the most common reason for homelessness applications.

REASONS FOR APPLICATION - LAST 12 MONTHS



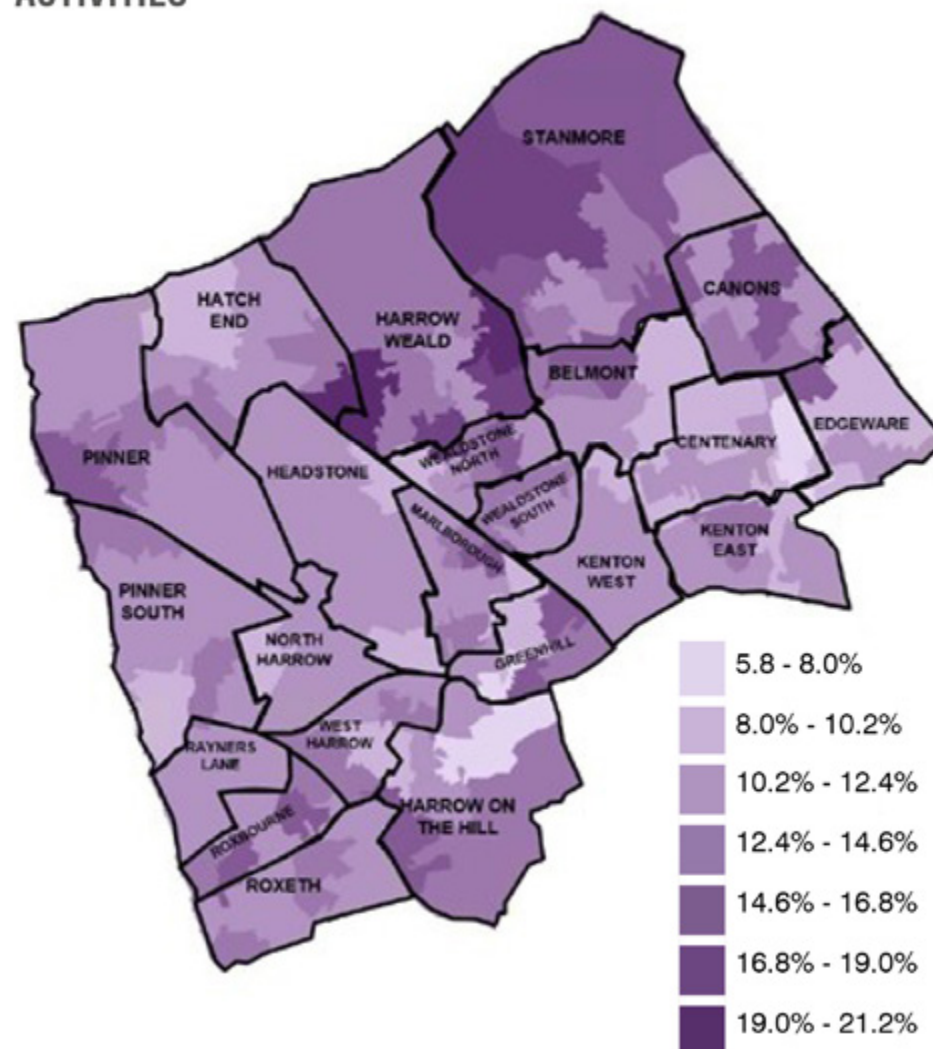
2.5 Health and disability

The 2021 Census reports that 12% of people in Harrow are disabled under the Equality Act definition –that is, their day-to-day activities are limited.

As shown in the 2021 census, the geographical distribution of those with disabilities is varied with some areas having a disproportionate number of residents whose day-to-day activities are limited, which roughly aligns with areas where there is a higher proportion of older residents. Those with conditions that limit day to day activities will have more significant needs and tend to be more socially isolated, increasing the demand for information and advice services.

	Number of Harrow residents	% of residents			
		Harrow	NW London	London	England
Day-to-day activities limited a lot	13,808	5.3%	5.6%	5.7%	7.3%
Day-to-day activities limited a little	17,450	6.7%	6.9%	7.5%	10.0%
Has long term health condition but day-to-day activities not limited	11,509	4.4%	4.5%	5.2%	6.8%
No long term health conditions	218,436	83.6%	83.0%	81.5%	75.9%

CENSUS 2021: PERCENTAGE OF HARROW POPULATION WITH A HEALTH CONDITION WHICH LIMITS DAY TO DAY ACTIVITIES



2.6 Impact of pandemic and global cost of living crisis

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the global cost of living crisis have significantly increased the demand for information and advice services in Harrow. Many residents report facing unprecedented financial hardships, including job losses, reduced incomes, and rising living costs, which have heightened the need for accessible and reliable support. The pandemic has also exacerbated health inequalities, with many individuals requiring assistance to navigate healthcare services and mental health support.

Moreover, the global cost of living crisis has led to increased food and energy insecurity, making it crucial for residents to receive guidance on accessing emergency assistance and long-term financial planning. Vulnerable populations, including the elderly and those with disabilities, have been particularly affected, underscoring the importance of targeted information and advice to meet their specific needs. Overall, the compounded effects of the pandemic and cost of living crisis have made it essential to provide comprehensive, integrated support services to help residents overcome these challenges and achieve stability.





Section 3

Information and Advice in Harrow

INFORMATION AND ADVICE IN HARROW

Information and advice for residents in Harrow is provided through a variety of avenues and pathways. Access to most services is through the council itself. With the move from the old Civic Centre, the way the council provides information and advice continues to evolve as we endeavour to improve customer experience.

Since 2017, the council has also contracted a single General Information and Advice Service (GIAS) currently provided by Citizens Advice Harrow to support residents on a range of issues from debt advice to immigration advice. In addition, the council has a range of statutory contracts with Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations including those related to the Care Act and advocacy services. Beyond all of these contracted services, there are a number of VCS organisations operating independently in the borough which support residents both formally and informally.

Good quality, reliable information and advice delivered in a timely manner provides residents with the options and ability to navigate the support available and better manage a range of issues affecting their lives. It therefore plays a vital role around not only encouraging community resilience, but also early intervention and the prevention of escalation of needs, potentially reducing the demand on public services.



Information and advice are defined in this strategy as the following:

INFORMATION

The open and accessible supply of knowledge and facts that are helpful to a particular individual or group which will enable them to take action.

Signposting would be included in this definition but it should lead towards the effective resolution of the issue faced by the resident.



ADVICE

Helping a person identify choices and providing an objective opinion, guidance, direction or recommending a course of action that will help resolve their issue. This would include casework and advice provided by qualified and regulated professionals. This could be both non-statutory such as all non-homelessness related advice provided under GIAS or statutory such as the Care Act contract in relation to Adult Social Care information and advice.



In addition, the advocacy contracts commissioned by the council supports individuals in a more extensive way, by speaking for them or supporting them so they can do the following: understand their rights, speak for themselves, make decisions and choices, express their needs and wishes and secure their rights. These advocacy contracts commissioned by the council are essentially statutory ones as per various relevant legislations such as the Care Act 2014. The legal requirements and duties upon the council in this extensive field is covered within the Care Act 2014, Housing Act 1996, Children and Families Act 2014, Adoption and Children Act 2002, The Children Leaving Care Act 2002 and The Children Act 1989, and Education Act 2011.

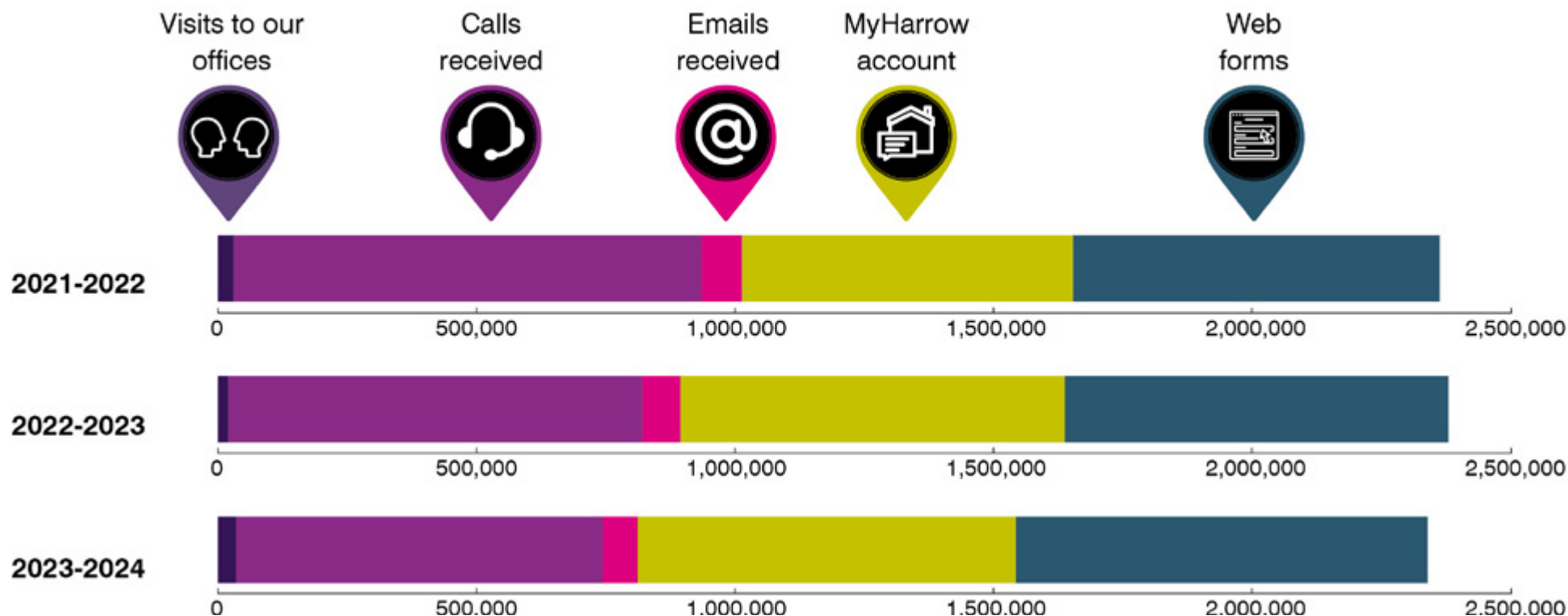
3.1 London Borough of Harrow Customer Services

Residents contact the council for support through a range of channels. Digital channels and the contact centre, which receives calls and digital (web content, My Harrow Account and Webforms) are the primary pathways, followed by face to face visitors.

During the pandemic, like many other councils, the Council temporarily closed its front door due to the outbreak of coronavirus, followed by a limited service provision emphasising

supported self-service, homelessness support, and pre-booked appointments for Adult Social Care and Children's Services. However, as part of the Council's accommodation review, the Civic Centre in Station Road formally closed in March 2023 and new arrangements for face to face provision was moved to three sites: Greenhill library (Customer Services), Gayton Road (Emergency Front Door for Children, Adult Social Care and Homelessness) and The Pavilion.

This shift is evident in a drop in face to face visits of 34 percent in 2022-2023, which has now built back up above 2021-2022 levels.

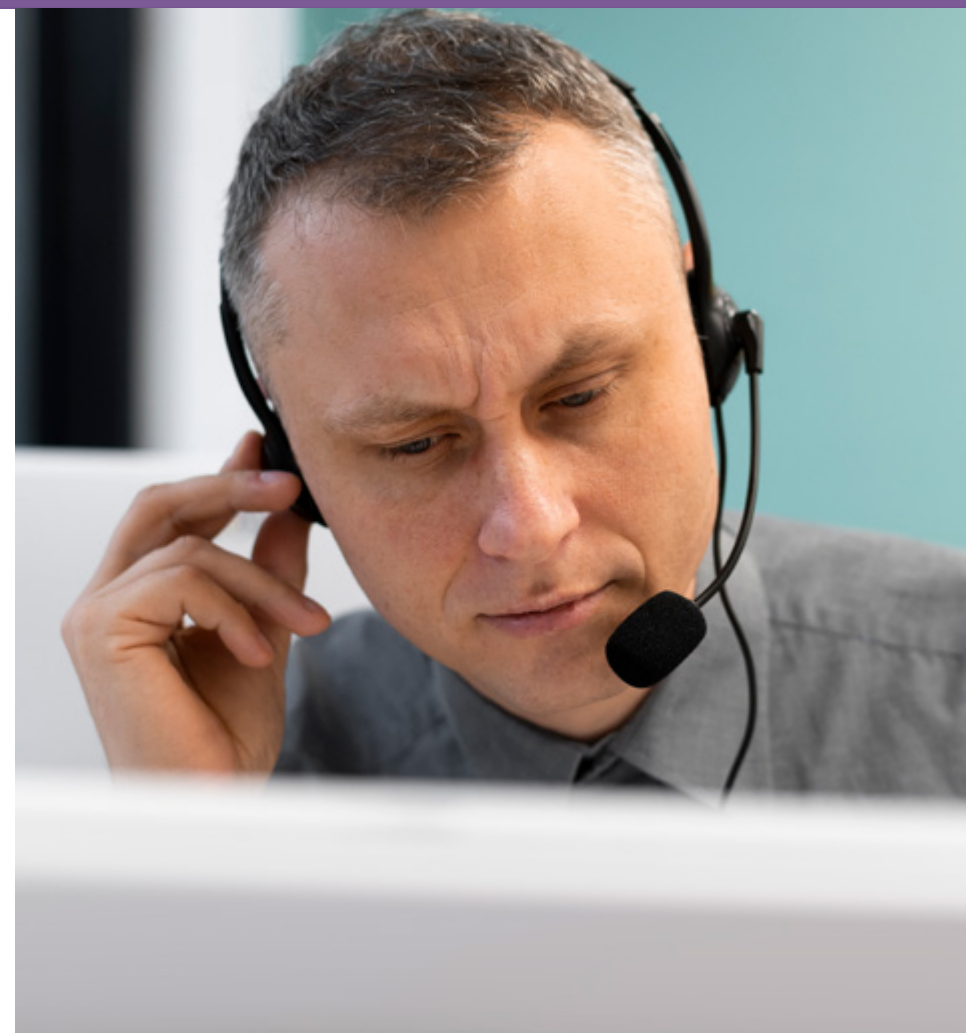


The data shows that the focus on enabling customers to self-serve where appropriate is paying off as the number of calls received by the contact centre continues to drop each year.

The most recent council data from Access Harrow shows that overall satisfaction levels with telephony rose from 78% in April 2023 to 88% in June 2024, with those being able to complete what they set out to do rising from 72% to 89%.

The face to face service support also similarly shows a rise in satisfaction levels of 74% to 91% from April 2023 to June 2024 with those being able to complete what they set out to do rising from 73% to 86%. Approximately 55% of the face to face queries are in relation to council tax and benefits.

The improvement in this area can be traced to the emphasis that the council has placed on improving the customer experience of residents via a range of initiatives including rolling out a Customer Ethos training for all staff in the council, incorporating 'Putting Residents First' as a Corporate Priority, placing an emphasis



on improving customer experience via enhanced performance management systems, and carrying out and implementing the findings from a scrutiny review on customer experience.

In addition, an action plan for improving customer experience over the next two years is going to Cabinet in September 2024.



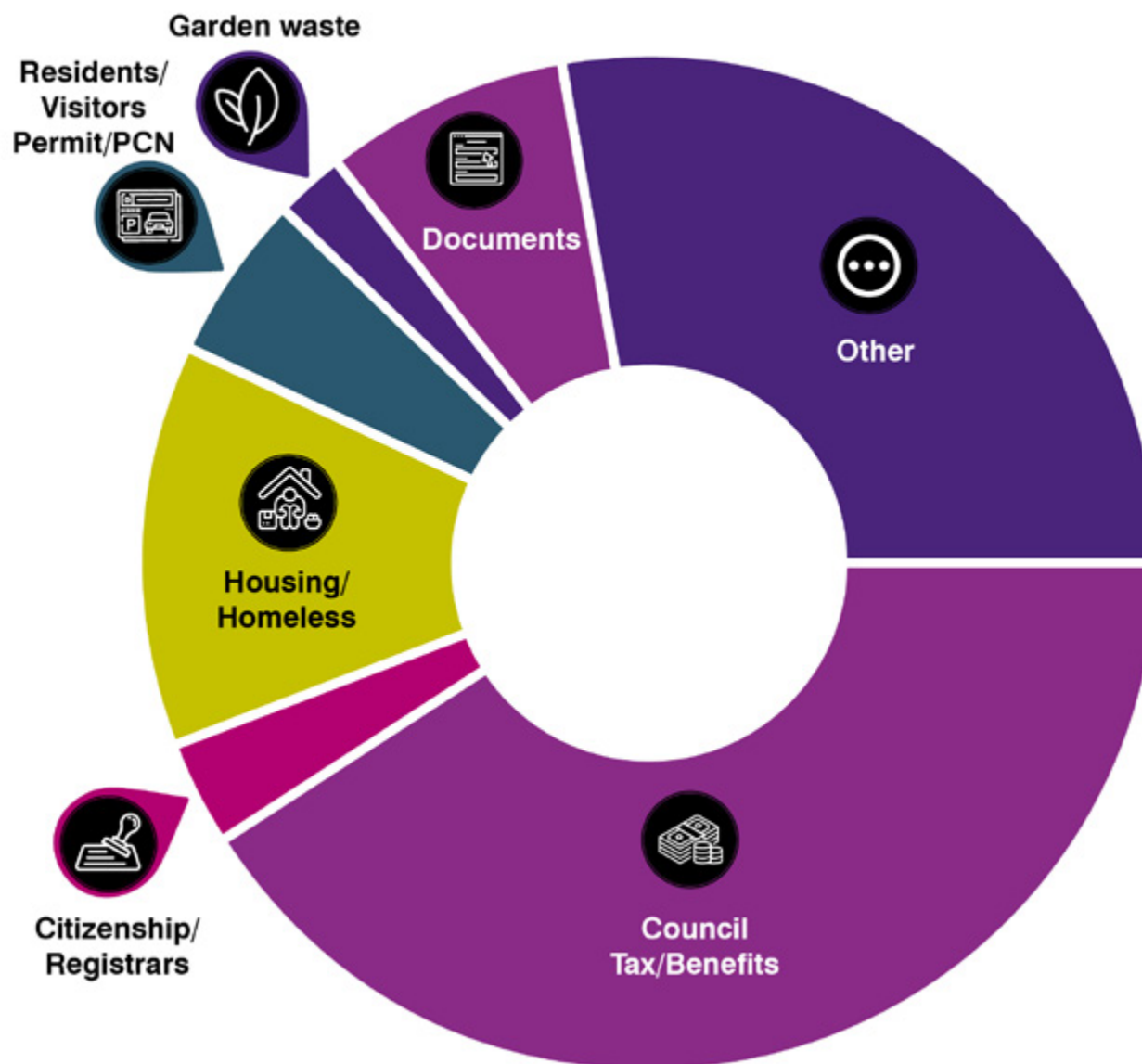
88%
satisfaction with
telephony in June 2024

A key principle that is driving the customer experience improvement is the focus on reducing the need for contact by getting things right the first time and solving issues proactively, which is an ongoing journey for the council. However, how we deliver face to face provision continues to remain critical, particularly for those who are vulnerable or are digitally excluded.

While digital continues to be the channel of choice, there is a recognition that a robust face to face service is important – as also recognised by the Customer Services Scrutiny review in 2023 – and has resulted in an ongoing push to consolidate customer services and the emergency front door at a single site (Gayton Road).

The move will bolster the face to face service, with a full revenues and benefits service, enhance the front door service for housing needs and homelessness, increase reception support for Adults and Children's services and increase the supported self-service offer.

FACE TO FACE CONTACT AT GREENHILL LIBRARY IN 2023-2024





3.2 General Information and Advice Service (GIAS)

The General Information and Advice Service contracted to be delivered by Citizens Advice Harrow since July 2017 is a crucial universal service that is open to any Harrow resident in need of information or advice. The service supports residents in relation to housing, benefits, debt, employment immigration, well-being, as well as family and personal matters (counselling, bereavement etc.) and other matters. Data from the quarterly monitoring shows that client demand remains robust with benefits, debt advice and housing support continuing to be key drivers. With the cost of living and rental crisis, this service provides a critical service to residents who are most in need, particularly in the above areas.

The homelessness advice support element of this contract is a statutory duty for local authorities under the Housing Act 1996. The GIAS run by Citizens Advice Harrow has operated from the old Civic since the previous recommissioning in 2017. However, with the closure of the civic, the service has moved to 4 Gayton Road and sits alongside the council emergency front door services.

Alongside this strategy refresh, the GIAS is being recommissioned in 2024 led by the key principles within this document and with a new service expected to be in place from the 1st of January 2025. A key issue is to ensure the service is able to meet the increased demand from Harrow residents coming out of the pandemic and the cost of living crisis.

3.3 Statutory Contract Service Providers including Care Act

In addition to the above, the council commissions a range of statutory advice services including advocacy related ones. A key element of this is to ensure compliance with the duties under the Care Act 2014, Children and Families Act 2014, Adoption and Children Act 2002, The Children Leaving Care Act 2002 and The Children Act 1989, and Education Act 2011.

The current statutory contracts commissioned by the council include:

- Harrow Care Act Information and Advice service (SWISH)
- Harrow Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Information and Advice Service (SENDIAS)
- Careers Information, Advice, Guidance (IAG) and Support Services to Young People in Harrow Council
- Care Act Advocacy
- Independent Mental Health Act Advocacy (IMHA)
- Independent Mental Capacity Act Advocacy (IMCA)
- Independent Health Complaints Advocacy (IHCA)
- Children's Advocacy

In addition to the above pathways, Harrow is home to a network of vibrant VCS organisations, mirroring our diverse population, which spans a wide spectrum of charities, non-profits, religious and community groups and social enterprises, catering to numerous ethnic and linguistic groups who provide information



and advice to residents. They are in turn supported by Harrow's key VCS infrastructure organisations – Harrow Together, Young Harrow Foundation, VCS Forum and Voluntary Action Harrow. Together, they play a critical role in capacity building, encouraging networking and collaboration, sector support for smaller organisations with grant applications, governance, training and others, and drawing in external funding.



Section 4

Engagement – Key Findings

ENGAGEMENT: KEY FINDINGS

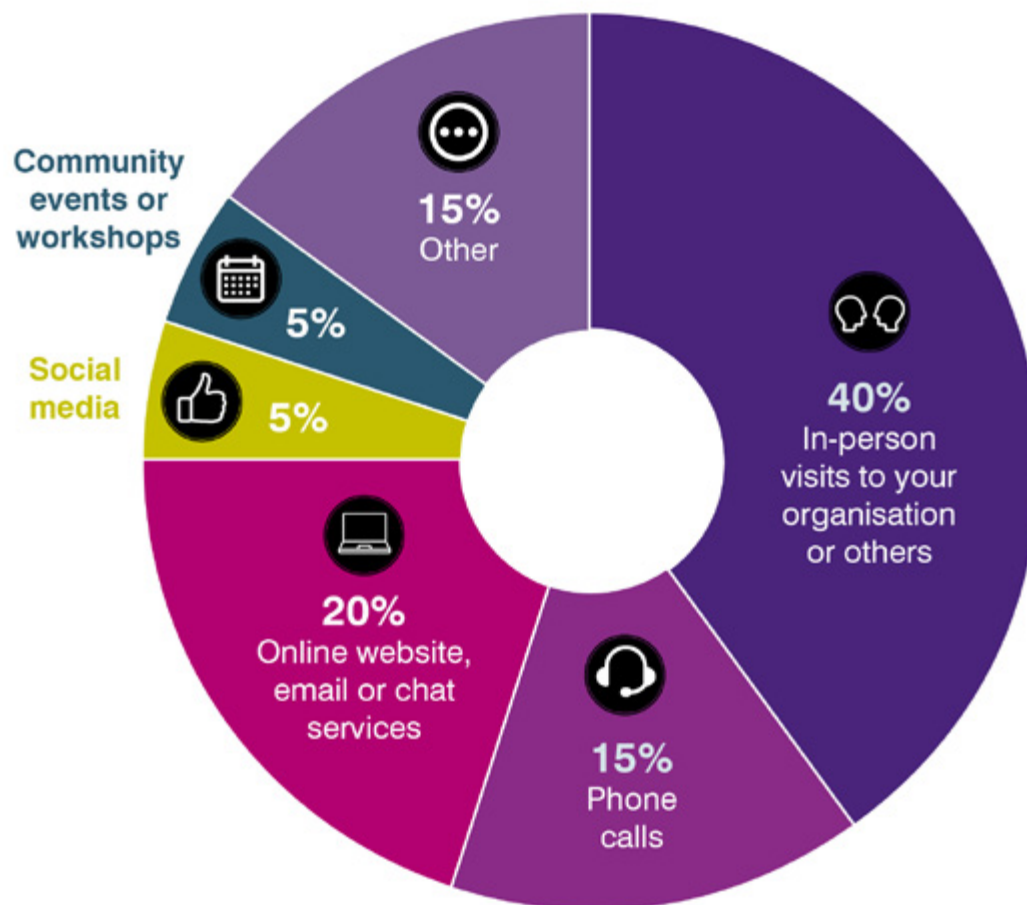
As part of the work on developing this strategy, the Council carried out the following consultation and engagement with service providers and residents in Harrow:

1. Co-production Workshop with Information and Advice providers in Harrow – Attended by 19 of the principal information and advice providers in the borough.
2. Survey of voluntary and community sector organisations in the borough – 19 VCS organisations participated in the survey which cater to more than 4,000 residents in the borough.
3. Qualitative interviews with Information and Advice providers – 15 information and advice providers and partners took part in detailed one to one interviews on the state of IA in the borough.
4. Focus group with service users of the General Information and Advice Service.

Key findings from the consultation and engagement raised the following issues in relation to the provision of information and advice in the borough:

- a. Impact of Post-Pandemic Changes to Services** The impact of the pandemic was felt to have an adverse impact on vulnerable residents as people reported finding it harder since the pandemic to support from the 'system' including difficulty

HOW DO YOUR CLIENTS PRIMARILY ACCESS INFORMATION AND ADVICE SERVICES IN HARROW?



getting GP appointments, reduced local authority front door services with the move from the Civic to Greenhill Library and Gayton Road, and inadequate support from VCS organisations with longer waiting periods. Information and advice providers reported that more vulnerable residents are reporting a sense of 'system exclusion' increasing a sense of isolation.

The clientele among information and advice providers tend to be those experiencing greater need and vulnerabilities and often this group tends to favour face to face support. In the survey conducted among 20 VCS organisations supporting more than 4,000 residents in Harrow, we can see that face to face access continues to be an important channel for those seeking to access information and advice.

While the closure of the old Civic Centre and new front door services at Greenhill Library and Gayton Road have been heavily publicised to residents through various communications channels, VCS organisations in the workshop and interviews reported lack of awareness among some residents of the front door offer. Echoing the Customer Experience scrutiny review, residents found that the dual front door was a source of confusion for residents alongside some frustration at the lack of more comprehensive services available at both sites.

With increased budget pressures in line with other LAs and an increased uptake in the use of new technology, the council has adopted digital as the channel of choice and supporting people to self serve where they are able to, however recent learnings has indicated that alternative channels including face to face

provision remain important for those who face more complex problems or vulnerabilities and digital exclusion. VCS providers consulted emphasised that for some people having someone to talk to face to face remains critical, not just on the phone or online.

- b. Signposting without resolution** Residents describe being signposted to various organisations and having to keep sharing their stories with various providers and being 're-traumatised'. The reason for this is dual pronged. Firstly, the quality of information and advice provision provided by organisations vary – not all organisations are accredited or certified at the right level to casework individuals to fully resolve their issues. Secondly, organisations tend to signpost individuals to various services without fully evaluating whether the service is equipped to resolve the issue and without an effective referral mechanism which results in residents resharing stories and then subsequently being signposted elsewhere.
- c. Increased demand** VCS organisations describe substantial increase in demand for information and advice in the post-pandemic period. As addressed earlier, the demand for information and advice has expanded tremendously as a result of more residents needing help with benefits and services, including those being evicted in the private rental sector in large numbers. The global cost of living crisis and the pan-London housing rental crisis has led to a perfect storm, driving increased demand for information and advice across the board. Residents report longer waiting periods and difficulty getting the help they need from service providers.

d. Need to reach deprived communities and enabling connectivity

The coproduction workshop raised the importance of information and advice reaching communities of need in their own geographical areas to have the greatest impact. Since deprivation in Harrow has a distinct geographical basis, reaching communities where they live was described as important by VCS groups, to ensure equitable access. Outreach efforts were highlighted as a vital tool to connect with vulnerable residents. It was also pointed out that the move to digital self-service while largely helpful for most residents, has a disproportionate impact on those experiencing digital exclusion. Participants emphasised that measures to increase digital inclusion and enhance connectivity are important to ensure digital exclusion does not act as a barrier to accessing essential services that can improve residents' quality of life, particularly among the older generation.

e. Lack of awareness of range of available services

The engagement findings also revealed a significant lack of awareness among not only residents and but also local VCS organisations about the range of available services in Harrow. It was emphasised that creating a navigable effective system that is cohesive and inter-linked requires a central joined-up

directory of services in which all available providers could be listed, and which could also be used as a referral tool.

f. Need for holistic family-oriented approach in delivering information and advice

Organisations supporting children and families highlighted the need for ensuring information and advice is family-oriented and not piecemeal. Families often face interconnected issues that require holistic solutions, making it essential to address their needs collectively rather than in isolation. By adopting a family-centred approach to information and advice, the council can provide more effective support that can foster stronger, more resilient households.

g. Limited prevention offer

Early intervention was highlighted as a key requirement to prevent needs from escalating. In relation to Adult Social Care, workshop participants emphasised the importance of information and advice helping people remain independent, avoid relapse or crisis, and help people be connected to the community. Preventative early intervention initiatives are important to achieve these outcomes, however it was felt that the offer in Harrow was limited when it comes to Prevention.



Section 5

Key Principles

KEY PRINCIPLES

Following on from the key findings from the consultation and engagement, this section focuses on emergent key principles that should serve as the cornerstone for how information and advice is provided by the council and its partners, facilitating a cohesive and joined-up delivery of services that improves the customer experience of residents. It is intended that this set of guiding principles inform the commissioning and provision of key information and advice services such as the General Information and Advice Service, those related to Care Act, and others.

These principles are interlinked and reinforce two of the council's Corporate Priorities – 'A council that puts residents first', and 'A place where those in need are supported'. By incorporating these principles, the council and partners can ensure that residents have access to consistent, high-quality support that meets their needs before it becomes acute and fosters resilience within the community.

1. Improving Resolution at Point of Access

Removing barriers experienced by residents at the point of contact is vital for enhancing the resident experience and ensuring equitable access to support. The efficient resolution of issues faced by residents at the point of access will have a positive customer experience and reduces the need for further contact.

While self-service is part of the solution where appropriate and

where it can resolve resident issues immediately, this principle also means that expanding the range of face to face support offered by the council as part of the front door's move to a single location at Gayton Road is critical. This will have a net positive impact on vulnerable groups such as those experiencing homelessness or older people who are digitally excluded.

Additionally, integrating information and advice services like GIAS through technological innovations such as digital customer kiosks, will further aid the resolution of resident issues at the point of contact. Expanding the locations where residents can receive information and advice to council libraries through the use of customer kiosks is one of the council's Flagship Actions in 2024-25 and will function to further improve the resolution of issues for customers at the initial point of contact. The Flagship Action to improve website access including via mobile technology is also an area that can help prevent additional demand via self-service and resolution at the first point of contact (online).

2. Improving referrals and moving towards a 'no wrong door' approach

There is a critical need to improve referrals among organisations in Harrow to combat the frequent experience of residents being endlessly sign-posted without the resolution of issues. Cross-sector collaboration such as trialling 'warm transfer' arrangements that ensures referrals are effective and seamless and resolves issues is critical to improving residents' customer journey and reducing ineffective referrals. This will ensure that residents do not have to repeat their story ad nauseum and closer joint-working and feedback mechanisms will enable

the referring organisation to understand if the issue has been resolved.

Establishing clear pathways and protocols and a person-centred approach to referrals as opposed to ineffectual sign-posting needs coordination between service providers and agencies and can reduce delays and frustration experienced by residents. It also facilitates a move towards a 'no wrong door' approach to information and advice provision in the borough instead of the frequent experience of residents where an agency tells them to talk to another provider who may or may not resolve their issue.

In order to establish effective referrals, a key element is the establishment of a joined-up directory of services such as the 'Joy Platform' used by health and social prescribing partners that can bring services together, or the platform provided by Young Harrow Foundation for services related to children. This will ensure that there is widespread awareness among providers of the range of available services. There needs to be a strategic push towards ensuring that all Harrow providers are on a joint directory and this is leveraged effectively in relation to referrals.

3. Mitigating Demand through a Partnership Approach

Addressing the increase in demand for information and advice requires an effective partnership approach in the commissioning of services and service delivery by the council and partners. This principle recognises the importance and potentiality of leveraging the collective expertise and resources of partner organisations in the borough. By fostering closer

referral mechanisms and partnership working between VCS organisations as described above, commissioning arrangements can stipulate how the provider works with partners so that some of the excess demand faced by providers of information and advice can be dispersed and mitigated effectively.

Partnership building and multi-agency collaboration needs to be seen as an essential requirement for those operating in the sector. This recognises that various organisations can be experts in specific domains and there is value in leveraging that expertise and thus building resilience and capacity within the information and advice sector.

4. Integration of Information and Advice into Ongoing Structural Redesign

As the council and partners undergo structural redesign involving Family Hubs, Neighbourhood Resource Centres (NRCs), and Integrated Neighbourhood Teams (INTs), the integration of information and advice services is critical to provide a seamless offer to residents. By integrating information and advice provision or establishing effective referrals pathways from these redesigned services – particularly in relation to health and well-being services - Harrow can ensure that residents can receive comprehensive support that is holistic and family-oriented rather than piecemeal.

Moreover, embedding advice services – whether it is through physical presence of advisors on site or through 'warm transfer' arrangements – into redesigned structures facilitates closer

collaboration between different agencies and organisations, promotes information sharing and joint working to address residents' needs effectively. Integrating vital services into Family Hubs and progressing the redesign of NRCs are key flagship actions for the council in 2024-25.

5. Prevention and Early Intervention

Information and advice is a key cog in the prevention agenda – it helps to ensure that residents know how to access early intervention offers in the community that prevents needs from becoming acute.

By promoting awareness of and accessibility to preventative interventions in the community, the system can mitigate risk of escalation and reduce the strain on public services. Early intervention not only enhances individual well-being but also fosters community resilience, ultimately contributing to the overall health and prosperity of the borough. At the heart of information and advice provided by the council and partners, there needs to be a firm commitment to the ethos of prevention, that intervening earlier and further upstream is much more effective than downstream when 'problems' transform into 'crises'. The Making Every Contact Count (MECC) training is critical to ensure that staff operating in the sector are trained to spot opportunities for early intervention, as well as ensuring the social prescribing model is expanded in terms of scope and reach. A current local example of a social prescribing offer is this year's Flagship Action on promoting Public Health's Get Harrow Moving programme to help residents explore walking trails in our parks.

This principle also recognises that more can be done in this space – there is a need for more targeted interventions and support services for residents at key stages of life transitions or during times of increased vulnerability that can result in social isolation. Building up the prevention and early intervention offer, in terms of commissioning arrangements, is critical as information and advice is only as effective as the availability of the offer that services can refer into.

6. Outreach into Communities

This principle emphasises the importance of targeted outreach initiatives designed to bridge gaps in accessibility and support the most vulnerable residents. By meeting communities where they are, proactive outreach not only enhances resident engagement but also fosters a sense of inclusion and belonging within the community. We know from research that people in more deprived areas are less likely to travel to meet service providers in areas further away.

In recent years, the council and partners have trialled successful initiatives such as Winter Warm Hubs and Conversation Café which have helped support residents through an outreach approach.

With the recommissioning of the General Information and Advice Service (GIAS), there is an opportunity to physically integrate information and advice provision at Conversation Café with the presence of advisors on site, which would be in line with the 2023-24 Flagship Action to expand the scope of the Conversation Café. This integration of GIAS can be carried



out with Conversation Café or other future outreach initiatives undertaken by the council. By building up an outreach model both in terms of scope and geographic reach, the council would be able to have a limited but effective ‘mobile front door’ which can significantly build trust in local public services. Importantly, a truly mobile outreach service should be able to flex resources according to the need in geographical areas of deprivation to have an impact, rather than stay in a permanent location in the borough. At the same time, it is important that the mobile outreach service demand growth is organic rather than through council services or other commissioned services sending walk-in clients to these sites.

7. Capacity Building among Information and Advice providers including Drawing in External Funding

Ensuring that the information and advice sector in Harrow is equipped to meet the evolving needs of the community requires a focus on capacity building, enhancing sector-wide standards, bringing in external funding to the borough and addressing collective challenges effectively. This principle emphasises the importance of upskilling the information and advice ecosystem to deliver high-quality support to residents across the borough.

To reduce excessive signposting, it is vital that more organisations are able to effectively casework individuals’ issues to the point of resolution. There is opportunity to use the Harrow Advice Network (run the by the General Information and Advice Service provider) more effectively to address sector-wide issues and raise collective standards. Through a focus on training, and sharing resources and best practices via the

network and importantly supporting smaller organisation to achieve industry-recognised quality standards/certification, the network should function as a key upskilling tool within the sector, including a focus on AI tech adoption within the sector to mitigate demand.

At the same time, supporting information and advice providers to draw in external funding to expand the scope and reach of their services, is important. The work being carried out via the council's Third Sector Support Service (currently being delivered by Harrow Together) and via Harrow Community Partnership needs to be leveraged so that local organisations are able to find more success in funding bids, which will have a positive impact on residents.

8. Future-proofing via Technological Solutions







Apart from using customer kiosks to enhance information and advice at other locations, the rapidly developing field of Generative Artificial Intelligence offers potential opportunities for new technological solutions to providing information and advice that can produce efficiencies, reduce cost and mitigate demand. It is important to be cautious as there are risks such as 'hallucinations' by Large Language Models (LLM) which can

deliver incorrect information, however the technology in this field is maturing rapidly.

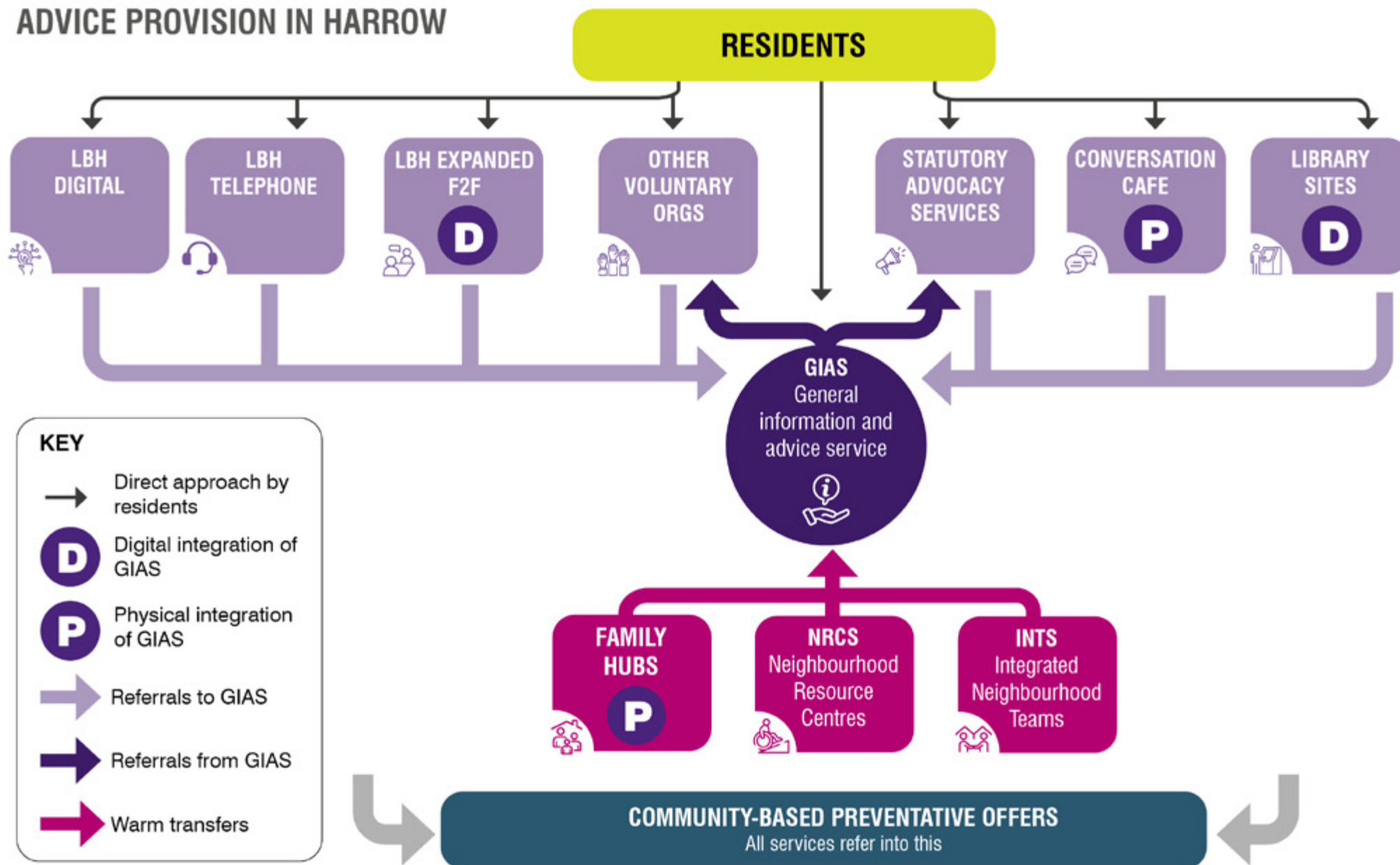
While the bulk of innovation in this field has been in the private sector, many counties and municipalities in the US have turned to the use of chatbots trained on local datasets to deliver information and advice to residents, reducing demand on services. Public sector expansion in this field has been more cautious in the UK; however by continuing to scan this fast-developing area for opportunities to adapt these emerging technologies as it becomes more robust, Harrow can future-proof our information and advice provision, in line with the UK government's National AI Strategy. The Harrow Advice Network needs to play a key role in encouraging AI tech adoption within the VCS advice sector.

At the same time, any move towards tech-based solutions needs to go hand in hand with a focus on digital inclusion initiatives so that vulnerable residents who may be digitally excluded are not ignored. This is linked to two existing Flagship Actions for 2024-25 on piloting an offer for residents on digital inclusion in accessing council services, as well as signing up 100 learners to gain digital skills.

Based on the above principles, the diagram on the following page puts forward how information and advice can be delivered in a joined-up way in Harrow, with a focus on the recommissioning of the General Information and Advice Service and how it fits within. The model prioritises the following:

-  1. Expanded council front door services as part of the move to a single site at Gayton Road.
-  2. Focus on ensuring that preventative offers are a cornerstone to prevent needs from becoming acute – both in terms of referrals and also building up the offer in terms of commissioning arrangements.
-  3. Digital integration of Access Harrow into library sites via customer kiosks as well as trial integration of GIAS to Access Harrow at Gayton Road and library kiosks.
-  4. Physical integration of GIAS into the Family Hub model as part of the recommissioned service.
-  5. Warm transfers and improved referrals from key redesigned services including Family Hubs, NRCs and INTs to provide clients a seamless customer experience. Warm transfers between VCS organisations where appropriate.
-  6. Outreach model to continue via Conversation Café to reach communities in need and physical integration of GIAS with advisors on site as part of the recommissioned service.

GIAS WITHIN INFORMATION AND ADVICE PROVISION IN HARROW





Section 6

Monitoring and Evaluating Success

MONITORING AND EVALUATING SUCCESS

While this strategy focuses on key principles to inform the delivery of all information and advice provision in the borough, the primary delivery vehicle of the strategy during the three year period of the strategy is in relation to the recommissioning of the General Information and Advice service. The Council will develop a performance framework and targets in conjunction with the General Information and Advice service in order to measure the

success of this strategy. In Year 1 following the commissioning of the new contract, the baseline of these example measures are to be established as part of this framework followed by target setting for Year 2 and Year 3.

The following measures are intended to serve as a starting point for that framework:

	Outcomes	Example Measures
1	More residents find it easier to access good quality Information and Advice through multi-modal channels including digital ones.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of weekly incoming enquiries that are picked up by the service vs those dropped due to demand pressures • Number and type of presenting issues per client • Number of enquiries dealt with via digital channels • Number of enquiries dealt with via telephone and face to face • Number of clients helped to independently access information online User satisfaction data recorded for each client
2	More residents are able to get their issues resolved at initial point of access or soon after and report higher satisfaction levels with the service they receive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average waiting period for appointment • Number of enquiries fully resolved at initial appointment • Number of follow up appointments required for each client • User satisfaction data recorded for each client • Number of complaints received.
3	More residents find referrals into the service effective and seamless	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of effective referrals/warm transfers from Family Hubs, Housing and other council services and partners. • Average time taken from referral to initiation of contact with service user. • Frequency of high-level feedback regarding resolution provided to referral partner including referring VCS organisations.

4	More residents are able to access general information and advice at other service points in the borough through integration with council/partner offer.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of enquiries dealt with at other sites including Family Hubs/Neighbourhood Resource Centres • Number of hours of advice support offered at other sites including digital integration.
5	More residents are prevented from their needs becoming acute via accessing 'preventative interventions' in the community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of client referrals into preventative/early intervention services in the borough/North West London. • User satisfaction data
6	More residents are able to find support related to information and advice closer to where they live including within communities of greater need.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of weekly hours of support delivered via outreach or Council led initiatives • Number of weekly enquiries resolved via outreach initiatives via outreach or Council led initiatives
7	The Information and Advice sector in Harrow is joined up and working together to address sector wide issues and raise standards in the sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of organisations signed up to the Harrow Information and Advice Network • Number of meetings/ events/trainings jointly planned and delivered for members of Harrow Information and Advice network • Annual user satisfaction survey of network members.

GOVERNANCE

The key outcomes will be monitored through quarterly contract management and monitoring of the newly recommissioned General Information and Advice Service (GIAS) and is reflected in the service specification for the commissioning. An Information and Advice Steering Group made up of key council department representatives from Corporate Strategy, Public Health, Housing, Access Harrow, Adults, Children's, and NHS partners, will function as the primary governance vehicle for monitoring the implementation of the key principles within information and advice provision in Harrow. This group will meet quarterly.



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