



Housing Options Service Independent Review

Complete Findings and Recommendations

28 June 2024

Corporate Strategy and Transformation Team

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Introduction

The Corporate Strategy & Transformation (CST) team has completed an independent review of the Housing Options Service (HOS). The review aims to identify key challenges and develop actionable recommendations for improvement.

This report summarises the findings from the extensive feedback sessions with HOS staff across all levels, including Officers, Managers, Senior Management Team (SMT) and Leadership. It then outlines the specific recommendations developed by CST based on the gathered information.

Scope and limitations

This review focused on identifying systematic challenges within the Housing Options Service (HOS) and developing actionable recommendations for improvement. Personal opinions, issues relating to specific individuals, or isolated concerns not raised more broadly were excluded.

Recognising the valuable expertise within HOS, the Corporate Strategy and Transformation (CST) team believes the new Interim Director of Housing Options and Homelessness is best positioned to develop a comprehensive action plan within two months of receiving this report.

The action plan should:

- Address all recommendations clearly, with designated target completion dates and an assigned owner for each action item.
- Ensure full implementation of all recommendations within 3 – 6 months following report receipt.

Upon development, the action plan will require approval from CST to ensure proposed actions are within appropriate target completion dates. The Deputy CEO will be accountable against all proposed recommendations.

CST acknowledges a history of unaddressed recommendations and its negative impact on morale. To address this, CST proposes that it independently leads assurance activities to monitor progress against the action plan. This will ensure timely implementation, clear communication of progress, and demonstrable results.

To maximise the success of the review and action plan, CST strongly recommends the formation of a self-managed HOS working group. This group, comprising up to 12 staff members (60% officers and 40% managers), will utilise their perspective and collaboration to:

- Review progress;
- Ensure action plan delivery;
- Foster a sense of ownership within HOS for the plan's success.

This approach leverages the expertise of HOS staff while fostering a sense of collective responsibility for improvement. CST are happy to lead the formation of this group.

Engagement approach

To enable comprehensive engagement, CST conducted a series of structured feedback sessions focusing on key themes impacting HOS staff:

- Induction and onboarding
- 1:1 and performance management
- Training and development
- Processes and work environment

Session breakdown:

A total of 16 feedback sessions were held, utilising a hybrid format (in-person and online) to ensure accessibility.

- Officers:
 - o 9 sessions for Officers from each team area (hybrid format)
- Managers:
 - o 2 sessions for managers from each team area (hybrid format)
- Senior Management Team (SMT):
 - o 1 session for SMT reporting to Housing Options and Housing & Procurement (Hybrid format)
- Leadership:
 - o 1 online session for the Head of Housing Options and Service Manager of Housing & procurement
 - o 1 online session for the Director of Housing

2x back-up online sessions were held for staff (one for officers, and one for managers and SMT) who couldn't attend their scheduled sessions.

Transparency and confidentiality:

- Trade Unions were invited to all sessions, except the two sessions for leadership (as there would be more Trade Union Leads invited than staff)
- Staff were informed at the start of each session about the option to provide confidential feedback via email or Teams after their session (by the end of the working day).

Engagement rates:

The review achieved strong participation across all staff levels, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of staff perspectives on key service areas:

- Officers: 76% attendance
- Managers: 87% attendance
- SMT: 92% attendance
- Leadership: 100% attendance

Aim of report

This report has a two-fold aim:

1. Empower staff, strengthening service: To identify and address challenges with the Housing Options Service (HOS) that impact staff wellbeing. This, in turn, will enable a stronger, more resilient service for residents.
2. Comprehensive improvement: The recommendations presented in this report are designed to address the root causes of identified issues, offering a measured and impactful approach to overall service improvement. The report avoids prioritising any

specific team or tier within HOS, ensuring a holistic approach to addressing challenges.

Overall findings and recommendations

This section focuses on the recurring themes identified during the Housing Options Service (HOS) review. These themes represent the most consistently expressed feedback across all tiers and given current challenges in the service, require significant focus and oversight. The recommendations are designed to empower staff, improve service delivery for residents, and ensure long-term sustainability of positive change.

Strengths:

- Dedicated staff: The HOS benefits from hardworking and passionate officers, managers, and leaders committed to delivering quality service.

Challenges:

- Ownership and accountability: Staff feel disempowered to make decisions, leading to a lack of ownership and accountability across all levels. There's an over-focus on immediate tasks within each tier, hindering strategic planning and consistent work practices.
- Service delivery: HOS delivery is currently perceived as inconsistent and reactive, creating a sense of chaos.
- Siloed work: The 2018 service restructure resulted in siloed work environments, with limited understanding and collaboration between teams.
- Workload demand: Workload is reported as unsustainable, with some staff managing over 100 cases, some of them highly complex.
- Long-term sickness: There is an ongoing challenge of long-term sickness within the service, without clear support and consideration of the wellbeing of such staff, or any associated resolution to address this.
- The current Residents' Hub was designed at a point when the service was already under significant pressure. Concerns regarding design, as well as dignity and accessibility for residents, was subsequently raised as inadequate.
- IT systems: Multiple disconnected IT systems pose a significant challenge for staff efficiency and user experience. The current IT Transformation Programme raises concerns about continued reliance on limited systems and a lack of user involvement in the design process. A CST Business Analyst was linked in with services to enable deeper understanding of challenges with current processes. The processes at Appendix 1 of this report are two visual examples of such challenges that need to be addressed more quickly.

Recommendations*:

*It will be the responsibility of CST to link in with the new Interim Director of Housing Options and Homelessness to ensure a clear plan of action within two months of finalising the report.

1. **Empowering staff, fostering accountability (suggested owner: Interim Director of Housing Options and Homelessness).** Encourage HOS to own the implementation of the detailed recommendations from this report, with CST acting as

a supportive 'critical friend', to ensure ownership, accountability, and progress monitoring.

2. **Service delivery review (suggested owner: Head of Homelessness).** Conduct a detailed review of service delivery processes, particularly where these are highlighted in this report, to ensure consistency, efficiency, and a more proactive approach to serving residents.
3. **Agile service review (suggested owner: Interim Director of Housing Options and Homelessness).** Undertake an agile (incremental) review of the entire service structure, prioritising resident needs. An agile approach will enable a phased outcome, ensuring limited disruption to service delivery during review and any associated redesign and transition.
4. **Dedicated resource to tackle backlog (suggested owner: Interim Director of Housing Options and Homelessness):** Of the 34 additional posts approved, there must be ringfenced resource allocated to the backlog of caseloads in the first instance. Once the service is in a stable position, this resource can be integrated to BAU work, at which point the expansion of service hours can commence.
5. **Dedicated support with sickness (suggested owner: Head of HR).** Allocate focused HR resource for a set period to review and actively support managers and staff where there is long-term sick-leave, ensuring wellbeing and enabling supported return to work against all reports of sickness within the service.
6. **Customer-focused Resident Hubs redesign (suggested owner: Director of Customer Services).** Conduct a thorough journey mapping and user experience exercise with residents, to adequately redesign the Resident Hub. This should also include journey mapping with staff, prioritising safety, dignity, accessibility for all. The redesign should explore the potential use of additional space within Town Hall ground floor areas.
7. **IT Systems deep dive (suggested owner: Acting Deputy Director of Strategy, Improvement & Transformation).** Prioritise a deep dive review of the IT Transformation Programme to address concerns regarding outdated systems, lack of user involvement, and implementation pace. While the IT Transformation Programme enables long-term benefits, immediate steps must be taken to address the complex process mapping set out at Appendix 1.

Detailed findings and recommendations

THEME A: INDUCTION AND ONBOARDING

Findings*

*Note that unless specifically differentiated, any reference to 'staff' can comprise Officers, Managers, or SMT.

1. Inconsistent induction and onboarding:

- There is currently no standardised starter pack with key service information, procedures and / or associated instructions.
- New starters may be left to learn independently, including client interaction, without clear guidance or understanding of their role within the team.
- The level of detail and focus on statutory / mandatory training during induction has declined.
- Onboarding practices vary significantly, with some receiving structured shadowing and others relying on informal learning methods.
- Obtaining access to systems is lengthy and causes undue delay to the induction process.

2. Limited integration and overview:

- New starters lack a comprehensive understanding of the broader Housing Options service and roles of the different teams.
- New staff often lack the opportunities to meet colleagues across teams, hindering integration and knowledge sharing.

3. Unsatisfactory shadowing: Existing shadowing opportunities are unstructured and left to new starters to coordinate, lacking clear plans for learning best practices.

4. Incomplete / outdated practice:

- New starters may not receive comprehensive training on all Housing Options systems, hindering overall service understanding.
- Provided documents may be outdated or contain incorrect details due to staff turnover or policy changes.
- New starters are limited to learning being specific to one individual or team's preference, which is inconsistent.

Recommendations*:

*Recognising the valuable expertise within HOS, the Corporate Strategy and Transformation (CST) team believes the new Interim Director of Housing Options and Homelessness is best positioned to develop a comprehensive action plan within two months of receiving this report.

The action plan should:

1. Address all recommendations clearly, with designated milestones against each action with associated target completion dates.
2. Ensure one assigned lead owner from each suggested group for each recommendation (but entire suggested group to contribute).
3. Ensure full implementation of all recommendations within 3 – 6 months following report receipt.

A1: Develop a standardised new Starter Pack (suggested group: SMT). This pack should include:

- Service Plan
- Team Plan

- Service structure overview
- Housing Options service slide deck, with introduction to other Housing Options Teams
- List of relevant statutory council-wide training
- List of relevant mandatory Housing Options training
- Shadowing guidance
- Quick 'how to' IT video tutorials for common queries

A2: Create a standardised New Starter checklist (suggested group: SMT). This checklist, initiated upon confirmed start dates, should address:

- Laptop order confirmation
- Completed Tower Hamlets IT registration
- Completed Housing Options IT system forms
- Identified and agreed-upon shadowing opportunities
- Agreed-upon induction plan
- Scheduled Housing Induction
- Defined work plan
- One-month follow-up meeting with Service Manager
- Complete of all relevant training

A3: Implement a new Housing Options Induction programme (suggested owner: Leadership). Organise central induction sessions at the Town Hall, where new staff meet Housing Options managers (including SMT), who provide high-level introductions to their respective teams and service functions.

Expected Benefits

These recommendations aim to:

- Standardise and improve the induction and onboarding processes for all new Housing Options staff.
- Ensure new staff receive comprehensive training and support, including statutory and mandatory requirements.
- Enhance team integration and knowledge-sharing among new and existing staff.
- Promote a deeper understanding of the wider Housing Options service structure and operations.

THEME B: 121 AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Findings*

*Note that unless specifically differentiated, any reference to 'staff' can comprise Officers, Managers, or SMT.

1. **Limited service and team planning:** Staff in the main expressed they haven't seen a service plan in years, hindering their understanding of how their work contributes to the broader Housing Options service. This has a direct negative impact on the ability to effectively conduct Annual Reviews. Staff express a desire to be involved in planning but feel communication and support from SMT is lacking.
2. **Inconsistent 121 meetings:** Many staff have not received regular 121 meetings, and when held, they may be rushed, negative, or solely focused on case management, particularly given the absence of a service plan. This indicates a need for improved managerial guidance on the purpose and process of 121s and importance of alignment with service plans. For staff with high caseloads, separate caseload discussions can free up 121s to address staff well-being and overall performance.
3. **Limited team interaction:** Some teams lack regular meetings or team-building opportunities, leading to a disconnect between teams within Housing Options. Additionally, poor communication and prioritisation understanding from SMT and line managers creates inter-team issues when urgent tasks from one team are not recognised as such by others, causing delays. Staff expressed that there is also limited update or handover in cases of annual leave or sickness, which has a significant impact on service delivery.
4. **Workload management concerns:** Management may not fully grasp the impact of workload on staff health and well-being, including the effects of ever-increasing caseloads and dealing with sensitive, complex, and difficult cases. Staff desire dedicated time for reflection, therapy, and open communication.

Recommendations*:

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The action plan should:

1. Address all recommendations clearly, with designated milestones against each action with associated target completion dates.
2. Ensure one assigned lead owner from each suggested group for each recommendation, but entire group to contribute.
3. Ensure full implementation of all recommendations within 3 – 6 months following report receipt.

B1: Develop a Service Plan (suggested group: Leadership). Create and share with service a meaningful and purposeful service plan, to ensure transparency and alignment. This must be reviewed quarterly.

B2: Develop Team Plans (suggested group: SMT). Collaboratively create team plans with staff input to establish clear goals and team objectives. This must be reviewed quarterly.

B3: Management Training (suggested group: Leadership). Implement mandatory training for all line managers (including SMT and Leadership) on effective management, leadership, staff well-being, fostering a positive work culture, and conducting impactful 121 meetings, with a particular focus on staff handling complex cases.

B4: Manager performance reviews (suggested group: Leadership). Integrate a target into all line manager annual reviews, mandating them to hold monthly 121 meetings with all direct reports.

B5: Regular team meetings (suggested group: SMT): Establish a regular schedule for team meetings to facilitate communication and collaboration.

B6: 360-feedback (suggested group: Leadership): Implement a system for 360-feedback for managers and SMT to gather well-rounded perspectives on leadership effectiveness.

B7: Support for complex cases (suggested group: SMT): For staff dealing with complex and difficult cases, explore options for facilitating reflection and debriefing with a specialist through Occupational Health as a first step.

B8: Arrangements for leave / sickness (suggested group: Leadership): Clear arrangements need to be developed and communicated to all staff on effective notification of manager leave / sickness and associated handover arrangements.

Expected Benefits

These recommendations aim to:

- Enhance communication and collaboration across all levels within the Housing Options service.
- Empower staff through involvement in service and team planning.
- Ensure effective leadership and support for staff well-being.
- Address workload concerns through improved management practices.

THEME C: LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Findings*

*Note that unless specifically differentiated, any reference to 'staff' can comprise Officers, Managers, or SMT.

1. **Limited training opportunities:** Staff report a lack of dedicated time and resources for training, hindering their continuous professional development (CPD). There is no clear structure or plan in place for managing training needed.
2. **Inadequate training support:** Managers may not fully consider staff suggestions for new training methods or workload reduction through training. A recent case involving an Ombudsman fine highlights potential training gaps.
3. **Unsuitable training content:** The current Learning Hub offerings are perceived as generic and irrelevant to the specific needs of Housing Options staff. Staff desire

mandatory training with regular refreshers on core Housing Options subjects (e.g.: legislation, policy, practice) along with readily available external courses like those offered by the Chartered Institute of Housing.

4. **Unmet IT training needs:** Staff repeatedly raised the need for IT training on key systems, with some waiting over two years for access. Reliance on informal peer-to-peer training can be inefficient.
5. **Career development concerns:** Career progression and development are perceived as neglected, with limited time, budget and managerial support available. Staff feel apprehensive about discussing career aspirations with their managers.
6. **Management training needs:** Management training is needed to foster empathy towards staff and provide adequate support when dealing with difficult situations.

Recommendations*:

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The action plan should:

1. Address all recommendations clearly, with designated milestones against each action with associated target completion dates.
2. Ensure one assigned lead owner from each suggested group for each recommendation, but entire group to contribute.
3. Ensure full implementation of all recommendations within 3 – 6 months following report receipt.

C1: Mandatory sector-specific training (suggested group: SMT). Implement mandatory training programmes for all staff, encompassing both team-specific and service-wide topics.

C2: Learning and development plan (suggested group: Leadership). Develop a comprehensive Learning and Development (L&D) plan, incorporating input from SMT, managers, and staff into annual planning cycles.

C3: Apprenticeship Levy Exploration (suggested group: Leadership). Investigate potential training opportunities utilising the Apprenticeship Levy, with a focus on cohort-based programmes.

C4: User-friendly training materials (suggested group: SMT). Create easy-to-use manuals and video tutorials for common IT system functions, ensuring regular updates after system changes.

C5: Impactful training (suggested group: SMT). Establish a system for collecting staff feedback on the effectiveness and relevance of training programmes.

Expected Benefits

These recommendations aim to:

- Bridge skill gaps and enhance staff competency through targeted training opportunities.

- Foster a culture of continuous learning and professional development.
- Equip staff with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively address service needs.
- Empower staff to pursue career progression through dedicated support mechanisms.

THEME D: PROCESSES AND WORK ENVIRONMENT

Findings*

*Note that unless specifically differentiated, any reference to 'staff' can comprise Officers, Managers, or SMT.

1. **Leadership and management:**

- The 2018 restructure is perceived as a cause of many current issues, and subsequent transformations within the service did not improve the situation.
- Staff feel disregarded and under-supported by management, citing instances of ignored concerns, unresolved complaints against managers, and a lack of respect in communication. This has resulted in low morale and demotivation.
- Team and service meetings are seen as unproductive, focusing on complaints without clear follow-up.
- Opportunities for team bonding are limited.
- All sessions demonstrated little to no self-accountability but expressed the main cause of challenges as being due to a lack of support from their managers or the relevant tier above.

2. **Workload and case management:**

- Workload is reported as unsustainable, with some staff managing over 100 cases, some of them highly complex.
- The perceived distolateral and micromanaging leadership style further exacerbates workload pressures.
- Concerns exist regarding staff fully understanding legislation and potential ethical issues arising from workarounds.

3. **Communication:** Internal and external communication is identified as a major concern. Staff report poor to no communication flow between managers and staff, across Housing Options Teams, and with other council services like Social Services, Children's Services, Adults' Services, and external partners.

4. **IT and systems:**

- Staff manage their work using 3 – 5 different systems and databases, leading to inefficiency due to data re-entry across platforms.
- System knowledge inconsistencies and lack of colleagues properly documenting notes further hinder workflow.
- Staff have been repeatedly advised of a move to a single system, but to date no improvement or user experience testing has been seen.

5. **Residents Hub:** Many staff consider the Residents Hub a source of dissatisfaction, citing it as unfit for purpose. Concerns include poor network connectivity, lack of triage system, confusing signage, the public call-out of client names, inadequate lighting, absence of screened rooms for sensitive discussions, lack of meeting rooms,

and missing hand sanitisers. It is believed that the Housing Options Service was not considered during the design of the Residents Hub.

Recommendations*:

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The action plan should:

1. Address all recommendations clearly, with designated milestones against each action with associated target completion dates.
2. Ensure one assigned lead owner from each suggested group for each recommendation, but entire group to contribute.
3. Ensure full implementation of all recommendations within 3 – 6 months following report receipt.

D1: Regular staff engagement (suggested group: Leadership). Implement regular staff engagement sessions, with a maximum of 20 minutes allocated to leadership for key updates, but mainly focused on providing opportunities for open communication for all staff to be heard.

D2: Leadership feedback (suggested group: Leadership): Develop a system for gathering anonymous feedback from staff on their experiences with line managers, allowing for improvement in leadership styles across every management tier.

D3: Team building activities (suggested group: SMT): Incorporate team-building activities and away days into team meetings to promote collaboration and morale.

D4 Caseload management (suggested group: Leadership): Establish a clear commitment to prioritise at pace and adopt a caseload weighting system for high pressurised frontline roles, particularly with roles of high stress where the excess caseloads may result in a breach to duty of care. Allocate sufficient ringfenced resource from the 34 additional posts to address the backlog as a priority.

D5 Communication analysis (suggested group: SMT): Conduct a comprehensive analysis of internal and external communication practices, followed by a clear action plan for improvement.

IT & Systems recommendation. The recommendation against this finding falls outside of the requirement of HOS. This recommendation is addressed under the 'overall findings' section at the start of this report.

Residents Hub recommendation. The recommendation against this finding falls outside of the requirement of HOS. This recommendation is addressed under the 'overall findings' section at the start of this report.

Expected Benefits

These recommendations aim to:

- Foster a more positive and collaborative work environment through improved leadership communication and staff engagement.
- Address workload concerns through the establishment of clear work standards and improved communication practices.
- Enhance operational efficiency by optimising IT systems usage and promoting knowledge sharing.
- Create a more welcoming and functional Residents Hub for both staff and clients.

Conclusion and Next Steps

This report has summarised the findings and recommendations from all feedback sessions as part of the Housing Options service improvement review.

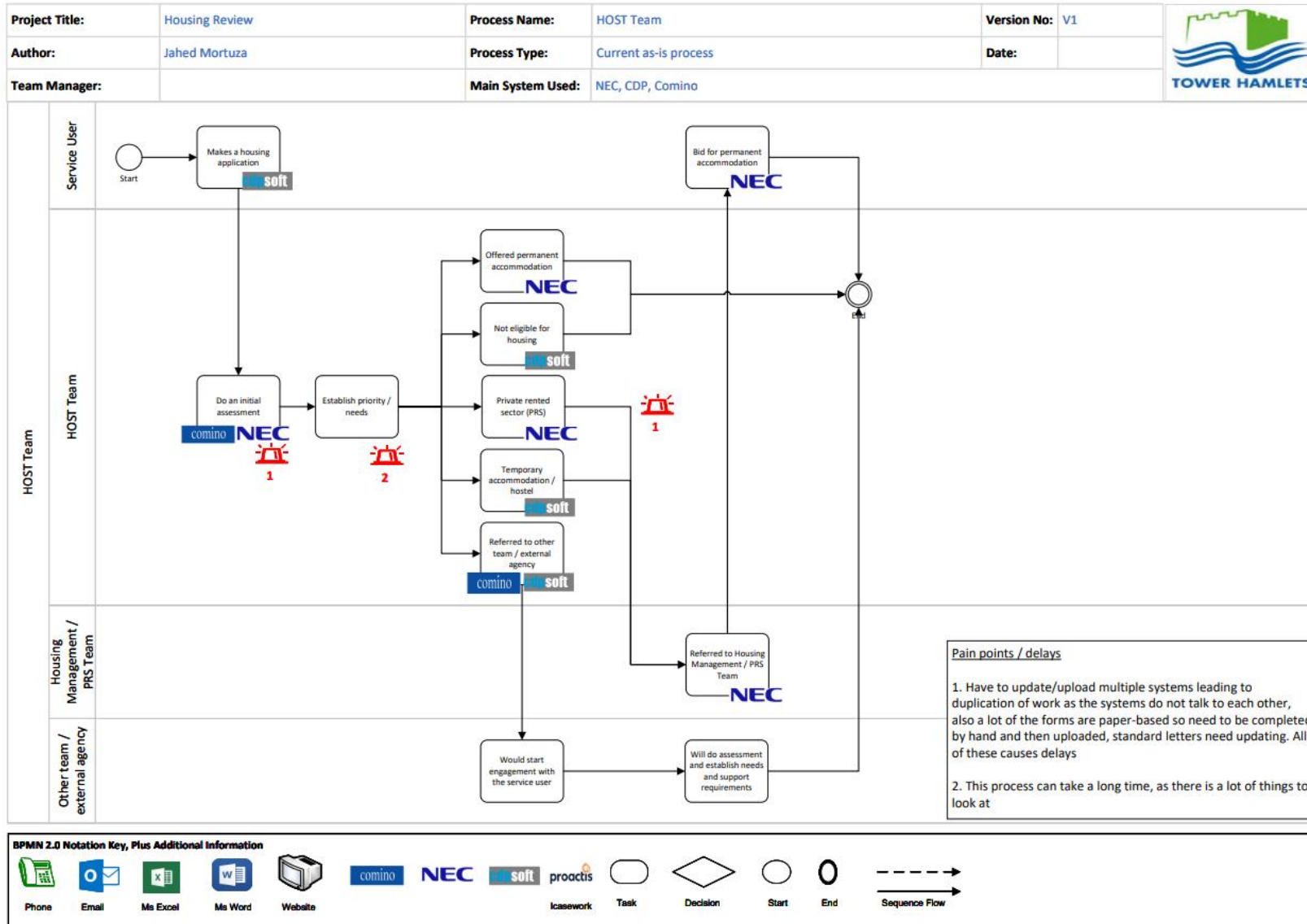
The Corporate Strategy & Transformation (CST) Team will now undertake the following steps:

- Forward report to Corporate Director of Resources for review: by 28 June.
- Meet with Trade Unions to review by 5 July.
- Meet with Leadership to review: by 5 July.
- Present report to all staff, with clear next steps and associated support where this applies: by 10 July.

The CST team is committed to supporting the Housing Options service with this independent review and encourages continued communication and feedback with Trade Unions throughout this process. Please do not hesitate to bring any questions or concerns to CST.

Appendix 1:

A CST Business Analyst was linked in with services to enable deeper understanding of challenges with current processes. Feedback in the main linked to the difficulty of using multiple IT systems, and below are two visual examples of such challenges.



Project Title:	Housing Review	Process Name:	Income Recovery Team	Version No:	V1
Author:	Jahed Mortuza	Process Type:	Current as-is process	Date:	
Team Manager:		Main System Used:	NEC, CDP, Comino, CITRIX, AIMS, Rundles, Newlyn		

